

THE ROMANTICIZATION OF THE INTEGRATION OF MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL  
AND THE DECLINE OF ORGANIZED BLACK PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL THROUGH  
THE LENS OF *THE PITTSBURGH COURIER*

by

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(Under the Direction of John Soloski)

ABSTRACT

The integration of Major League Baseball by Jackie Robinson in April 1947 is often regarded as a seminal moment in American history. Robinson and the structure of organized black professional baseball have each obtained larger than life statuses within American culture. However, analyzing every front-page story published in *The Pittsburgh Courier* from 1945 to 1950 suggests that the full impact of Robinson's integration of professional baseball and the fall of the Negro Leagues has only been realized in the ensuing decades. While Robinson appeared on front-page stories in the *Courier* during this time, his accomplishments were often overshadowed by other news events relevant to the black community, such as lynchings and educational inequalities. Similarly, the Negro Leagues received minimal coverage in the front page of the *Courier*, indicating that it might not have been as much of a community pillar as it is believed to have been by many scholars.

INDEX WORDS: Jackie Robinson, Black Newspapers, Front Page, Negro Leagues, Organized Black Professional Baseball, Civil Rights, Major League Baseball.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my family and friends (which consists of far too many people to mention).

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
LIST OF FIGURES .....	viii
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
2 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE <i>COURIER</i> .....	10
<i>The Pittsburgh Courier</i> .....	11
3 THE COMMUNITY .....	16
Baseball and the Community: The Kansas City Monarchs .....	20
4 METHODOLOGY .....	23
5 THE HEIGHT OF THE NEGRO LEAGUES AND PRE-INTEGRATION (1945-1946) .....	28
Front Page Stories, 1945-1946 .....	28
The <i>Courier</i> 's Efforts to Integrate Baseball, 1945-1946 .....	36
6 JACKIE ROBINSON INTEGRATES BASEBALL, APRIL-MAY 1947 .....	59
Coverage of Jackie Robinson on the Front Page (April-May 1947) .....	59
<i>The Pittsburgh Courier</i> , April 5, 1947 (Two Weeks Prior to Robinson's MLB Debut) .....	61
<i>The Pittsburgh Courier</i> , April 12, 1947 (One Week Before Robinson's MLB Debut) .....	63

	<i>The Pittsburgh Courier</i> , April 19, 1947 (Robinson's MLB Debut) .....	65
	<i>The Pittsburgh Courier</i> , April 26, 1947 (One Week After Robinson's MLB Debut) .....	66
	<i>The Pittsburgh Courier</i> , May 3, 1947 (Two Weeks After Robinson's MLB Debut) .....	67
	Coverage Surrounding Robinson's MLB Debut in <i>The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i> .....	68
7	THE RISE OF THE BLACK MAJOR LEAGUERS AND THE FALL OF THE NEGRO LEAGUES, 1948-1950 .....	70
	Front Page Stories, 1948-1950.....	70
	Coverage of Baseball in the <i>Courier</i> , 1948-1950 .....	73
	Attendance Figures, 1948-1950 .....	74
	The Decline of the Negro Leagues as Covered By the Sports Pages of the <i>Courier</i> , 1948-1950.....	84
8	CONCLUSION.....	98
	REFERENCES .....	104



## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Articles Published on the Front Page of <i>The Pittsburgh Courier</i> , 1945-1950 .....	25

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Jackie Robinson was an African American Negro League second baseman credited with breaking Major League Baseball's (MLB) color barrier by playing for the formerly all-white Brooklyn Dodgers. On April 15, 2004, his admirers honored him with the annual Jackie Robinson Day to celebrate this accomplishment.<sup>1</sup> Jackie Robinson Day was embraced by the MLB and a tradition of wearing Jackie's uniform number 42 soon began. The tradition was born in April 2007, when Ken Griffey Jr., then an outfielder with the Cincinnati Reds and a 2016 inductee into the Baseball Hall of Fame, asked MLB commissioner Bud Selig for permission to wear the number 42 on his jersey to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Jackie Robinson's Major League debut.<sup>2</sup> After receiving approval, Griffey took the field wearing the number 42.<sup>3</sup> He was not alone. On the 72nd anniversary of Robinson's first official appearance as a Brooklyn Dodger, every MLB team paid tribute to him by wearing Robinson's #42 uniform (a number that has been retired throughout professional baseball since 1997).<sup>4</sup> Umpires and managers joined players in donning these #42 uniforms. Jackie Robinson Day commemorated an event that permanently altered the landscape of professional baseball.

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<sup>1</sup> "Major League Baseball Declares April 15 Jackie Robinson Day; Will Be Celebrated Every April 15 Beginning This Season." *Business Wire*, March 3, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Sheldon, Mark. "Tribute of Wearing No. 42 Began in 2007 with Reds' Ken Griffey Jr." MLB.com, April 15, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Sheldon, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Sheldon, 2015.

As Griffey said of Robinson,<sup>5</sup> “He should be an inspiration not only to baseball players but to anyone who fights prejudice and hatred.” Griffey’s then teammate and fellow outfielder Marlon Byrd also discussed Robinson’s impact on the game of baseball. “Being able to wear the number, you understand he’s the reason I’m playing,” Byrd remarked. “All of the minorities in the game can say that, even Asian players. Without him, the game probably wouldn’t have been integrated. Maybe at some point it would have happened, but it happened with him and he did it right. It’s great that we can honor him like this, with Jackie Robinson Day.”<sup>6</sup> Modern Major League Baseball players continue to hail Robinson as an influence on their playing. On April 15, 2019, New York Mets second baseman Robinson Cano tweeted that Jackie Robinson “inspired me to play the game that I love. You broke every barrier to pave the way for generations to come. Thank you Jackie...honoring you today and every day.”<sup>7</sup> New York Yankees pitcher C.C. Sabathia also paid tribute to Robinson on April 15. “Jackie, thank you for everything you did and went through,” tweeted Sabathia.<sup>8</sup> “You made it possible for me to live my baseball dream!”

It was not just athletes who expressed respect for Robinson’s achievements. Notable Civil Rights leaders also vocalized Robinson’s impact on the black community. In a 2005

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<sup>5</sup> Sheldon, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Sheldon, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Skiver, Kevin, and Matt Snyder. “Jackie Robinson Day: Cano, Sabathia and Other MLB Players Pay Tribute to Baseball Legend on Historic Anniversary.” CBSSports.com, April 15, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Skiver and Snyder, 2019.

speech, Civil Rights leader Jesse Jackson heralded Robinson as a trailblazer.<sup>9</sup> “He made new ways,” said Jackson. “Jackie Robinson was not a pathfinder who traveled the easier and convenient way. He chose the road less traveled. He chose dignity over dollars, freedom over finance. From the ballfield his fearless integrity forever altered the political landscape of our nation.”<sup>10</sup> Jackson later added that Robinson “didn’t just change baseball; he irreversibly changed and altered a perverse course to white supremacy. He opened the doors...[and] Major League Baseball really began in 1947.”<sup>11</sup> Jackson’s admiration was echoed by his fellow Civil Rights movement leader and Georgia Congressman, John Lewis. On Jackie Robinson Day in 2018, Congressman Lewis threw out the ceremonial first pitch at the Washington Nationals game. He offered praise of Robinson in an interview conducted after the first pitch was thrown. “Jackie changed America, to set us on a path to lay down the burden of race,” said Lewis. “I think our country is a much better place because Jackie Robinson passed this way.”<sup>12</sup>

Scholars joined sports stars and Civil Rights leaders in their praise of Robinson’s accomplishments. Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin has vivid memories of Robinson. “No other sport had captured the hearts and imaginations of the American people [like baseball],” said Goodwin. “You could walk down any block and you could hear what was going on from inning to inning because every radio would be turned on to baseball. And so when Jackie Robinson broke through, it wasn’t just breaking through in one of any number of sports. It was *the*

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<sup>9</sup> Jackson, Jesse. “Speech About Jackie Robinson.” Congressional Gold Medal Ceremony of Jackie Robinson. March 2, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Jackson, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Jackson, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Reeve, Richard. “Black Heritage Day at Nationals Park Honors Jackie Robinson.” WJLA. WJLA, April 15, 2018.

national sport...[with Jackie] you just hope that blacks today understand the shoulders on which they stand.”<sup>13</sup> Goodwin concluded that Robinson “carried the hopes [of the black community] like a bridge up to Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks.”<sup>14</sup>

Notable African American journalist and scholar Paul Delaney, who was a teenager at the time Jackie Robinson broke baseball’s color barrier, also recalled a black community-wide sense of elation existing at the time Robinson integrated baseball. “Folks of my generation recall the joy that the adults expressed from Jackie going to Brooklyn,” said Delaney. “I remember the adults would gather around the radio to listen to the play-by-play whenever Brooklyn was playing, whenever Jackie was playing. It provided the community with extreme joy.”<sup>15</sup>

The nostalgia for all things Robinson extended tentacles into modern studies of organized black professional baseball through the Negro National League and the Negro American League (Negro Leagues), and the effect the Negro Leagues had on black communities. In his research, Lanctot studies the relationship between black communities and the Negro Leagues teams that played for them.<sup>16</sup> “Regardless of its flaws, black baseball helped build an irreplaceable sense of collective solidarity, identity and self-esteem [for these communities].”<sup>17</sup> He quotes former Negro League pitcher Tom Johnson, who further explores this mindset: “the black leagues played a major role at the social level for our people. They provided the entertainment to our

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<sup>13</sup> Selah, Makkada B. “Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin Remembers Jackie Robinson.” Black Enterprise. Black Enterprise, February 23, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Selah, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Delaney, Paul. “John Slights Interview with Paul Delaney.” August 30, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Lanctot, Neil. *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008: 394.

<sup>17</sup> Lanctot, 2018: 394.

communities; they provided an activity, a wholesome activity.”<sup>18</sup> These sentiments are echoed in other studies.

Heaphy interviews former Negro League stars as part of her research into the community impact of the Negro Leagues. According to former Monarchs star Buck O’Neil, “the black community supported and loved the Monarchs and the team reciprocated. Kansas City was a good baseball town; when the Monarchs were playing, everything happened.”<sup>19</sup> But perhaps the most relevant component of Heaphy’s research came in the form of interviews with Homestead Grays fans. The Grays were the Pittsburgh area’s predominant black baseball team. According to one of them, “the Grays players became role models for young people. A lot of kids patterned themselves after the Homestead Grays. The games gave the young people some hope and something to look forward to.”<sup>20</sup> Another fan added, “We still don’t realize what an important part of the community the Grays were.”<sup>21</sup>

Over the years these baseball stars, Civil Rights leaders, and academics have emphasized the importance of the role that Jackie Robinson and the Negro Leagues played in the daily lives of African Americans living in the black communities. This thesis will explore whether between the years 1945 through 1950 the racial integration of baseball and the effect of the Negro Leagues on black communities were really a matter of daily significance to African Americans or have the importance of these events to the black communities been lionized and romanticized in the intervening years. In order to analyze this question, the black community was viewed

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<sup>18</sup> Lanctot, 2018: 394.

<sup>19</sup> Heaphy, Leslie A. *The Negro Leagues, 1869-1960*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013: 81.

<sup>20</sup> Heaphy, 2013: 81.

<sup>21</sup> Heaphy, 2013: 81.

through the lens of front-page articles in the community newspaper for the relevant period of time.

The city of Pittsburgh was chosen as a representative sample of a black community because it was home to two professional black baseball teams and it was the site one of the most important black newspapers in the country, *The Pittsburgh Courier* (*Courier*). The newspaper is reflective of the black communities which often have, at their core, a common historical tie. It is not necessary for the group members of the community to participate in the history in order to share it, but they must identify with it.<sup>22</sup> In its prime, the *Courier* had a circulation of 250,000 by the late 1940s.<sup>23</sup> One would expect to see coverage of Robinson and the Negro Leagues appear on the front page of the *Courier* regularly. However, an analysis of the front page of the *Courier* from 1945 to 1950 suggests that this was not the case. Instead of stories about the integration of baseball, the front page of the *Courier* tended to focus on issues of racial injustices plaguing black communities across the country. A careful analysis of the *Courier* shows the importance of Robinson and the Negro Leagues' evolution over time. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Jackie Robinson's integration received a significant amount of press coverage in newspapers like the *Courier*, but it was never the primary story of the news cycle.

The mid-1940s are widely considered to be a prime period for organized professional black baseball. Black all-stars such as Buck Leonard, Josh Gibson, Satchel Paige, and Jackie Robinson are regarded as critical figures within the African American community at the time.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> McMillan, David W., and David M. Chavis. "Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory." *Journal of Community Psychology* 14, no. 1 (1986): 14.

<sup>23</sup> Tolly, Victor. "Pittsburgh Courier (1907- )." BlackPast, January 11, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Bower, Scott Clayton. "The History and Influence of Black Baseball in the United States and Indianapolis." Butler University, March 29, 1991: 2.

According to Clayton, “black baseball teams were integral parts of the black community from the turn of the century to about 1950.”<sup>25</sup> Attendance figures confirmed fan interest in the Negro Leagues; a game played on May 12, 1945, between the Chicago American Giants and the Kansas City Monarchs drew 15,000 fans to Ruppert Field in Kansas City.<sup>26</sup> It was an indication that black baseball was popular and was capable of drawing large numbers of fans.

Despite this, the Negro Leagues as organizations received minimal front-page coverage in the *Courier*. The newspaper’s coverage of black baseball was extensive, but limited mostly to the sports pages of the *Courier*. Robinson’s integration of baseball in April 1947 spelled a significant decline in organized black professional baseball. As other notable black baseball players followed Robinson to the Major Leagues, fan interest in the Negro Leagues began to wane.<sup>27</sup>

In the wake of Robinson’s integration, the *Courier* sports editorial staff penned many articles in an attempt to keep organized professional black baseball afloat despite the steep decline in fan interest and talent on its ballclubs. Writing in 1949, the *Courier*’s Wendell Smith stated that “the men who control the Negro baseball scene must realize right now that they cannot ignore the public, and they must inform them of what is happening [with black baseball].” Smith later added that “If these men [don’t do that], their show is going to fold before it ever approaches the last act.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bower, 1991: 2.

<sup>26</sup> “15,000 See Monarchs Defeat Giants, 6-2.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 12, 1945: 12.

<sup>27</sup> Deas, Tommy. “A History of the Negro Leagues.” *Tuscaloosa News*, July 16, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Negro Baseball’s ‘Do or Die’ Year.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 14, 1949: 22.



Indeed, from 1948 to 1950, the Negro Leagues were hanging on by a thread. The *Courier*'s sportswriters regularly covered the talent discrepancy that was created by Robinson's integration. As a result, attendance figures began to drastically dip: while Negro Leagues teams were regularly drawing healthy attendance numbers within the five-figure range in the mid-1940s, by the end of the decade, those numbers were beginning to dwindle. A game played in June 1950 between the New York Cubans and the Birmingham Black Barons at the Polo Grounds in New York drew a meager 5,000 fans to the ballpark.<sup>29</sup> It was a sharp deterioration from five short years earlier. For the 1950 East-West Game (essentially the Negro Leagues All-Star Game), 40,000 fans were expected to attend the game at Chicago's Comiskey Park according to the *Courier*.<sup>30</sup> Under 25,000 seats were actually filled for the game, a number that was nearly half of what was anticipated.<sup>31</sup>

The attendance figures reported in the *Courier*, coupled with a general lack of coverage on the front-page of the *Courier*, demonstrate that the Negro Leagues were not as central to the black community as they might appear to be today. By 1950, just three years after Robinson broke baseball's color barrier, the Negro Leagues as they had existed earlier were dead. Organized black baseball did not go out in a blaze of glory, with fanfare and around-the-clock press coverage; instead, it died with empty seats, minimal press coverage, and below-average

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<sup>29</sup> "N.Y. Cubans Chill B'Ham in Twin Bill." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 24, 1950: 22.

<sup>30</sup> "40,000 Expected to See Annual 'Dream Game.'" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 12, 1950: 22.

<sup>31</sup> Smith, Wendell. "West Captures 18th Annual East-West Game, 5-3, Before 24,614 Fans." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 26, 1950: 10.

talent. The Negro Leagues, despite the modern romantic picture painted of it, exited with a whimper, not a bang.

The thesis will be divided into three critical sections: 1945 to 1946; five weeks in the spring of 1947; and 1948 to 1950. The chapter covering 1945 to 1946 will explore the stories prevalent on the *Courier's* front-page during that time, as well as the events that would lead up to Jackie Robinson's April 1947 debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers. For the 1947 chapter, five critical weeks were selected for analysis: two weeks prior to Robinson's debut, the week of Robinson's debut, and two weeks after Robinson's debut. Front-page stories of that week will also be analyzed, as well as the newspaper's coverage of Robinson's first game. Finally, the "fallout" of Robinson's debut will be explored in greater detail in the 1948 to 1950 chapter: the ensuing decline and ultimate death of the Negro Leagues. Attendance figures and coverage from the *Courier's* sports page during that time will be used to describe the quick demise of the Negro Leagues.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE *COURIER*

By the mid-1940s, the *Courier* was one of the most important black newspapers in the country.<sup>32</sup> It was one of the few black newspapers covering the frontlines of World War II on location abroad, and its reach expanded to black communities throughout much of the United States.<sup>33</sup> It was *Courier* sports editor Wendell Smith who arranged for a tryout for Robinson and two other black baseball players in front of Major League Baseball scouts and coaches, ultimately leading to Branch Rickey signing Robinson in November 1945. Given Smith's impact on professional baseball, it was thought that the *Courier* would cover the integration of baseball extensively.

The city of Pittsburgh was chosen largely because of its cultural significance within the black community. The Hill District, Pittsburgh's predominant black neighborhood, was one of the most vibrant black communities in the United States at the time. The Hill District featured a healthy jazz music scene and social club presence, making it highly relevant in the immediate postwar years.<sup>34</sup> In addition, two professional black baseball teams played in the Pittsburgh area throughout much of the 1940s. The Pittsburgh Crawfords operated until the mid-1940s, and the Homestead Grays (a team that played six miles outside of Pittsburgh's city limits) fielded a team

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<sup>32</sup> Tolly, 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Tolly, 2008.

<sup>34</sup> "The Rich History of Pittsburgh's Hill District." Pittsburgh Beautiful, June 6, 2019.

until professional black baseball disappeared at the end of the 1950 season.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the city was home to the Pittsburgh Pirates, a Major League Baseball team that was quite slow to integrate. The Pirates would not play a black player until Curt Roberts became a second baseman for the team on April 13, 1954, some seven years after Robinson debuted with the Brooklyn Dodgers.<sup>36</sup>

### *The Pittsburgh Courier*

*The Pittsburgh Courier* was established in 1907 by Edwin Harleston, a security guard at the H.J. Heinz food packing plant in downtown Pittsburgh.<sup>37</sup> The newspaper had its first major breakthrough three years later when Robert Lee Vann, a well-established attorney, joined the paper.<sup>38</sup> Initially, Vann was the *Courier*'s chief legal counsel, but within a few years, Vann had risen to become the paper's editor-publisher.<sup>39</sup> He led the paper in a direction of social activism and the advancement of civil rights.<sup>40</sup> Articles published in the *Courier* were instrumental in reforming healthcare and housing for African Americans in Pittsburgh.<sup>41</sup> By the time Vann died

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<sup>35</sup> Smith, Brady. "Let's Learn from the Past: Homestead Grays and Pittsburgh Crawfords." *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 23, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Shetler, Jason. "Curt Roberts and His Significant Impact on the Pirates." Bucco Nation, February 3, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Tolly, 2008.

<sup>38</sup> Tolly, 2008.

<sup>39</sup> Tolly, 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Tolly, 2008.

<sup>41</sup> Tolly, 2008.

in 1940, he had helped grow the paper into a powerhouse for the African American community; the *Courier* had offices in 14 cities and a weekly circulation of 250,000.<sup>42</sup>

As the *Courier*'s influence on African American culture grew across the country, its sports section became a staple of the newspaper. The *Courier*'s most prominent sportswriter was Wendell Smith. Smith joined the *Courier* in 1937, immediately after graduating from West Virginia State College.<sup>43</sup> With Vann encouraging writers to pursue stories and topics pertaining to civil rights, Smith began to cover the color barrier in baseball.<sup>44</sup> In 1939, Smith authored a groundbreaking piece for the *Courier* in which he interviewed over fifty white Major League Baseball managers and players.<sup>45</sup> Seventy-five percent of those interviewed by Smith claimed to have no issues with integrating Major League Baseball; these statistics became the backbone of his crusade to integrate Major League Baseball.<sup>46</sup>

Throughout the early 1940s, Smith used the *Courier* as a platform to advocate for the integration of Major League Baseball while continuing to encourage the growth and development of the Negro Leagues.<sup>47</sup> As the 1940s continued, Smith's influence on the game of baseball was growing steadily. It was after a 1945 meeting with Smith that Brooklyn Dodgers general manager Branch Rickey began to explore the possibility of adding Jackie Robinson to his

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<sup>42</sup> Tolly, 2008.

<sup>43</sup> "About Wendell Smith." Baseball Hall of Fame, n.d.

<sup>44</sup> "About Wendell Smith."

<sup>45</sup> "About Wendell Smith."

<sup>46</sup> "About Wendell Smith."

<sup>47</sup> "About Wendell Smith."

baseball club.<sup>48</sup> After Robinson joined the Dodgers, Smith traveled with Robinson throughout the 1946 and 1947 seasons “to offer support and counsel.”<sup>49</sup> While traveling with Robinson, he continued to write for the *Courier*.

Smith’s departure from the *Courier* at the end of the decade (he would leave to join *The Chicago Herald-American*) signaled the end of an era for black baseball as a whole. The circulation of the paper declined rapidly throughout the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>50</sup> In 1965, Robert Stengstacke of Chicago purchased the floundering *Courier* to add to his fleet of newspapers.<sup>51</sup> A year later, in 1966, Stengstacke renamed the paper *The New Pittsburgh Courier* in an attempt to rebrand and retool the newspaper.<sup>52</sup> Today, *The New Pittsburgh Courier* continues to be published weekly with an emphasis on the modern African American community in Pittsburgh.<sup>53</sup>

The *Courier* represented the black communities by covering stories that reflected issues that were important to them. “The *Courier* was an absolutely critical newspaper,” according to Paul Delaney. “The changes that were occurring [at the time], with the violence, the segregation – it was extremely important to the black community and not that important to the white community, and it was of course ignored by the daily Southern newspapers. And so the fact that the *Courier* paid strict attention to those issues was very vital to the beginning of the Civil Rights movement and to the assault on Jim Crow. There’s no question that the *Courier* played a vital

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<sup>48</sup> “About Wendell Smith.”

<sup>49</sup> “About Wendell Smith.”

<sup>50</sup> Tolly, 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Tolly, 2008.

<sup>52</sup> Taylor, Rob. “The History of the *New Pittsburgh Courier*.” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 2018.

<sup>53</sup> Taylor, 2018.

role within the black community.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, according to Reisner, stories were carefully selected in the front pages of newspapers to match the interests of the readers.<sup>55</sup> Reisner notes that the front page of a newspaper is the most important component of a newspaper, as it is ultimately what creates the agenda for the community it serves.<sup>56</sup> In addition, readers of a newspaper tend to focus on front-page stories more than stories published in other portions of the newspaper.<sup>57</sup> According to Kim and Chung, news values that are emphasized when choosing which stories to place on the front page of newspapers include “timeliness, prominence, proximity, magnitude, conflict, impact, and oddity.”<sup>58</sup>

Black celebrities recognized the significance of the *Courier* and utilized the newspaper as a platform. Notable black writers of the time such as W.E.B. DuBois and Langston Hughes would routinely visit the newspaper’s headquarters, as would jazz musicians such as Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald.<sup>59</sup> These famous figures utilized the wide readership of the *Courier* to increase their exposure to audiences within black communities around the country, further demonstrating just how important the *Courier* was to the black community as a whole.

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<sup>54</sup> Delaney, 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Reisner, Ann E. “The News Conference: How Daily Newspaper Editors Construct the Front Page.” *Journalism Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (1992): 971.

<sup>56</sup> Reisner, 1992: 971.

<sup>57</sup> Kim, Yung Soo and Deborah S. Chung. “Anatomy of Front Pages: Comparison Between *The New York Times* and Other U.S. Major Metropolitan Newspapers.” *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 950.

<sup>58</sup> Kim, 2017: 950.

<sup>59</sup> Alicia. “*The Pittsburgh Courier*.” Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, March 10, 2017.

While Robinson's integration was a milestone for professional sports and race relations in general, there were far more troubling issues that were on the minds of black citizens. It can therefore be determined that a straw man argument has been created over time, which is that Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier and the ensuing decline of the Negro Leagues were among the most prescient issues to black communities across the country at the time. However, after careful analysis of relevant articles from the *Courier*, this does not seem to have been the case.

It would appear that such a study into what is now seen as a critically important moment in African American history has not been performed prior to this research. Utilizing prominent black newspapers is an essential way to gauge the interests of the black community at the time of this research; by looking back at front page news articles published in notable black newspapers from the time of Robinson's integration and the death of the Negro Leagues, much can be learned about the priorities of the black community at the time. Given Wendell Smith's close ties to the Negro Leagues and to Robinson himself, studying the *Courier* seemed to be a logical newspaper to research in order to better understand the time period within the context of the black community. Furthermore, by the time he died in 1972, Smith's status as a sportswriting icon was firmly established. He was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame, becoming the first black sportswriter so honored; as of 2019, he is one of only four African American baseball writers enshrined in Cooperstown.<sup>60</sup> Thus, a black newspaper study into the integration of Robinson and the ensuing decline of the Negro Leagues provides a critically important roadmap in terms of understanding the mindset of the black community of the time.

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<sup>60</sup> "J.G. Taylor Spink Award." Baseball Hall of Fame.



### CHAPTER 3

#### THE COMMUNITY

To better understand the study behind baseball and its impact on black communities, it is first important to grasp the concept of what is a “community.” There are two components of a community, according to Gusfield.<sup>61</sup> The first element of a community is geographic.<sup>62</sup> This involves developing rituals and traditions specific to one’s city, town, or neighborhood.<sup>63</sup> The second component of the community is the “relational” portion, which Gusfield defined as “the quality of character of human relationship, without reference to location.”<sup>64</sup>

McMillan and Chavis point out that these two components of community are not mutually exclusive.<sup>65</sup> In fact, according to them, community as it is known today is rooted in shared skills and interests than cities and neighborhoods.<sup>66</sup> McMillan and Chavis posit that one cannot understand community without first understanding how a person becomes a member of a community.<sup>67</sup> Membership of a community, according to McMillan and Chavis, is defined as “a

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<sup>61</sup> McMillan, 1986: 8.

<sup>62</sup> McMillan, 1986: 8.

<sup>63</sup> McMillan, 1986: 8.

<sup>64</sup> McMillan, 1986: 8.

<sup>65</sup> McMillan, 1986: 8.

<sup>66</sup> McMillan, 1986: 8.

<sup>67</sup> McMillan, 1986: 9.

feeling that one has invested part of oneself to become a member and therefore has a right to belong.”<sup>68</sup> There are firm boundaries put into place here: certain types of people will belong in a certain community, while others will not.<sup>69</sup> It is difficult to establish boundaries for each community; it is important to note that every community possesses a different standard of belonging.<sup>70</sup>

Boundaries are critical to communities given the emotional implications of their existence. It establishes “emotional security,” according to McMillan and Chavis, for community members.<sup>71</sup> In many instances, it provides the structure for intimacy in most of these communities.<sup>72</sup> Also relevant to many communities is the usage of a common symbol that binds the group together.<sup>73</sup> This idea was explored by Nisbet and Perrin. They defined a community symbol as “a thing the value or meaning of which is bestowed upon it by those who use it,”<sup>74</sup> adding that “the symbol is to the social world what the cell is to the biotic world...the symbol is the beginning of the social world as we know it.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> McMillan, 1986: 9.

<sup>69</sup> McMillan, 1986: 9.

<sup>70</sup> McMillan, 1986: 9.

<sup>71</sup> McMillan, 1986: 10.

<sup>72</sup> McMillan, 1986: 10.

<sup>73</sup> McMillan, 1986: 10.

<sup>74</sup> Nisbet, Robert A., and Robert G. Perrin. *The Social Bond*. New York: Knopf, 1977: 22.

<sup>75</sup> Nisbet, 1977: 22.

Influence is another key ingredient to a community structure. McMillan and Chavis noted that an odd counterbalance must be struck with influence.<sup>76</sup> “It is a bidirectional concept,” they wrote.<sup>77</sup> “In one direction, there is the notion that for a member to be attracted to a group, one must have some influence over what the group does. On the other hand, cohesiveness is contingent on the group’s ability to influence its members.”<sup>78</sup> This give-and-take relationship is what allows communities to survive and thrive; influence is shared amongst the members and participants.<sup>79</sup> The balance between exerting influence and taking influence from other members of the group often serves to bolster the bonds between the group.<sup>80</sup> However, it is not uncommon for certain members of the group to “rise up” and express dominance more than other members.<sup>81</sup> Usually, these members believe that they “either directly or indirectly can exert some control over the community.”<sup>82</sup> Communities often seek conformity and consensus, which is often provided by strong leadership.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> McMillan, 1986: 11.

<sup>77</sup> McMillan, 1986: 11.

<sup>78</sup> McMillan, 1986: 11.

<sup>79</sup> McMillan, 1986: 11.

<sup>80</sup> McMillan, 1986: 11.

<sup>81</sup> McMillan, 1986: 11.

<sup>82</sup> McMillan, 1986: 12.

<sup>83</sup> McMillan, 1986: 12.

McMillan and Chavis also discussed the need for a member's fulfillment of needs within a community.<sup>84</sup> This is the "reinforcement" factor within a community.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps the most important need that seeks reinforcement is the status of being a member of the community.<sup>86</sup> Community pride often leads to closer relationships within participants. Community members also seek shared values.<sup>87</sup> According to McMillan and Chavis, "groups with a sense of community work to find a way to fit people together so that people meet the needs of others while meeting their own needs."<sup>88</sup>

Thus, a shared emotional connection is needed in order to form a community.<sup>89</sup> This is best defined as a common historical tie.<sup>90</sup> McMillan and Chavis noted that "it is not necessary for group members to have participated in the history in order to share it, but they must identify with it."<sup>91</sup> They identified seven key components to a strong shared emotional connection within

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<sup>84</sup> McMillan, 1986: 12.

<sup>85</sup> McMillan, 1986: 12.

<sup>86</sup> McMillan, 1986: 12.

<sup>87</sup> McMillan, 1986: 13.

<sup>88</sup> McMillan, 1986: 13.

<sup>89</sup> McMillan, 1986: 14.

<sup>90</sup> McMillan, 1986: 14.

<sup>91</sup> McMillan, 1986: 14.

a community: contact hypothesis,<sup>92</sup> quality of interaction,<sup>93</sup> closure to events,<sup>94</sup> shared valent event,<sup>95</sup> investment,<sup>96</sup> effect of honor and humiliation on community members,<sup>97</sup> and the spiritual bond.<sup>98</sup>

During the period of 1945 to 1950, segregation was prevalent throughout the United States. It was the black communities across the country that supported athletes like Jackie Robinson and organized Negro Leagues baseball. Newspapers such as the *Courier* acted as a de facto mouthpiece for these communities, advocating for the best interests of these groups and delivering news stories that were relevant and important. To observe what mattered most to the black community at the time of Robinson's integration of baseball and the decline of the Negro Leagues, studying what appeared on the front pages of the *Courier* is an effective way to gauge these interests.

#### Baseball and the Community: The Kansas City Monarchs

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<sup>92</sup> "The more people interact, the more likely they are to become close" (McMillan, 1986: 14).

<sup>93</sup> "The more positive the experience and relationships, the greater the bond" (McMillan, 1986: 14).

<sup>94</sup> "If the interaction is ambiguous and the community's tasks are left unresolved, group cohesiveness will be inhibited" (McMillan, 1986: 14).

<sup>95</sup> "The more important the shared event is to those involved, the greater the community bond" (McMillan, 1986: 14).

<sup>96</sup> "This determines the importance to the member of the community's history and current status" (McMillan, 1986: 14).

<sup>97</sup> "Reward or humiliation in the presence of community has a significant impact on attractiveness of the community to the person (McMillan, 1986: 14).

<sup>98</sup> "Present to some degree in all communities; [in the black community,] it was the animating spirit behind their music, dance, and styles" (McMillan, 1986: 14).

A relationship between the Negro Leagues and the black community was exemplified by the Kansas City Monarchs ballclub. Although somewhat of an anomaly in its success while the rest of organized black professional baseball was failing, the Monarchs represented a symbiotic bond between baseball and the black community. In Hull's research, he examined specific measures ownership groups in the Negro Leagues took to get African American communities out to the ballpark.<sup>99</sup> In Kansas City, according to Hull, largely at the urging of local black sportswriters, ownership groups decided to create "booster clubs."<sup>100</sup> This was a loose collection of fans from surrounding neighborhoods to the ballpark.<sup>101</sup> Such groups included the 12th Street Rooters, Vine Street Rooters, the 18th Street Rooters, and the North End Fans Association.<sup>102</sup> These booster clubs were highly successful; fan support and interest increased significantly in the wake of the advent of these clubs, leading to higher profits for the ballclub; in fact, according to Hull, the booster clubs were the "economic motor" to the success of the Monarchs.<sup>103</sup>

Furthermore, Hull notes that the economic successes of the Monarchs allowed the team to play an increased role within the community. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Monarchs would frequently play charity games to support the Red Cross, the Negro National Business League, and the NAACP.<sup>104</sup> These efforts further endeared the team to the Kansas City

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<sup>99</sup> Hull, John L. "Baseball: The Negro Leagues and Racism in America." American Culture Faculty at the University of Michigan-Flint, December 1999: 43.

<sup>100</sup> Hull, 1999: 43.

<sup>101</sup> Hull, 1999: 43.

<sup>102</sup> Hull, 1999: 43.

<sup>103</sup> Hull, 1999: 43.

<sup>104</sup> Hull, 1999: 43.

community; so much so, in fact, that many ministers would cut their sermons on Sundays short to allow churchgoers to make the first pitch of the Monarchs game.<sup>105</sup>

Formed in 1920 by J.L. Wilkinson, a white businessman, the Monarchs began life as a barnstorming team.<sup>106</sup> However, the team began to grow in popularity, and by the end of the 1930s, the team had grown to become a fixture within the black community in Kansas City.<sup>107</sup> After decades as an independent team, the Monarchs joined the Negro American League as a charter member in 1937.<sup>108</sup> During the first six seasons of the Negro American League, the Monarchs won five pennants.<sup>109</sup> After World War II, the Monarchs remained commercially viable. The team's successes continued into the 1940s.

During the 1950 season, generally regarded as the last full season of the Negro Leagues as a major league organization, the Monarchs continued to bring fans to the ballpark, reinforcing its strong ties to the community. 11,000 fans attended the Monarchs doubleheader against the Indianapolis Clowns.<sup>110</sup> Yet again, Kansas City defied the typical Negro League crowds of the day, proving that Negro Baseball was still a successful venture in that market even as late as 1950. With no Major League Baseball team to call their own at the time, Kansas City fully embraced the Monarchs throughout its history by attending games and forging an emotional communitywide connection with the team.

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<sup>105</sup> Hull, 1999: 43.

<sup>106</sup> McBride, Colin. "The Kansas City Monarchs (1920-1965)." BlackPast.org, March 28, 2014.

<sup>107</sup> McBride, 2014.

<sup>108</sup> Riley, James A. "Kansas City Monarchs." Negro Leagues Baseball Museum eMuseum, 1994.

<sup>109</sup> Riley, 1994.

<sup>110</sup> "K.C. Monarchs Win Pair from Clowns." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 17, 1950: 22.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY

This study examines articles that were published in the *Courier* from 1945 to 1950. The years 1945 to 1950 were chosen because of that time period's significance to black baseball and the black community as a whole. World War II ended in 1945, and thousands of black veterans were returning home in search of education and employment opportunities that would be afforded to them courtesy of the G.I. Bill.<sup>111</sup> The postwar period was a significant period in African American history. Many of the events that took place during this time period would set the stage for the Civil Rights Movement that would begin to gain traction in the mid-1950s.

The time period 1945 to 1947 is widely considered to be critically important within the history of the Negro Leagues. Players such as Cool Papa Bell, Josh Gibson, Buck Leonard, and Buck O'Neil were making names for themselves playing black baseball. In Homestead, Pennsylvania, Leonard and Gibson were teammates and were quickly setting the sports world on fire. Leonard was referred to by many writers as "the black Lou Gehrig," while Gibson was dubbed "the black Babe Ruth."<sup>112</sup> Thus, in order to perform a study on the Negro Leagues' viability in the years leading up to Robinson's integration, the immediate postwar era of black baseball needs to be examined.

The most important year of this study is 1947. Despite signing with the Dodgers in November 1945, Robinson would not debut with the team until April 15, 1947 due to spending

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<sup>111</sup> "GIs Demand End to Bigotry." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 18, 1945: 1.

<sup>112</sup> Berger, Ralph. "Buck Leonard." Society for American Baseball Research, 2017.



the 1946 season with the Dodgers' minor league team, the Montreal Royals. The color barrier was broken, and the floodgates soon opened for other Major League Baseball teams to begin signing black baseball players. According to Buck Leonard, "White owners believed that blacks could play Major League Baseball, but everyone hated to be the first [to sign them]."<sup>113</sup> After Robinson made his debut, other Major League teams began to add all-stars from the Negro Leagues to their rosters, which ultimately led to organized black baseball's swift decline and its demise in 1950.<sup>114</sup>

Like many African American newspapers, the front page of the *Courier* was a direct reflection of what editors believed its readers cared about and needed to know about. Therefore, in order to understand the relationship between these critically important events in baseball and its impact on the black community as a whole, every front-page story of the *Courier* published between the years 1945 to 1950 was examined.

These stories were then broken down into several categories for purposes of organizing them for this thesis. Front-page categories were sorted. Using a spreadsheet to compile the data, each front-page story from the *Courier* from 1945 to 1950 was categorized. For example, every front-page story about lynchings was tallied. Stories about topics such as weddings, deaths of community leaders, and divorces were placed into a category of human-interest stories. Every front-page story that featured Jackie Robinson was placed into its own category, as was every article concerning black baseball and the Negro Leagues. Categories were created for every

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<sup>113</sup> Berger, 2017.

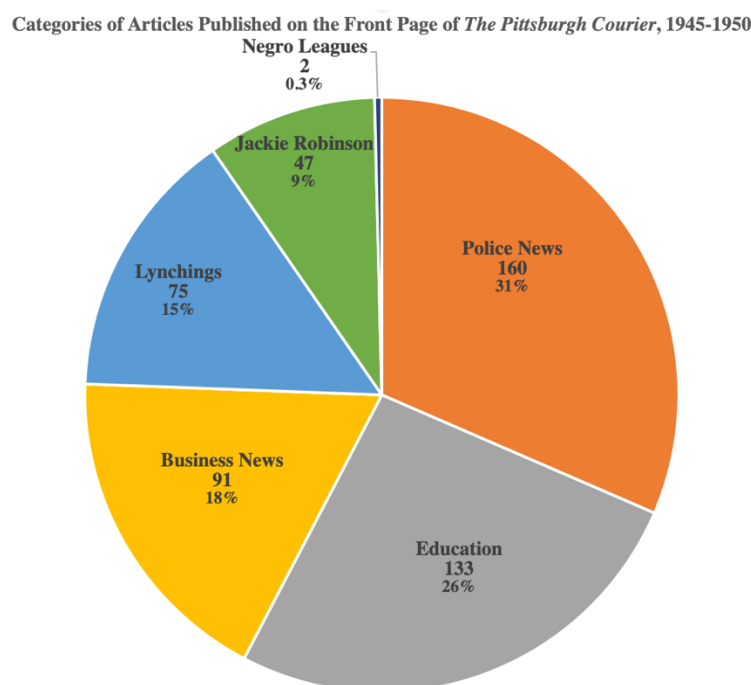
<sup>114</sup> Fertig, Todd. "Legacy: Integration of Baseball Led to Demise of Negro Leagues." *The Topeka Capital-Journal*, February 20, 2016.

relevant issue covered on the *Courier* front page, which allows for an accurate count of the stories that mattered to the black community from 1945 to 1950.

Every issue of the *Courier* from the time was read to glean relevant articles found outside of the front pages concerning Robinson and the integration of Major League Baseball. Every article published in November 1945 concerning Jackie Robinson's signing with Brooklyn was also added to the spreadsheet, as were articles published earlier in 1945 about the *Courier*'s (or, in particular, Wendell Smith's) efforts to integrate Major League Baseball. After 1947, when Robinson made his Major League debut, box scores of Negro Leagues games were also catalogued. The declining attendance figures in the wake of integration were tracked in order to demonstrate the correlation between notable black baseball players (such as Satchel Paige and Jackie Robinson) joining the Major Leagues and the lack of interest in post-Robinson Negro Leagues baseball among the black community.

The *Courier* made several pleas with its readers to keep the Negro Leagues alive over the course of the three years following baseball's integration. These include articles warning of the forthcoming demise of the Negro American and Negro National Leagues if fans continued to stay away from black baseball games. These articles were also logged for purposes of this research, as it demonstrates the *Courier*'s efforts to serve as an influential voice and anchor within the black community. Despite the newspaper's best efforts, these articles clearly did not lead to the desired effect.

Figure 1: Articles Published on the Front Page of *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 1945-1950



To determine the genres of stories from the *Courier* front page from the years 1945 to 1950, several key word and phrase searches were employed on the Newspapers.com website. This list gathers the number of issues where each search word or phrase appeared on the front page of the *Courier* from 1945 to 1950. Of the six categories of stories monitored on the front page, stories concerning the police appeared on the front page of the *Courier* the most; from 1945 to 1950, 160 issues of the newspaper featured a story about the police in some capacity on the front page. Stories pertaining to education also appeared on the *Courier* front page, with 26 percent of *Courier* front pages featuring them. These stories mostly focused on the integration of schools and universities, as well as efforts to provide funding to black schools and universities. Articles about businesses and financial news appeared on 18 percent of front pages of the *Courier*, and 15 percent of front pages of the *Courier* contained stories of lynchings on the front page.

All of these categories of stories appeared more frequently than stories about Jackie Robinson and the Negro Leagues. From 1945 to 1950, Jackie Robinson appeared on the front page of the *Courier* in 47 issues, or nine percent of front pages; stories about black professional baseball appeared on less than one percent of *Courier* front pages. While Jackie Robinson's accomplishments were certainly covered on the front pages of the *Courier*, analysis shows that these stories did not appear as regularly as other stories that directly impacted black communities across the country, such as lynchings and police brutality. In addition, black professional baseball received virtually no coverage on the *Courier* front page, meaning that all of the coverage of its death was relegated to the sports page.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE HEIGHT OF THE NEGRO LEAGUES AND PRE-INTEGRATION, 1945-1946

On April 7, 1945, the *Courier* ran a front-page story about a Florida sheriff who was being accused of slavery by the Workers Defense League. Sheriff Walter Clark of Fort Lauderdale attempted “to force Negroes to work for substandard wages on nearby farms by arresting every one of them found idle on the streets and fining them from \$25 to \$35 each, without trial.”<sup>115</sup> This was an attempt by a white man in a position of power to force African Americans to perform work against their will. Issues such as blatant work violations against the black community were rarely reported in white newspapers, but in the *Courier*, they were printed for the black community to read.

In addition to civil rights issues, stories about the potential integration of baseball began to appear in the *Courier* as early as 1945. It was the *Courier* that pushed for the integration of baseball and brought the issue into the public consciousness. Wendell Smith, the sports editor of the *Courier*, referred the Brooklyn Dodgers organization to Jackie Robinson, setting the ball in motion for the destruction of the color barrier in baseball.<sup>116</sup>

#### Front Page Stories, 1945-1946

At the start of 1945, America was fully engaged in World War II. Much of the *Courier*'s front page was devoted to the African American perspective of the war. The newspaper covered

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<sup>115</sup> “WDL Charges Florida Sheriff with Slavery; Asks U.S. Probe.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 7, 1945: 1.

<sup>116</sup> “Wendell Smith and Branch Rickey.” Baseball Hall of Fame.

stories of various African American brigades and infantry units, devoting much of its coverage to the war effort. The *Courier* also spent much of its time covering black soldiers around the world during the war, as well as the strong reputation of African American troops on the global stage. After the war ended midway through the year, the *Courier* spent much of its coverage focusing on black troops reacclimating and readjusting to American society, as well as pushing for entitlements and reforms for black soldiers in the GI Bill.<sup>117</sup>

Similarly, the newspaper focused its coverage on pushing various branches of the military to end Jim Crow policies. When various units within the Army and Air Force ended segregation and integrated its facilities, the *Courier* devoted much of the front page to these stories. A notable example came on March 24, 1945, when the *Courier* ran a front-page story concerning the integration of the First and Seventh Armies. “Negroes and whites are now fighting shoulder to shoulder in the same outfits in both Armies, marking a break in the United States Army’s traditional policy of segregation,” the newspaper reported.<sup>118</sup> This event was a critical breakthrough for black soldiers as it marked a turning point in the country’s integration of the Army.

The newspaper also covered a college fund established in New York for black veterans, as well as publishing long-form pieces about black veterans struggling to acclimate to American society. On May 19, 1945, the *Courier* printed a letter from a black soldier serving in Japan, “From the Hell of Okinawa: A Different American is Returning to the States,” about the desire

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<sup>117</sup> Young, John H. “Senate, Legion to Scan Discharges.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 10, 1945: 1.

<sup>118</sup> “1st, 7th Infantries Abolish Jim Crow Policy.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 24, 1945: 1.

for equality after soldiers returned home from war.<sup>119</sup> “We are going to have the things that are rightfully due us or else, which is a very large order, but we have proven beyond all things that we are people and not just the servants of the white man,” wrote Private Herbert W. Seward, a soldier stationed in Okinawa.<sup>120</sup>

The *Courier* devoted extended coverage over multiple weeks to the Virginia Supreme Court’s decision to uphold the segregation of buses and public transportation in the state. This decision came down in June 1945 and was promptly appealed.<sup>121</sup> Months later, on December 8, 1945, the travel law found its way to the United States Supreme Court, which meant that coverage of the case lasted throughout much of 1946.<sup>122</sup> The *Courier* kept readers apprised of relevant information pertaining to the case. The outcome of the case would have had a profound impact on “separate, but equal” laws throughout the United States. Long before the case had reached the highest court in the land, the *Courier* was covering the Virginia law as it was being challenged in the state Supreme Court. Having a newspaper of its magnitude cover the case provided legitimacy to the issue, and likely helped bring it to the front of the black public consciousness.

In the mid-1940s, the Ku Klux Klan terrorized African American communities around the country. The *Courier* was at the forefront of reporting the atrocities committed by the Klan. On July 13, 1946, the *Courier* ran a front-page story claiming that the Klan had permanently

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<sup>119</sup> Seward, Herbert W. “From the Hell of Okinawa: A Different American Is Returning to the States.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 19, 1945: 1.

<sup>120</sup> Seward, 1945: 1.

<sup>121</sup> “State Law Applies to Interstate Commerce.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 16, 1945: 1.

<sup>122</sup> “Virginia Case Gets Hearing: Jim-Crow Travel Law to U.S. Supreme Court.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 8, 1945: 1.

dissolved.<sup>123</sup> This would ultimately prove not to be the case, with new chapters of the Klan emerging in states such as Indiana and Michigan by the end of the year.<sup>124</sup>

Lynchings continued throughout 1946. Despite the *Courier* reporting on small communities like Fairburn, Georgia passing anti-lynching laws,<sup>125</sup> lynchings remained prevalent throughout the South. On August 24, 1946, the *Courier* published a front-page story about two lynchings that had taken place that week.<sup>126</sup> One took place in rural South Carolina, while another took place in Minden, Louisiana; the Louisiana slaying involved a World War II veteran. The white man who led the lynching in South Carolina was arrested and brought up on charges, whereas the Minden lynchers had not been found as of the article's publication. Minden's District Attorney expressed skepticism to the *Courier* that the community would leak the names of the lynchers, making it quite likely that the men responsible would never be brought to justice.<sup>127</sup>

In response to these lynchings, the Attorney General declared that he would pursue anti-lynching laws and legislation in an attempt to thwart such acts of terror from continuing.<sup>128</sup> As 1946 continued, the FBI launched several probes into various lynchings that had taken place.

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<sup>123</sup> "One for the Books: The Klan Claims It Has Dissolved!" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 13, 1946: 1.

<sup>124</sup> Vann, Robert L. "The Klan in Michigan." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 31, 1946: 4.

<sup>125</sup> "Town Passes Own Anti-Lynch Law, Sets Pattern for Southern Cities." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 10, 1946: 1.

<sup>126</sup> "Dixie 'Reign of Terror' Spreads: Two More Lynchings!" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 24, 1946: 1.

<sup>127</sup> "Dixie 'Reign of Terror,'" 1946: 1.

<sup>128</sup> "Attorney General Will Seek Federal Anti-Lynching Law." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 24, 1946: 1.



These probes continued well into the end of the year, with five Mississippi lynchings facing trial in October 1946, and investigators looking to bring charges against a group of white men that had carried out a lynching in Georgia.<sup>129</sup> However, despite these attempts to curb the lynchings, these activities continued. A December 28, 1946 *Courier* front-page story described the struggles to bring the perpetrators of a lynching that had taken place earlier in the year in Monroe, Georgia, to justice.<sup>130</sup>

Racially motivated discrimination in the American education system was rampant in 1945 and 1946, and the *Courier* devoted many of its front-page stories to covering these issues. A March 31, 1945 article detailed a study that indicated that white students were more prejudiced when informed that black students were equal.<sup>131</sup> Such attitudes set the stage for the educational shortcomings African Americans were forced to confront at the time. The *Courier* spent much of 1945 pushing for the passing of an Equalization Educational Fund, which would provide black students with the same opportunities for education as white students. According to an April 28, 1945 article, President Franklin Roosevelt had approved of the college fund's creation prior to his death.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> "Action! Nation Demands Lynching Arrests." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 12, 1946: 1.

<sup>130</sup> "Monroe Lynchers Unknown: FBI Will Continue Ga. Probe." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 28, 1946: 1.

<sup>131</sup> "Does Education Breed Race Hate?: Says Whites More Prejudiced When Told Negroes Are Equal." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 31, 1945: 2.

<sup>132</sup> "Nation Needs!: FDR Okayed College Fund." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 28, 1945: 2.

During the week of May 19, 1945, the *Courier* reported that the University of Missouri had fired four professors for expressing views supportive of integrated education.<sup>133</sup> These actions sparked protests across campus. Eventually, in October 1945, school riots began to pop up across the country. Much of the riots stemmed from disgruntled white students frustrated by the change in educational policies emerging in many Northern and Midwestern city schools. In Gary, Indiana, 850 students rioted over an elementary school becoming integrated.<sup>134</sup> These students were encouraged by local organizations opposing integration to do so despite many students facing expulsion for their actions and criminal charges of truancy.<sup>135</sup>

Certain groups of Southerners fought relentlessly to keep colleges segregated, and the *Courier* devoted many pages to covering these events. These white voters opposed black students having their own regional colleges in the South, with many waging legal fights in an attempt to block such schools from forming. This fight was ultimately unsuccessful, and the *Courier* reported on December 15, 1945, that black students would have their own regional colleges throughout the South.<sup>136</sup> That same week, the *Courier* reported that Tennessee black schools were found to be well below the facilities white students in the state had. The *Courier* was quick to note that this was a clear violation of the “equal” portion of the “separate, but

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<sup>133</sup> Stafford, George B. “Missouri U Fires Four for Interracial Views.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 19, 1945: 1.

<sup>134</sup> “Chicago, Harlem Witness New Outbreaks as Tension Mounts.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 6, 1945: 1.

<sup>135</sup> “Chicago, Harlem,” 1945: 1.

<sup>136</sup> “Governors Adopt New Plans for Education.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 15, 1945: 1.

equal” policy implemented by the Supreme Court.<sup>137</sup> In January 1946, it was reported that black elementary schools still did not exist in Trousdale County, Tennessee, one of the wealthier counties in the state at the time.<sup>138</sup>

However, the newspaper also reported on the racial progresses of African Americans in the educational sphere. On February 9, 1946, the University of Wisconsin at Madison announced the hiring of Dr. Alain L. Locke by the school’s philosophy department.<sup>139</sup> This was a landmark hire for the university. Locke was the first black professor hired by the University of Wisconsin and the announcement was a front-page story that week.<sup>140</sup> In addition, a school lunch bill that passed the House of Representatives barred discrimination of any kind against “race, creed, color, or country of origin.”<sup>141</sup> The amendment was added to the bill by Representative Adam Clayton Powell of New York, a black congressman, and provided black students with a critical protection at school during lunchtime.

Despite the progress being made in black education at the time, there were still many flaws and shortcomings within the American education system. A March 1946 *Courier* article found that only 3.4 percent of funds in the United States for rural education were being spent on

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<sup>137</sup> “Unequal Accommodations: Tennessee Negro Schools Far Below Facilities for Whites.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 15, 1945: 2.

<sup>138</sup> “50 Denied Higher Education: No High School for Negroes in Prosperous Tenn. County.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 12, 1946: 3.

<sup>139</sup> “A Full-Fledged Professor: Wisconsin U. Adds Locke to Faculty.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 9, 1946: 1.

<sup>140</sup> “A Full-Fledged Professor,” 1946: 1.

<sup>141</sup> “Powell Leads Fight for Equality in Federal Aid.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 2, 1946: 1.

black students.<sup>142</sup> In addition, the Supreme Court ruled that Texas universities could ban African American students from attending white schools as long as “equal education was provided” at another comparable black school.<sup>143</sup> In Oklahoma, the state defied a high court ruling and denied a black student entry into the University of Oklahoma law school despite being ordered to do so.<sup>144</sup> According to a March 1946 article, a massive effort was launched by black activists to raise the South’s school standards for African Americans.<sup>145</sup> The lack of proper education available to black students in states like Tennessee and Georgia led to such equal education movements emerging in pockets of the Deep South.

Finally, the *Courier* documented efforts for voting rights for black citizens. While black citizens in Florida, Alabama, Missouri and Georgia were granted various rights to make voting easier, these efforts were unsurprisingly met with great resistance from some white voters. An August 3, 1946 front page story from the *Courier* reports of the death of a black veteran, Macio Snipes, in Butler, Georgia, shortly after voting.<sup>146</sup> Snipes was shot to death by a white man. In addition, a week later, in Athens, Alabama, reports that mobs were tormenting black communities began to emerge.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Lautier, Louis, and James L. Hicks. “For Rural Education, Survey Shows Race Gets Only 3.4% of U.S. Funds.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 2, 1946: 2.

<sup>143</sup> “Texas University Can Bar Negroes on One Condition: Must Provide Equal Education or Admit Vet to Law Course.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 23, 1946: 1.

<sup>144</sup> “Oklahoma ‘U’ Case Granted Stay.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 18, 1946: 15.

<sup>145</sup> “Movement Afoot to Raise South’s School Standards.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 30, 1945: 2.

<sup>146</sup> “After Voting, Georgia Veteran Shot to Death.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 3, 1946: 1.

<sup>147</sup> “Mob Terrorizes Athens, Alabama; Nine Arrested.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 17, 1946: 1.

Reading the *Courier*, it is clear that strides towards racial equality were made between 1945 and 1946. Many lawmakers worked to reduce lynchings, improve voting conditions for blacks, and passed measures and allocated funds to improve black education, particularly in rural and low-income areas. However, white voters fought hard to push back against these measures, with riots, killings, and burnings routinely occurring in attempts to thwart and stall these efforts. These issues were critical components to the front pages of the *Courier* in the two years leading up to Jackie Robinson breaking baseball's color barrier. Issues pertaining to baseball seldom appeared on the front page of the *Courier*, with a few notable exceptions.

#### The *Courier*'s Efforts to Integrate Baseball, 1945-1946

It has been argued by scholars such as Kelley that the efforts of the *Courier* hastened the process of integrating Major League Baseball.<sup>148</sup> Studying the newspaper's baseball coverage from 1945 to 1946, it is clear that this is the case. The newspaper published stories about the need for an integrated Major League Baseball in as early as January 1945. A *Courier* article printed on January 27, 1945, stated that the Major Leagues acknowledged that inferior talent existed within the league.<sup>149</sup> This reinforced the newspaper's narrative that black players were equal (and in many cases, superior) to the white talent that played in the Majors at the time.

White writers began to support the idea of an integrated Major League Baseball early in 1945. The *Courier* sports page published an article by *Los Angeles Daily News* columnist Gordon Macker in February 1945. Macker had written that if black players were able to fight in World War II and participate in the U.S. war effort, they were more than good enough to play in

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<sup>148</sup> Kelley, William G. "Jackie Robinson and the Press." *Journalism Quarterly*, 1976, 139.

<sup>149</sup> "Major Leagues Willingly Acknowledge Inferior Talent...Say Nothing About 'Cover Charge' They Slap on Fans." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 27, 1945: 12.

Major League Baseball. “My argument is simply this: If a boy from 43rd and Central is good enough to stop a bullet in France he’s good enough to stop a line drive at 42nd and Avalon (Wrigley Field),” wrote Macker. “That is, if baseball would continue to pose as America’s favorite game.”<sup>150</sup>

As the year progressed, the *Courier* began to push harder for authority figures to investigate the roots of the black baseball player ban. A March 10, 1945 Wendell Smith column served as a plea for equality in the sport of baseball. “Why won’t Congressman Samuel Weiss launch an investigation and find out why professional baseball continues to bar Negro citizens?” wrote Smith. “Why won’t he come forth and decry this un-American exclusion act the major leagues promote and foster year after year? Why won’t he point out in the sacred halls of Congress that professional baseball is perpetuating a policy which is against the wishes and best interests of one-tenth of the Nation?”<sup>151</sup> Such pieces demonstrated the *Courier*’s dedication towards lobbying those in positions of power to demand answers about baseball’s inequality.

Lawmakers in major cities with Major League Baseball teams began to push to integrate baseball as well. On March 24, 1945, the city of Boston explored the possibility of denying the Boston Braves and Boston Red Sox licenses to operate in the city on the grounds of racial barriers. One of the city’s aldermen wrote:

It is my understanding that despite an aroused public opinion and pending legislation for fair employment practices, the practice of discrimination against Negro ballplayers will prevail. I cannot understand how baseball, which claims to be the national sport and

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<sup>150</sup> Fentress, J. Cullen. “‘If They’re Good Enough to Fight, They’re Good Enough to Play in Majors’ –Gordon Macker.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 10, 1945: 12.

<sup>151</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Major League Teams Off to Camps; What About it, Mr. Weiss?” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 10, 1945: 12.

which in my opinion receives special favors and dispensations from the Federal Government because of the alleged morale value, can continue a pre-Civil War attitude towards fellow American citizens because of the color of their skin.<sup>152</sup>

This letter showed that it was not just a small minority calling for the integration of baseball. Lawmakers were actually considering denying two teams the power to operate on the grounds of race.

While the efforts to integrate baseball did not usually constitute front-page news for the *Courier*, on April 14, 1945, the newspaper devoted much of its front page to covering its new campaign to integrate baseball. A Boston city councilman, in the wake of the aforementioned letter, pushed for open tryouts for black ballplayers for the Red Sox.<sup>153</sup> Wendell Smith, the *Courier's* sports editor, also opined the need for tryouts for black players. That week, the *Courier* utilized its front page in an attempt to get Negro Leagues all-stars Sam Jethroe and Dave Hoskins tryouts with Major League clubs. Also listed in the article as possibilities for Major League tryouts were Jackie Robinson, who at the time was playing for the Kansas City Monarchs, and Roy Campanella, who played for the Baltimore Elite Giants.<sup>154</sup>

One of the baseball executives most intrigued by the possibility of adding black players to his roster was Brooklyn Dodgers general manager Branch Rickey. Rickey was extremely impressed by the talent that existed in the Negro Leagues; he was the first general manager

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<sup>152</sup> "Baseball Ban Holds Up Licenses to Boston Nines." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 24, 1945: 12.

<sup>153</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Tryouts for Red Sox: Boston Councilman Joins in Crusade." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 14, 1945: 1.

<sup>154</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Robinson, Jethroe, Hoskins May Get Tryouts." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 14, 1945: 1.

willing to go on the record to discuss his enthusiasm about black baseball.<sup>155</sup> “I’d like to book more colored teams in Ebbetts Field [home of the Dodgers],” Rickey told the *Courier* at the time. “Why, I might even be interested in ownership of a franchise eventually.”<sup>156</sup> This was a stunning admission at the time for a white general manager. Not only was Rickey praising black baseball players, he was actively interested in participating and expanding into the sport.

A week later, another series of front-page stories appeared in the *Courier* on the possibility of integrating baseball. According to the *Courier*, it was the Boston Red Sox that were openly flirting with the idea of having black baseball players try out for the Major Leagues.<sup>157</sup> There were three ballplayers that appealed to Eddie Collins, the general manager of the Red Sox: Jackie Robinson, Sam Jethroe and Marvin Williams, the second baseman of the Philly Stars.<sup>158</sup> All three men went to Boston in April 1945 and met with the management of the Red Sox. The trip was organized and funded by the *Courier*.<sup>159</sup> According to the article, the meeting came as somewhat of a surprise as until hours before the meeting, the Red Sox had brushed off requests from the newspaper for a comment or updates regarding a tryout.<sup>160</sup>

These efforts, however, proved to be futile. Accompanied by Wendell Smith, the players spent a week in Boston attempting to lobby management for both the Red Sox and Braves for a

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<sup>155</sup> “Brooklyn Chiefs ‘Look at’ First Negro Players.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 14, 1945: 12.

<sup>156</sup> “Branch Rickey Says He Might Be Interested in a Franchise in Sepia League.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 14, 1945: 12.

<sup>157</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Red Sox Consider Negroes.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 21, 1945: 1.

<sup>158</sup> Smith, April 21, 1945: 1.

<sup>159</sup> Smith, April 21, 1945: 1.

<sup>160</sup> Smith, April 21, 1945: 1.



tryout. General managers from both teams expressed general disinterest towards giving the men tryouts. However, Smith was completely undeterred and vowed to continue his fight to integrate baseball:

We are not giving up! We are American, the color of our skins to the contrary...and we're going to stick to our guns! We are looked upon as 'confounded rebels' who would challenge the divine right of baseball's kings. Nevertheless, we stay on, playing the fife of Americanism, beating the drum of democracy, and waving our tattered flag of citizenship. We have inherited – even if Mr. Collins and Mr. Quinn have not – that indomitable colonial spirit.<sup>161</sup>

This was Smith's rallying cry to his readers and ultimately to the players. The fight to integrate baseball was far from over, and while the attempts to secure a trial run with the two Boston franchises ultimately fell flat, Smith (and the *Courier*) vowed to fight on.

On April 28, 1945, several congressmen asked for a probe into the continuing ban of black baseball players in the Major Leagues.<sup>162</sup> For the third consecutive week, the issue of integrating baseball was a front-page story. New York Congressman Vito Marcantonio announced on the floor of the House of Representatives that he was interested in probing Major League Baseball as to the motivations behind this ban. "If my new resolution is approved, baseball's new czar, if he is then elected, Ford Frick, president of the National League; Will Harridge, president of the American League, and the owners of the several Major League clubs,

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<sup>161</sup> Smith, Wendell. "We're Not Giving Up – We're Sticking to Our Guns!" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 21, 1945: 12.

<sup>162</sup> Boyack, James. "Marcantonio Hits Major League Ban." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 28, 1945: 1.

will be invited to testify,” Marcantonio announced.<sup>163</sup> He went on to add, “Baseball is not the property of an individual, or group of individuals. It is the heritage of all of the people, and rightfully belongs to all of the people, and the press, which maintains its prosperity.”<sup>164</sup> The desire to integrate baseball was beginning to quickly pick up steam, with national lawmakers beginning to demand a change to baseball’s policies.

Finally, on the week of April 28, the *Courier* proved to be successful in getting Jethroe, Robinson and Williams tryouts with the Red Sox. According to an article published that week, the three Negro League all-stars were on standby, waiting for the Red Sox to assess their performances and determine whether or not they would be Major Leaguers.<sup>165</sup> Team manager Joe Cronin was responsible for overseeing the tryouts. Not long after the tryouts, Cronin was hospitalized with a broken leg, and sports editor Wendell Smith speculated that a decision on whether or not the three Negro Leaguers had earned spots on the Red Sox would not come until after the Red Sox skipper was well enough to assess the outcome.<sup>166</sup>

Meanwhile, according to Wendell Smith’s column that week, Dodgers general manager Branch Rickey continued to enthusiastically express his interest in black baseball. According to Smith, “there is considerable speculation as to what Branch Rickey intends to do about Negro candidates applying for positions with his Brooklyn Dodgers. His observations on Terris McDuffy and Dave Thomas were extremely interesting. It is obvious that McDuffy interested

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<sup>163</sup> Boyack, 1945: 1.

<sup>164</sup> Boyack, 1945: 1.

<sup>165</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Robinson, Williams, and Jethroe ‘Standing By.’” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 28, 1945: 12.

<sup>166</sup> Smith, April 28, 1945: 12.

the Brooklyn boss, while Thomas' performance aroused nothing in the way of enthusiasm from him."<sup>167</sup> In this column, Smith began to plant the seeds for the possibility of Rickey being the first Major League Baseball executive willing to take the chance of signing a black ballplayer, thus breaking the color barrier.

"Whether he does or does not employ a Negro player in the future, I believe the public and sportswriters owe the Brooklyn chief every possible kind of consideration, and above all, the benefit of the doubt," wrote Smith. "At the same time, millions of fans are looking in Mr. Rickey's direction hoping that he will in the near future employ at least one Negro player. Most people believe that the possibilities of such an innovation are remote, but nevertheless they are banking on Mr. Rickey's sympathy in the situation."<sup>168</sup>

A week later, it was announced that the Congressional probe spearheaded by Congressman Marcantonio would proceed.<sup>169</sup> New Major League Baseball commissioner Happy Chandler, a former Democratic senator from Kentucky, would be called to testify as would both league presidents. According to the *Courier*, "it is expected that the qualifications of a number of nationally known Negro ballplayers and their eligibility for major league contracts will receive the careful scrutiny of the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee."<sup>170</sup>

A week later, more developments emerged in the fight to integrate baseball. On May 12, 1945, it was announced that a committee had been proposed by Major League Baseball to study

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<sup>167</sup> Smith, Wendell. "On the Baseball Situation..." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 28, 1945: 12.

<sup>168</sup> Smith, April 28, 1945: 12.

<sup>169</sup> "Probe of Bias in Big Leagues Expected Soon." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 4, 1945: 12.

<sup>170</sup> "Probe of Bias," May 4, 1945: 12.

the potential benefits and flaws of integrating the league.<sup>171</sup> According to the article, the committee would consist of: “A representative of the National League, one from the American League, a baseball writer appointed by the New York Baseball Writers Association, an outstanding Negro baseball man, a colored baseball writer, and a nationally known personality representing the public interest.”<sup>172</sup> Larry MacPhail, president of the New York Yankees, issued a statement to the *Courier* about the upcoming committee’s creation:

I think that the formation of two Negro leagues, under the conditions, would probably lead to their being admitted to organized baseball, with all the responsibilities and privileges inherent in this association. These would include appointment of two presidents with full authority governing contracts, a definite playing schedule, scout system, competent baseball administration, and the other appurtenances of organized baseball.<sup>173</sup>

This admission also proved to be an important breakthrough. In the words of one of the most powerful owners in baseball, the Major Leagues were exploring the possibility of creating a black developmental league specifically with the purpose of sending worthy African American ballplayers to the Major Leagues.

In that week’s sports page, the *Courier* published Satchel Paige’s response to a letter from a fan. Paige expressed skepticism about the ability of black players to make the Major Leagues and do so quickly:

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<sup>171</sup> Boyack, James. “Committee Proposed to Study Problem.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 12, 1945: 12.

<sup>172</sup> Boyack, 1945: 12.

<sup>173</sup> Boyack, 1945: 12.

The only way I see we can make it is to pick an All-Star club of our own to play their best club and let the whole world see it. This must be a big game, not just a spring training contest where only 25 or 30 people will see it. Some say we do not have many good Negro players – at least good enough for the major leagues. That is not true. What is wrong with Booker McDaniels, Kansas City pitcher; Buck Leonard and Josh Gibson of the Homestead Grays and Bonnie Serrell of Kansas City? Too old? Listen, there are a lot of big leaguers now playing that are over thirty years of age. The men I have named, and plenty of other Negro players, are just as good and better than a lot of big leaguers the same age.<sup>174</sup>

Paige, who was believed to be in his mid-40s at the time he published his response to the fan, again made the argument that the *Courier* had been making for quite some time: that black players were more than capable of standing toe-to-toe with any major leaguer in similar age brackets. However, he believed that integration of baseball was simply not possible given the barriers that black players faced at the time, and his proposal to fix the problem was to create professional barnstorming all-star teams to square off against white all-stars.

As was to be expected, the issue of integrating baseball did not sit well with every Major League Baseball owner. Clark Griffith, the owner of the Washington Senators, publicly called out Branch Rickey's enthusiasm for black baseball. According to Griffith, Rickey was overstepping his boundaries as president of the Dodgers by getting involved with black baseball and believed that the Negro Leagues should have been left alone as a completely independent entity.<sup>175</sup> Griffith, according to Smith, was one of the league's most staunch opponents of

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<sup>174</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Satchel Takes Pen in Hand." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 12, 1945: 12.

<sup>175</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Up Pops Mr. Griffith Again." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 26, 1945: 12.

integrating baseball. Despite this, Smith noted that Griffith was also a known hypocrite; during World War II, when many of the contracted Senators players had been drafted, Griffith scouted and signed players from across the globe to replace the militarily-bound Senators players. “He had so many foreigners on his team it was necessary to have an interpreter,” wrote Smith. “If you ever heard that conglomeration of personalities talking to each other in the dugout, you’d swear you were sojourning in Madrid, Lisbon, or Havana.”<sup>176</sup> Smith concluded that owners like Griffith would “rather go outside the borders of these United States and bring in players, rather than hire American citizens of color.”<sup>177</sup>

While many Negro Leagues owners understandably had reservations about allowing their players to flirt with the possibility of joining a Major League Baseball team, the owner of the Kansas City Monarchs, Robinson’s team at the time, was very supportive of the *Courier*’s efforts to integrate baseball, even if it meant losing one of the most talented players. “Certainly Jackie can go [try out for teams],” J.L. Wilkinson, owner of the Monarchs, responded when asked for permission. “He’s a fine boy and I would be the last one to deny him an opportunity like this. He’ll be there whenever you say, and I honestly hope he makes it.”<sup>178</sup> Wilkinson had long been regarded as one of the most bold and progressive owners in the Negro Leagues. According to Wendell Smith, it was Wilkinson who revived Satchel Paige’s career during a downslide when he signed him to a contract when no other teams were interested.<sup>179</sup> Having flexible and

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<sup>176</sup> Smith, May 26, 1945: 12.

<sup>177</sup> Smith, May 26, 1945: 12.

<sup>178</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Can’t Turn a Ballplayer Down.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 9, 1945: 12.

<sup>179</sup> Smith, June 9, 1945: 12.

forward-thinking Negro Leagues owners like J.L. Wilkinson paved the way for baseball's integration.

In July 1945, local lawmakers in Brooklyn began to show support for the idea of having a black ballplayer on the Dodgers. Brooklyn Assemblyman Philip J. Schupler penned an open letter to Branch Rickey urging the team's president to move forward with signing black ballplayers. "If you are so desperate in your search for talent, I might suggest a source which would be more productive than the various homes for the aged which you have been scouting," Schupler wrote sarcastically. "There are many talented and able Negro ballplayers available who would insure the pennant for the Dodgers."<sup>180</sup> Schupler's letter was even more notable due to the fact that he represented an entirely white district; the cries for integration were now coming from lawmakers that, on paper, had few political points to gain by doing so.

Black celebrities also joined the growing chorus of voices urging Major League Baseball to integrate. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, the notable dancer and one of the leading black stars of the Vaudeville era of entertainment, called for Happy Chandler to integrate baseball and move forward with a viable plan to do so. "There are a lot of people who don't think young colored players can play big league baseball, but I know that they can," said Robinson. "I can prove it by white ballplayers like Walter Johnson, Dizzy Dean, Joe DiMaggio and from any member of the Philadelphia Athletics of some years ago, when Connie Mack had those great championship teams of his. All those teams were beaten by the Lincoln Giants at 136th Street and Fifth

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<sup>180</sup> "Assemblyman Asks Brooklyn to Hire Negro Players." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 21, 1945: 12.

Avenue years ago.”<sup>181</sup> Robinson added that he wanted “competent young colored ballplayers to play on Major League teams, provided they are qualified and will not be humiliated.”<sup>182</sup>

The usually racially friendly Branch Rickey sparked a minor controversy in the *Courier*, particularly with sports editor Wendell Smith, after he gave an interview to *The St. Louis Sporting News*.<sup>183</sup> Rickey noted that the St. Louis Browns baseball team was struggling, and the city seemed to be incapable of supporting two Major League Baseball franchises. Rickey stated that black fans had not gotten into the habit of supporting Major League Baseball in St. Louis, and that this would need to occur in order for the Majors to survive in the city. Smith noted that the most obvious fix to this solution would be for the Cardinals or Browns to add black players to their rosters. Smith noted that St. Louis baseball teams had a long history of discriminating against black players and fans due to Jim Crow laws, giving black baseball fans in St. Louis little incentive to support the local clubs.<sup>184</sup>

A week later, Rickey was seemingly back in Smith’s good graces. For the first time, there was an obvious signal that a black player was joining a white baseball team. On September 8, 1945, the *Courier* reported that Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey held what was described as a “mystery” conference in Brooklyn.<sup>185</sup> The meeting, according to the report, lasted well over

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<sup>181</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Bill Robinson Urges Majors to Drop Color Ban.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 1, 1945: 12.

<sup>182</sup> Smith, September 1, 1945: 12.

<sup>183</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Is Branch Rickey Kidding?” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 1, 1945: 12.

<sup>184</sup> Smith, September 1, 1945: 12.

<sup>185</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Sepia Shortstop and Dodgers Boss Meet in Brooklyn.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 8, 1945: 12.



two hours. Robinson was apparently instructed by the Dodgers to “leave the Monarchs immediately and report to Rickey in Brooklyn.”<sup>186</sup> This was a breakthrough moment in the process to integrate baseball. A week later, on September 15, the *Courier* reported that Robinson had left the Monarchs for good, telling the team that he was “headed home.”<sup>187</sup> This was another signal that perhaps something was in the works between Robinson and a Major League team, especially given that Robinson’s departure occurred within a week of his meeting with Branch Rickey.

One thing was for certain: Robinson would not be joining the New York Yankees. According to a September 29, 1945 *Courier* article from Wendell Smith, Larry MacPhail told the Congressional committee investigating the segregation of baseball that the Yankees had no intention of signing a black ballplayer.<sup>188</sup> However, MacPhail did want to continue to allow Negro Leagues teams to use Yankee Stadium because they were responsible for contributing \$100,000 towards the Yankee franchise.<sup>189</sup> Smith harshly criticized MacPhail and the Yankees for these comments, and added that franchises like the Detroit Tigers were also playing a significant role in shortchanging Negro League games by refusing to advertise the games and charging astronomical fees for stadium usage.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Smith, September 8, 1945: 12.

<sup>187</sup> “Robinson Leaves Monarchs for Home.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 15, 1945: 12.

<sup>188</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Larry (the Mouth) MacPhail Double Talks.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 29, 1945: 12.

<sup>189</sup> Smith, September 29, 1945: 12.

<sup>190</sup> Smith, September 29, 1945: 12.

Nearly two months after Robinson met with Rickey in a closed-door meeting, the deal became official. On November 3, 1945, Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers organization.<sup>191</sup> It was a front-page story in the *Courier*; professional baseball had finally taken its largest step yet towards integration. “I studied this thing a long, long time,” said Rickey, “and when my scouts told me Robinson was good enough to play with Montreal [Brooklyn’s minor league affiliate], I decided I wanted him. I could not turn him down because he was a Negro – my conscience would not let me. I knew I was right, and when a man is right he cannot do wrong. I anticipated the adverse reaction that has been expressed by certain people, but I had the shield of right and I was not afraid.”<sup>192</sup> After months of flirting with the idea, Rickey made it official. Rickey told Wendell Smith and the *Courier* that Jackie would have every opportunity to crack the Dodgers’ roster during the upcoming 1946 season.<sup>193</sup> The influence of the *Courier* was clear. Because Wendell Smith and the sports staff at the newspaper pushed for players like Jackie Robinson to get a full tryout in front of Major League scouts and staffers, a signing was inked and on paper.<sup>194</sup>

In the wake of the signing, the *Courier* took out a half-page bulletin on the sports page to reaffirm its commitment to black baseball at the same time. The bulletin read:

*The Pittsburgh Courier*, in its intensive campaign to smash the color barriers in organized Major League Baseball, does not intend to jeopardize the best interests of

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<sup>191</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Branch Rickey Tells *Courier* Why He Signed Jackie Robinson to Play with Montreal Club.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 3, 1945: 1.

<sup>192</sup> Smith, November 3, 1945: 1.

<sup>193</sup> Smith, November 3, 1945: 1.

<sup>194</sup> “Wendell Smith and Branch Rickey.” Baseball Hall of Fame.

Negro organized baseball in any way. We do not approve of raiding or other unfair practices. We did feel, however, that the signing of Jackie Robinson by the Brooklyn farm club transcended anything else at this particular time. We respectfully suggest to the presidents of the two organized Negro leagues that steps be taken immediately to become affiliated with organized major league baseball so that an amicable working arrangement can be consummated.<sup>195</sup>

Here, the *Courier* sports staff attempted to quell any suspicions that they did not fully support the Negro Leagues in the wake of Robinson signing with the Dodgers' farm team in Montreal. This was a message urging action from black baseball clubs to align themselves with Major League teams in order to survive and continue to grow.

Much of the coverage for the next several weeks in the *Courier* revolved around the aftermath of Robinson's contract with the Dodgers. Several notable figures in black and white baseball were highly supportive of Rickey's decision to sign Robinson. J.B. Martin, the president of the Negro American League, penned a letter to Rickey congratulating him and Robinson. "I take great pleasure in congratulating you for your moral courage in making the initial step which will give Negro ballplayers a chance to participate in the Major Leagues in this, our great democracy," wrote Martin. "I feel that I speak the sentiments of fifteen million Negroes in America, who are with you 100 percent, and will always remember the day and date of this great event. I wish you, Robinson, the Montreal baseball club and all concerned the

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<sup>195</sup> "The *Courier* Supports Organized Negro Baseball!" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 3, 1945: 12.

greatest success.”<sup>196</sup> This letter showed remarkable respect and admiration from Martin despite having just lost one of his league’s best players.

Newspapers across the country printed stories about the landmark event in baseball on the front pages, including *The Chicago Daily News*, *The Montreal Gazette*, and *The San Francisco Chronicle*.<sup>197</sup> *The Detroit News* lauded the signing of Robinson by the Dodgers: “Everything in Robinson’s record and background suggests that he will be a credit to pro sport from which it will follow that he will be a credit to his race,” according to the paper.<sup>198</sup> The newspaper proceeded to compare Robinson to other black trailblazers that had a profound impact on their professions, like opera singer Marian Anderson, dancer Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, and boxer Joe Louis.<sup>199</sup>

This was a story that drew the attention of fans and ballplayers alike. Cleveland Indians All-Star pitcher Bob Feller expressed skepticism at Robinson’s abilities as a baseball player and the likelihood of his success in the minor and major leagues. “He’s not an offensive ball player,” Feller said of Robinson.<sup>200</sup> However, Feller was quick to point out that Robinson was a perfect black ambassador for the game of baseball – his education level and his general sportsmanship made him a highly appealing type of ballplayer, according to Feller. Other All-Stars like Rogers Hornsby voiced their opposition to Robinson joining a Major League Baseball team, but Rickey

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<sup>196</sup> “Martin Congratulates Rickey on Signing.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 3, 1945: 12.

<sup>197</sup> “What ‘Name’ Writers Wrote About Signing Jackie Robinson.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 3, 1945: 12.

<sup>198</sup> “What ‘Name’ Writers Wrote,” 1945: 12.

<sup>199</sup> “What ‘Name’ Writers Wrote,” 1945: 12.

<sup>200</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Robinson Versus Feller.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 10, 1945: 10.

remained undaunted.<sup>201</sup> Conversely, American soldiers still stationed abroad voiced their pleasure with Robinson's signing: "We always had a question period during our programs for the troops to ask any baseball questions that they had stored up," according to Dodgers manager Leo Durocher. "There was always someone who asked about Jackie Robinson, and a lot of them said they thought it was a really great thing. I told them it's OK with me. If he's good enough to play major league baseball, that's all I care about."<sup>202</sup>

Many Negro Leagues owners were not pleased with the signing of Robinson by the Dodgers, and blamed outlets like the *Courier* for opening the door for it to happen. According to a story, "the Negro press was blasted for the position it has taken on many issues affecting Negro baseball. The owners were of the opinion that the Negro press has been 'too vocal' on such issues as Negro players in the majors. They declared that Branch Rickey's episode with Jackie Robinson and the Kansas City Monarchs was insincere. There was even a proposal to file a legal suit against Rickey for the alleged slanderous remarks he has made about the present structure of the two [Negro] leagues."<sup>203</sup> These criticisms were aired during the owners meetings for the Negro American and National Leagues, and illustrated that Negro Leagues owners were likely frightened by the presumed financial ramifications of Jackie Robinson playing professional major league baseball.

Dodgers management decided that Robinson would start the 1946 season in the minor leagues with Montreal. Robinson began the year with the Montreal Royals. Meanwhile, the

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<sup>201</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Tough Job Lies Before Jackie." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 3, 1945: 12.

<sup>202</sup> "GIs Abroad Praise Signing of Robinson." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 24, 1945: 13.

<sup>203</sup> "Owners of Negro Leagues Blast Rickey and Press." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 22, 1945: 16.

organizational structure of the Negro Leagues was starting to find itself in disarray, and Robinson joining a Major League team did little to stop the problems. Happy Chandler, the commissioner for Major League Baseball, urged the Negro Leagues to functionally operate in order for an actual partnership between the leagues to develop. “There have been conferences between myself, President Will Harridge and President Ford Frick with the presidents of the Negro American and National Leagues,” said Chandler. “These conferences, at the request of the Negro league presidents, were with a view toward organizing the Negro leagues on a strong basis. I was asked if I would also be a commissioner for those leagues. I told them to get their house in order then come to baseball with a petition for recognition.”<sup>204</sup> These remarks drew even more controversy among Negro Leagues owners and administrators, particularly Negro American League president J.B. Martin. “There was no mention of Negro leagues wanting to hold their players if they had a chance to advance,” according to Martin. “The chief objective in the commissioner’s office was to foster plans to place the Negro leagues in organized baseball in order that our players would have a greater opportunity for advancement.”<sup>205</sup> A week later, on February 16, 1946, these owners met in New York and decided overwhelmingly to ignore the advice of Happy Chandler and move forward with their own plans.<sup>206</sup>

After Montreal players reported to Spring Training in Florida, Rickey made a point to lecture the team about the importance of tolerance and accepting players of all races and

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<sup>204</sup> “Commissioner ‘Happy’ Chandler Tells Negro Baseball to ‘Get Your House in Order.’” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 26, 1946: 16.

<sup>205</sup> “NAL Head Refutes Chandler.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 2, 1946: 12.

<sup>206</sup> “Baseball Owners to Meet in New York Wednesday, Not Expected to Heed Advice of ‘Hap’ Chandler.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 16, 1946: 12.

backgrounds.<sup>207</sup> Robinson would thrive in Spring Training, eventually beating out favorite Stan Breard to win the starting job in Montreal.<sup>208</sup> Robinson would play against the Dodgers in an exhibition game later that March, losing to the Dodgers 9 to 7.<sup>209</sup> Dodgers manager Leo Durocher walked away from the game highly impressed by Robinson's performance.<sup>210</sup>

Another black baseball player was added to the Montreal roster around the same time as Robinson. Johnny Wright, a black pitcher who had played for the Homestead Grays earlier in the decade, signed with Montreal in January 1946, becoming the second black player to join the Dodgers organization.<sup>211</sup> Like Robinson, Wright would be provided opportunities to earn his spot on the Major League club. However, despite making the Montreal roster to start the season, Wright would struggle.<sup>212</sup> It was hoped by Rickey and other members of the Dodgers front office that Wright would be able to develop into a Major League pitcher. This would turn out not to be the case.

According to the *Courier*, numerous ballparks (particularly in the Southern region) attempted to ban Robinson from playing. Rickey stood by his man, and informed clubs that if Robinson was unable to enter the stadium, the Montreal Royals would not show up for the

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<sup>207</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Rickey Advocating Tolerance." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 9, 1946: 16.

<sup>208</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Jackie Must Beat Out Stan Breard, 1945 Sparkplug." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 16, 1946: 16.

<sup>209</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Durocher Praises Jackie's Playing Against Dodgers." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 23, 1946: 17.

<sup>210</sup> Smith, March 23, 1946: 17.

<sup>211</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Johnny Erratic on Mound as Bums Win Before Commissioner." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 23, 1946: 17.

<sup>212</sup> Smith, March 23, 1946: 17.

game.<sup>213</sup> Rickey's persistence paid off, and on April 20, 1946, Robinson entered the starting lineup for the Royals against Jersey City.<sup>214</sup> The Montreal fans seemed to welcome Jackie with open arms. As Robinson's stature grew, more fans of multiple skin colors continued to flock to ballparks across the country to see him play.

Perhaps due to the success of Robinson, Rickey quickly signed two other African American superstars from the Negro Leagues: catcher Roy Campanella and pitcher Don Newcombe.<sup>215</sup> With Robinson playing in AAA with Montreal, the two young former Negro Leagues prospects were assigned to the class-B Nashua Dodgers.<sup>216</sup> In Montreal, Robinson continued to thrive. In July 1946, rumblings began to emerge that Robinson might soon find himself on the Dodgers' roster. It was front-page news that Rickey confirmed to the *Courier* that the Dodgers were interested in calling up Robinson.<sup>217</sup> Clay Hopper, the manager of the Montreal Royals, told the media at the time that "there isn't one Royal except for Robinson who has the making of a future Dodger."<sup>218</sup> Robinson's mystique was continuing to build, and the Dodgers were growing more interested in having him join the team.

A week later, in the July 20 edition of the *Courier*, Rickey confirmed that he was working towards having Robinson play on the big league club. "What would I sign Robinson

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<sup>213</sup> Smith, Wendell. "'Robinson Plays Or No Game,' Rickey's Answer to Dixie Bias." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 13, 1946: 14.

<sup>214</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Jackie in Lineup Against Jersey City." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 20, 1946: 16.

<sup>215</sup> "Newcombe, Campanella to Nashua." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 13, 1946: 14.

<sup>216</sup> "Newcombe, Campanella," 1946: 14.

<sup>217</sup> Maltin, Sam. "Brooklyn Ready to Call Jackie." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 13, 1946: 1.

<sup>218</sup> Maltin, 1946: 1.



for, if not to groom him for Brooklyn, which is my goal for every ballplayer I sign, provided he has the stuff to make the grade?" asked Rickey. "It would be silly for me to go to the trouble of signing him, and arouse all that controversy, break precedent and all that, if I merely wanted to get a player for Montreal. Of course he'll go to Brooklyn if he has the stuff. The color won't make the slightest difference. Those days are gone, and the war ended all that, I think."<sup>219</sup>

Robinson's performance in Montreal drew praise from Commissioner Happy Chandler. "Jackie Robinson is a credit to his race," said Chandler.<sup>220</sup> A week later, on August 10, 1946, rumors again began to circulate that Robinson's time in the Major Leagues was coming soon. The Dodgers and the Montreal Royals both denied these rumors published in the *Courier*, but writer Sam Maltin insisted that the struggling Dodgers were on the brink of calling up Robinson, who had been responsible for making the winning play in two recent Montreal victories.<sup>221</sup> Despite the rumors, these never came to fruition in 1946, and Robinson would remain in Montreal until the end of the 1946 season.

Shortly afterwards, rumors also began to emerge that Robinson would quit baseball and return to UCLA, his alma mater, to finish his education. On August 24, 1946, Robinson quickly put these rumors to bed and insisted that this was not the case.<sup>222</sup> Despite being routinely targeted by white players and fans (including an incident where Robinson was loudly booed in

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<sup>219</sup> Maltin, Sam. "'Jackie Robinson Is Being Groomed to Play for the Brooklyn Dodgers' –Branch Rickey." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 20, 1946: 16.

<sup>220</sup> "Chandler Praises Jackie Robinson." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 3, 1946: 16.

<sup>221</sup> Maltin, Sam. "Rumor Says: 'Jackie Robinson Brooklyn Bound.'" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 10, 1946: 16.

<sup>222</sup> Maltin, Sam. "Jackie Denies He Will Quit Baseball and Return to School." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 24, 1946: 17.

Louisville, Kentucky<sup>223</sup>), Robinson continued with his quest to reach the Major Leagues. His persistence earned him admiration from the Montreal fans. According to the *Courier*, Robinson was a major catalyst behind the team winning 100 games during the 1946 season.<sup>224</sup>

On September 28, 1946, the *Courier* published an article that claimed that Robinson was guaranteed a tryout for the 1947 season with the Dodgers.<sup>225</sup> Two months later, Dodgers manager Leo Durocher confirmed this was indeed the case, calling Robinson “one of the best prospects we’ve seen here in years.”<sup>226</sup> During 1946 meetings, Philadelphia Athletics owner Connie Mack lent his support to Robinson getting a tryout with the Dodgers. “This is a new day,” said Mack. “I see no reason why Negroes should not be accepted in organized baseball. I hope to see Jackie Robinson with Brooklyn and sincerely hope that he makes good.”<sup>227</sup>

The years 1945 and 1946 were critical during the integration process of professional baseball. In a 24-month span, the *Courier* helped to organize a Major League Baseball tryout for Jackie Robinson, which ultimately led to his signing with the Dodgers at the end of 1945. After a strong 1946 season in the minor leagues, the stage was set for Robinson to integrate Major League Baseball the following season. Despite Robinson rising through the ranks of

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<sup>223</sup> “Fans in Louisville Cheer, Boo Jackie.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 5, 1946: 14.

<sup>224</sup> Maltin, Sam. “Jackie Helps Team Reach 100 Victories.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 14, 1946: 16.

<sup>225</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Robinson Assured of Trial.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 28, 1946: 16.

<sup>226</sup> “Durocher Says: ‘Jackie to Get Fair Trial.’” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 23, 1946: 16.

<sup>227</sup> Williams, John R. “Leo Durocher Hails Robinson as ‘Brilliant Prospect,’ ‘Hope He Makes Good,’ Says Connie Mack.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 14, 1946: 16.

professional baseball, he was never the primary story of a news cycle on the front page of the *Courier*.

## CHAPTER 6

### JACKIE ROBINSON INTEGRATES BASEBALL, APRIL-MAY 1947

#### Coverage of Jackie Robinson on the Front Page of the *Courier*, April-May 1947

There can be no doubt that Jackie Robinson's achievements were of great interest to the black community. Robinson was no stranger to the front pages of the *Courier*. The *Courier* was a newspaper that regularly crammed dozens of stories onto its front pages, providing insight into the stories that were deemed to be the most valuable to the black community. During the week of November 3, 1945, when Robinson first signed his contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers, the event was covered on the front page of the *Courier*, but it was not the lead story of the week. There were other stories that were given more prominent placement on the front page of the *Courier*. A story from the postwar international efforts was prioritized ahead of Robinson's signing. "332nd Pilots to Fly Planes in Ecuador" was chosen as the lead story for that week, about a concession provided for black pilots to fly planes in Ecuador.<sup>228</sup> An exclusive interview with Dodgers general manager Branch Rickey was published on the front page of the *Courier* that week, but it was still deemed to be secondary to stories on integrating the military.

This was yet another example of the coverage of Robinson being downplayed due to other important issues taking place within the African American community. Similarly, on April 19, 1947, the issue published the week of Robinson's first start with Brooklyn, another story took priority over his debut. "Mob Attacks Mixed Group at Chapel Hill" was the lead story for that

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<sup>228</sup> Saunders, Jack. "332nd Pilots to Fly Planes in Ecuador: Transport Concession Granted to Negro Line." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 3, 1945: 1.

week's *Courier*. A racially motivated mob consisting of "young hoodlums and taxicab drivers" attacked a group of interracial college lecturers at a Chapel Hill, North Carolina, bus station.<sup>229</sup> This event relegated Robinson's debut to the sidebar of the front page, further demonstrating that there were far more pressing issues within the black community that needed to be covered than the integration of baseball.

A week later, on April 26, 1947, Robinson's first week in the Majors was again relegated to the bottom of the front page of the *Courier*. A story written by the "Pittsburgh Courier Press Service" entitled "2 Jailed in Bus Case Appeal to High Court" was the primary news story of the week.<sup>230</sup> This was a follow-up story from the previous week, in which black attorneys in the state of North Carolina claimed that the interracial group of lecturers targeted by a mob were being wrongly jailed for violating the state's Jim Crow laws.<sup>231</sup> This was a story that had serious implications for Jim Crow laws and travel laws.

Jackie Robinson's integration of baseball was a landmark event in American history, especially looking back from today's vantage point. It signaled a significant change in race relations in the United States, as well as a turning point in the black community's involvement and engagement in sports as a whole. Given its significance, in the months of April and May 1947, the *Courier* covered the event, although it was never the primary news story of the cycle. Robinson's debut (and the events leading up to it) primarily received attention in the sports pages of the *Courier*, with only a smattering of front-page coverage.

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<sup>229</sup> Graves, Lem. "Mob Attacks Mixed Group at Chapel Hill." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 19, 1947: 1.

<sup>230</sup> *The Pittsburgh Courier* Press Service. "2 Jailed in Bus Case Appeal to High Court: Interracial Tour Tests Travel Laws." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 26, 1947: 1.

<sup>231</sup> *The Pittsburgh Courier* Press Service, 1947: 1.

In this chapter, five weeks' worth of *Courier* coverage will be analyzed. This research will begin two weeks before Robinson's Major League Baseball debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers on April 15, 1947. From there, the immediate aftermath of Robinson breaking the color barrier in baseball as told through the front pages of the *Courier* will be examined. While articles pertaining to Jackie Robinson are the central theme of this study, other articles have been selected to set the scene of what was of importance to the black community at the time. This includes notable events in politics (such as civil rights marches and protests), arts and entertainment (such as notable concerts or artistic occurrences that coincided with Robinson's debut), and articles concerning various events happening within black communities across the United States that would seemingly impact black culture. The main purpose of this chapter is to examine key language and events that shaped the black community at the height of the success of the Negro Leagues shortly before its rapid deterioration.

*The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 5, 1947 (Two Weeks Prior to Robinson's MLB Debut)

On April 5, 1947, Robinson's pending debut was major news, but it was not worthy of a front-page headline in the *Courier*. There were several major events occurring within the African American community at the time that received significant coverage. For example, in a precursor case to *Brown v. Board of Education*, a black student was getting ready to challenge a lower court ruling that the University of Texas School of Law was able to discriminate against minority students on the sole basis of race.<sup>232</sup> These social events perhaps created a sense of uneasiness within the community and helped to form the landscape of the community before Robinson broke the color barrier.

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<sup>232</sup> Davis, Jay Don. "Court Orders Retrial in Heated Fight Over Texas Law School: Sweatt Ignores Jim-Crow Setup." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 5, 1947: 1.

In addition, lynchings of African Americans were happening at the time, which created a tense and uneasy environment in the black community. The *Courier* ran a front-page story discussing the reluctance of local law enforcement to crack down on lynchings and race-related hate crimes.<sup>233</sup> Continuing with this pattern, the *Courier* detailed the shooting of an Oakland, California, NAACP leader by a white man.<sup>234</sup> The leader, Henry T. Johnson, was shot in the head, but managed to survive the shooting.<sup>235</sup> The events being experienced by the black community at the time of Robinson's debut were riddled with uncertainty and injustice.

The coverage of Robinson was confined largely to the sports page of the *Courier*. It was announced that Robinson had made the opening day roster of the Brooklyn Dodgers to start the 1947 season. "No need to bother with the old Dixie racial bugaboo," the paper wrote. "[Robinson and catcher Roy Campanella] were informed Sunday that they may depart for New York immediately following the final exhibition game."<sup>236</sup> Despite the potential downside of having black baseball players in the Major Leagues, the Dodgers decided to take a chance by adding two black players to their roster to start the 1947 season. This was a major news event in the world of black sports, as it set the breaking of the color barrier in motion.

However, Robinson's debut was not going to be made right away. In early April 1947, Robinson was fighting a bout of the stomach flu, keeping him on the bench to begin the

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<sup>233</sup> "Bus Passenger Jailed, U.S. Law Ignored." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 5, 1947: 1.

<sup>234</sup> "NAACP Official Is Shot in the Head." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 5, 1947: 1.

<sup>235</sup> "NAACP Official," 1947: 1.

<sup>236</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Royals, Jackie, and Dodgers Break Camp; Heading North." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 5, 1947: 14.

season.<sup>237</sup> He had made the roster, but his much-anticipated first start with the Dodgers was still several weeks away. Campanella, on the other hand, would not debut with Brooklyn until April 20, 1948.<sup>238</sup>

*The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 12, 1947 (One Week Before Robinson's MLB Debut)

In the April 12 issue, Robinson makes an appearance on the front page of the *Courier* (albeit as a teaser for a story on the sports page of the *Courier*). “How the Dodgers Feel About Jackie – For the Answer, Read Wendell Smith’s The Sports Beat!,” touted the blurb.<sup>239</sup>

Robinson was gearing up for his Major League Baseball debut. In preparation, he played several games with the minor league Montreal Royals prior to his arrival in Brooklyn. Robinson suited up against the Dodgers, in fact, for a two-game exhibition series against the Royals (the farm team of the Dodgers at the time).<sup>240</sup> Robinson’s road to his first start was rather tumultuous. In a game played earlier in the week of April 12, he injured himself while playing for the Montreal Royals in a collision at first base. He collided with baserunner Bruce Edwards while Robinson’s legs were still in the air. As a result of the impact, Robinson landed awkwardly on his shoulder. An examination found that no permanent damage existed, but he

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<sup>237</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Stomach Ailment Keeps Jackie Robinson on Bench.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 5, 1947: 14.

<sup>238</sup> “Roy Campanella Stats.” Baseball-Almanac.com.

<sup>239</sup> “How the Dodgers Feel About Jackie.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 12, 1947: 1.

<sup>240</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Jackie Just Shaken Up in Collision at First; Ready to Play.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 12, 1947: 14.



was still in agony.<sup>241</sup> Robinson left the game in the middle of the sixth inning, but Smith noted that this collision would not cost Robinson any significant playing time.<sup>242</sup>

Furthermore, Smith alluded to additional social issues Robinson was likely to face at the Major League level. Due to the strict segregation policies of the time, Robinson would be forced to sleep at separate hotels and travel separately from his teammates. “Players who live together, sleep together, and eat together automatically develop factions and cliques,” wrote Smith. “These factions and cliques develop from human relationship and association. Negro ballplayers, and especially Jackie Robinson, must wade through all of these problems before they ever attain the status of a big leaguer.”<sup>243</sup>

Interestingly, Smith spoke to anonymous sources to gauge the support Robinson would have from his teammates. He compiled a list of players who would treat Robinson with hostility (such as Dixie Walker and Eddie Stankey) and those who would support and welcome the opportunity to play with him (such as Pete Reiser and Gene Hermanskie).<sup>244</sup> This was an interesting article, as it provided a glimpse of the transition that was to come for Robinson. By developing a list of players’ attitudes towards Robinson, it provided the reader (and the black community) with a chance to understand the extent of support for black baseball within the Major League community.

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<sup>241</sup> Smith, April 12, 1947: 14.

<sup>242</sup> Smith, April 12, 1947: 14.

<sup>243</sup> Smith, Wendell. “No Easy Road to the Majors.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 12, 1947: 14.

<sup>244</sup> Smith, Wendell. “If Dodgers Stars Were Polled.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 12, 1947: 14.

Finally, Smith pointed to a fact that was perhaps more relevant than any individual teammate supporting Robinson: he had earned the support of both the club's general manager and manager. Branch Rickey and Leo Durocher were unabashed Robinson supporters, with Smith claiming that Durocher "would not give Robinson any trouble."<sup>245</sup> Smith further notes that Robinson's coaches on the Dodgers either fully supported him or had a neutral attitude towards him, indicating that he had full support within the Dodgers organization.<sup>246</sup>

*The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 19, 1947 (Robinson's MLB Debut)

Robinson debuted at home at Ebbetts Field in Brooklyn against the New York Yankees; more than 95,000 fans flocked to the ballpark to see Robinson's first four games as a Dodger.<sup>247</sup> Much of the front page revolved around Robinson's debut and the ensuing fanfare. Despite this, the event was a secondary news story on the *Courier* front page, with a story about a race mob attack in North Carolina taking priority over Robinson's landmark event.<sup>248</sup>

Robinson's arrival in Brooklyn created a frenzy around the league. Not only were white fans coming from far and wide to see Robinson play, but black baseball fans also followed Robinson to the Majors. "Robinson is the attraction," wrote Wendell Smith in the front-page story. "There is no doubt about that, and there is no doubt that Negro fans are showing their appreciation by digging down and coming up with the money for tickets every day."<sup>249</sup> Smith

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<sup>245</sup> Smith, "If Dodgers Stars Were Polled," April 12, 1947: 14.

<sup>246</sup> Smith, "If Dodgers Stars Were Polled," April 12, 1947: 14.

<sup>247</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Dodgers Have Drawn 95,000 Fans in Four Exhibition Contests." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 19, 1947: 1.

<sup>248</sup> Graves, 1947: 1.

<sup>249</sup> Smith, April 19, 1947: 1.

further added that “every time Robinson steps to the plate, he is welcomed with a rousing ovation by the fans.”<sup>250</sup> This is surprising, as it seems to indicate that Robinson was largely accepted and even welcomed into the Major League Baseball fold right away by white fans upon making his debut, thereby debunking a common misconception.

The impact of Robinson’s first games as a Dodger was immediate. He drove in three runs to help steer the Dodgers to a victory against their inner-city rivals, the New York Yankees.<sup>251</sup> In the same series, Robinson also delivered a two-hit game which led to another Dodgers victory.<sup>252</sup> Robinson’s hot start may have been a contributing factor to other ballclubs beginning to express interest in signing players from Negro League squads.

*The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 26, 1947 (One Week After Robinson’s MLB Debut)

Just one week after Robinson integrated baseball, there is no mention of his name on the front-page of the *Courier*. Furthermore, the stories in the sports page covering Robinson for this week read like tabloid articles. There is little by way of information pertaining to Robinson’s on-field play; the *Courier* instead provided a photographic diary of the *Courier*’s writers covering the event from a week prior.<sup>253</sup> Nearly 136,000 fans attended Dodger games throughout Robinson’s first week in Major League Baseball to see the spectacle in person,<sup>254</sup> demonstrating Robinson’s ability to draw fans of all races and backgrounds to the ballpark.

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<sup>250</sup> Smith, April 19, 1947: 4.

<sup>251</sup> Smith, April 19, 1947: 4.

<sup>252</sup> Smith, April 19, 1947: 4.

<sup>253</sup> “How *Courier* Went to Press...with Jackie Robinson...on Opening Day.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 26, 1947: 13.

<sup>254</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Jackie Bangs Out Homer, Double; Fields Flawlessly.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 26, 1947: 15.

Hundreds of fans throughout the country sent letters to Robinson congratulating him on his accomplishment. These fans came from all walks of life and represented different races and regions of the United States. Perhaps the most powerful letter came from a Southern white fan, who wrote that “like thousands of other white people, I feel that in our American way of life we should not tolerate race prejudice and that a person should be judged on his merits. I send you congratulations and believe you will be a credit to baseball.”<sup>255</sup>

*The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 3, 1947 (Two Weeks After Robinson’s MLB Debut)

Race relations continued in a negative direction this week, with a popular college track star, Jeffrey David Jennings, sustaining serious injuries in an automobile accident in Pelham, Tennessee. The nearest hospital to Jennings accepted whites only; despite Jennings’ serious injuries, he was refused entry into the hospital on the grounds of his race.<sup>256</sup> Instead, Jennings was forced to travel to another hospital, where he died as a result of his injuries (and not receiving immediate treatment).<sup>257</sup>

Robinson, meanwhile, was creating a national phenomenon. The *Courier* provided front-page coverage of his appearance on network television, but it was yet again a secondary news story. That week, Robinson appeared on the CBS show *Information Please* discussing matters pertaining to race relations far outside of the baseball diamond.<sup>258</sup> Much of the evening’s

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<sup>255</sup> Smith, Wendell. “What a Big Leaguer Gets in His Mail.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 26, 1947: 14.

<sup>256</sup> “Barred from Hospitals!: White Institutions Refuse Dying Athlete.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 3, 1947: 1.

<sup>257</sup> “Barred from Hospitals!,” 1947: 1.

<sup>258</sup> “Information Please.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 3, 1947: 1.

program was devoted to the United Negro College Fund, an organization Robinson strongly supported.<sup>259</sup> On a larger stage, Robinson demonstrated to the black community (and the country at large) that he was far more than merely a black athlete. Robinson was a highly intelligent man very much in tune with the world around him, and his appearance on *Information Please* went a long way towards establishing him as a credible figure outside of the baseball diamond.

Throughout 1947, fans continued to flock to Ebbetts Field to see him play. Robinson was a spectacle that was beginning to bring significant attention to black baseball players. He was becoming a central figure in American pop culture, thus moving him beyond the black community as a whole.

#### Coverage Surrounding Robinson's MLB Debut in *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

It was not just black newspapers like the *Courier* that reported on Robinson's exploits. Pittsburgh's white newspaper, the *Post-Gazette*, devoted coverage to Robinson's pending debut as a Brooklyn Dodger. In an article published on April 12, 1947, the *Post-Gazette* noted that Robinson's debut could take place at any moment, and that he was worthy of the respect accorded to a Major Leaguer. Discussing the Pittsburgh Pirates, the *Post-Gazette* columnist Vince Johnson noted that "Robinson will not be referred to as 'Jackie Robinson, Negro First Baseman,' but rather as 'First Baseman Jackie Robinson.' After all, he wears a uniform just like any other player and, unless some baseball men are very wrong about Jackie's ability, he is a little better than most."<sup>260</sup>

Instead of treating Robinson with condescension and in a derisive fashion, the *Post-Gazette* addressed Robinson as a legitimate baseball player capable of defeating baseball teams

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<sup>259</sup> "Information Please," 1947: 1.

<sup>260</sup> Johnson, Vince. "Sports Slants." *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 12, 1947: 12.

in many different ways. The tone of the article is very much that of respect and admiration for Robinson's talent as a baseball player, which is perhaps surprising coming from a white newspaper existing in a Jim Crow-era United States. However, unsurprisingly, Robinson's debut was not a front-page story in the *Post-Gazette*; in fact, coverage devoted to Robinson's upcoming first game as a Dodger is limited to a meager blurb consisting of two short paragraphs.

In the April 16, 1947 issue of the *Post-Gazette*, the day after Robinson's debut as a Major Leaguer, the event was covered in one brief sentence in the sports page attached to a box score. "Jackie Robinson, first Negro to play in modern big-league ball, signalized his official debut as a Dodger by sprinting home with the deciding run on Pete Reiser's smash and playing perfect ball at first base" was the only sentence the newspaper could offer about Robinson's debut.<sup>261</sup> Coverage of the events leading up to Robinson's debut, as well as his debut itself, was minimal in the *Post-Gazette*. This was true even though during a five-week span in 1947, Jackie Robinson permanently altered the landscape of professional sports by debuting with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Even though Robinson broke plenty of new ground during this time period, there were other issues that were dominating the news coverage of the *Courier*. The civil rights of African Americans were being violated on a regular basis during this time, and the *Courier* editorial staff deemed these stories to be of utmost importance on its front page. The successes of Robinson would lead to the swift decline and demise of organized Negro Leagues baseball, a death that received minimal coverage on the *Courier*'s front page.

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<sup>261</sup> "Reiser's Hit Gives Dodgers Victory, 5-3." *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 16, 1947: 18.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE RISE OF THE BLACK MAJOR LEAGUERS AND THE FALL OF THE NEGRO LEAGUES, 1948-1950

As Jackie Robinson was conquering Major League Baseball and earning plenty of accolades, organized black professional baseball struggled mightily. Cities in the North, closer in proximity to Robinson in Brooklyn, failed to draw sizable crowds in the wake of Robinson's integration. As an example, Hogan cites the Newark Eagles' (who played across the Hudson River from the Dodgers in New Jersey) steep decline in attendance. In 1946, 120,000 spectators paid to see the Eagles play; by 1947, that number had dwindled to 57,000 and by 1948 it had dropped all the way down to 35,000.<sup>262</sup> These problems were not unique to Newark; as Buck Leonard of the Homestead Grays described it, "After Jackie happened, we [the Negro Leagues] couldn't draw flies."<sup>263</sup>

#### Front Page Stories, 1948-1950

While Jackie Robinson made appearances on the front page of the *Courier* from 1948 to 1950, stories pertaining to civil rights and injustices were often seen more prominently. Lynchings were regularly featured on the *Courier*'s front page; one of the more egregious examples of a lynching covered by the newspaper came on November 20, 1948, in Lyons, Georgia. Robert Mallard, a successful casket salesman, was shot to death by a mob of people in

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<sup>262</sup> Hogan, Lawrence D. *Shades of Glory: The Negro Leagues and the Story of African-American Baseball*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2007: 346.

<sup>263</sup> Hogan, 2007: 346.

a racially motivated crime.<sup>264</sup> According to the *Courier*, Mallard's wife believed that the motivation behind the killing of her husband was due to his prosperity in Toombs County, a county that contained a strong Ku Klux Klan presence. His widow wanted the *Courier* to tell the story of her late husband's lynching, believing that the newspaper platform would resonate with black communities around the United States.<sup>265</sup>

Similarly, in March 1949, a Georgia mob lynched a black veteran in a jail cell. Sam Terry was a veteran who saw combat action in World War II when he was shot and killed by two city authority figures.<sup>266</sup> His wife was in a cell next to Sam. She begged and pleaded for her husband's life to be spared before the fatal shots rang out. Felton Avery, a local fireman, and C. H. Rogers, a policeman, were both arrested for murder.<sup>267</sup>

Later in 1949, another lynching took place in Mississippi. This lynching occurred by the side of a road, and the victim was a 45-year old farmer.<sup>268</sup> Malcolm Wright resided in Chickasaw County, Mississippi, and was bludgeoned to death by a white mob in front of his wife and young children.<sup>269</sup> Wright's killer used a bumper jack as the weapon; at least one of the perpetrators of the crime was a soldier stationed at a local military base.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> "Terrified Widow Tells Why Ga. Mob Killed Her Husband: 'They Were Jealous!'" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 11, 1948: 1.

<sup>265</sup> "Terrified Widow," 1948: 1.

<sup>266</sup> "Ex-GI Slain in Jail Cell." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 12, 1949: 1.

<sup>267</sup> "Ex-GI Slain in Jail Cell," 1949: 1.

<sup>268</sup> "Another Lynching!: Jail 3 Mob Suspects in Mississippi." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 16, 1949: 1.

<sup>269</sup> "Another Lynching!," 1949: 1.

<sup>270</sup> "Another Lynching!," 1949: 1.



The *Courier* also continued to devote plenty of space to stories pertaining to education on its front pages. These stories were multifaceted, but often had a civil rights focus. In the July 16, 1949 issue of the *Courier*, the front-page contained the story of a black university president resigning after facing significant threats from the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>271</sup> William Gray, the president of Florida A&M University, was forced to resign after leaks came from local whistleblowers exposing wrongdoings in which his administration was partaking. Dr. Gray denied all of the charges against him, claiming that the reason for his “forced resignation” was “his active participation in the fight against regional education for Negroes in the South.”<sup>272</sup>

According to the front page of the *Courier*, the University of Oklahoma spent the better part of the 1940s resisting integration. In February 1948, six black students filed a lawsuit demanding entry into four different graduate departments at the University of Oklahoma.<sup>273</sup> Three men and three women comprised the group filing the lawsuit against the state; five of the six were found to have met academic requirements according to their transcripts, and further information was requested for the sixth student.<sup>274</sup> Oklahoma’s Attorney General Mac Q. Williamson requested that the university’s Board of Regents reject the six black students. In response to the lawsuits, white students at the university burned a copy of the 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution. The ashes were then sent to President Truman’s office.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> “Florida A&M College Prexy Forced to Quit.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 16, 1949: 1.

<sup>272</sup> “Florida A&M,” 1949: 1.

<sup>273</sup> “Open New Attack on U. of Okla. Bias.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 7, 1948: 1.

<sup>274</sup> “U. of Okla. Bias,” 1949: 1.

<sup>275</sup> “U. of Okla. Bias,” 1949: 1.

That same week, the *Courier* had a front-page article announcing that another state university made the decision to fully integrate its school. The University of Delaware in Newark allowed black students to attend the university for courses not offered at Delaware State Teachers College, a black school in Dover, the state's capital.<sup>276</sup> Unlike the University of Oklahoma, no legal action was needed for the University of Delaware to integrate; the university's decision to open its doors to black students was done entirely voluntarily.<sup>277</sup>

The *Courier* devoted much of its front-page coverage during this period to police misconduct. A notable example of this came in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, in September 1950. A Ku Klux Klan demonstration in the black section of the town ended in the death of a Klansman, and sheriffs announced that nearly 100 people would be arrested from both sects as a result of the violence.<sup>278</sup> According to a *Courier* investigation, the Klansman who was killed in the attack was a Myrtle Beach police officer, James D. Johnston.<sup>279</sup> Johnston was wearing his police uniform underneath his Klan robe at the time of his attack and during the Klan's demonstration,<sup>280</sup> which marked a clear violation of his oath.

#### Coverage of Baseball in the *Courier*, 1948-1950

From 1948 to 1950, the *Courier*'s baseball coverage was largely confined to the sports pages. The *Courier* would feature Jackie Robinson on the front page occasionally during this

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<sup>276</sup> "Delaware to Enroll Negroes." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 7, 1948: 1.

<sup>277</sup> "Delaware to Enroll Negroes," 1948: 1.

<sup>278</sup> "Tension Seethes in Resort Town After Klan Raids." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 9, 1950: 1.

<sup>279</sup> "Tension Seethes," 1950: 1.

<sup>280</sup> "Tension Seethes," 1950: 1.

time frame, but the vast majority of the newspaper's Robinson coverage appeared on the sports pages.

Moreover, as attendance figures dipped in the Negro Leagues, seemingly so did fan interest. The lack of coverage on the *Courier*'s front page reflected this; only one article that was even remotely related to black professional baseball appeared on the front page between 1948 and 1950. On June 10, 1950, a female model appeared at a Negro Leagues game as a promotional tie-in.<sup>281</sup> This article had nothing to do with baseball, but rather had more to do with promoting an upcoming event that happened to be taking place during a Negro Leagues baseball game. No coverage of the decline of the Negro Leagues appeared on the front page of the *Courier* during this time. As this chapter will show, the newspaper covered the decline and eventual death of the Negro Leagues, but its coverage was exclusively in the *Courier*'s sports pages.

#### Attendance Figures, 1948-1950

Attendance figures collected from the *Courier* illustrate the story of the demise of the Negro Leagues. Despite the fears from *Courier* writers like Chester Washington and Wendell Smith, Negro Leagues attendance for 1948 appeared to be fairly steady. The May 1, 1948 edition of the *Courier* ran a headline of "Big Opening Day Crowd in Birmingham on Sunday,"<sup>282</sup> and in the May 8 issue, another headline of "10,500 See Cubans, Philly Win Stadium Openers" appeared,<sup>283</sup> demonstrating that concern over attendance issues were not quite at alarming levels.

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<sup>281</sup> "Bronze Beachcomber." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 10, 1950: 1.

<sup>282</sup> "Big Opening Day Crowd in Birmingham Saturday." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 1, 1948: 12.

<sup>283</sup> "10,500 See Cubans, Philly Win Stadium Openers." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 8, 1948: 14.

8,000 fans flocked to the ballpark that same week to see the Birmingham Black Barons win their home opener that season, further proving that the attendance figures of the Negro Leagues, while not as high as earlier in the decade, were still solid.<sup>284</sup>

As the season progressed in various markets, attendance saw a slight drop-off in the Negro Leagues, but still did not rise to the level of great concern. 7,500 fans attended a game the week of June 12, 1948, between the Birmingham Black Barons and the Kansas City Monarchs, suggesting that fan interest in the Negro Leagues was still present, even if baseball was not the biggest concern on the minds of African Americans.<sup>285</sup> According to an article that ran in the June 19 issue, the Barons were averaging roughly 5,000 fans per game and were starting to increase the amount of home games played in a week due to the high attendance figures.<sup>286</sup> Despite the decent attendance figures at Negro League games, black baseball fans were starting to attend Major League Baseball games with the emergence of black players like Robinson and the Cleveland Indians' Larry Doby. During a game against the Pittsburgh Pirates, Robinson's Dodgers brought in 24,745 fans, with many of those fans being African American.<sup>287</sup>

While an inter-city matchup between the New York Cubans and the New York Black Yankees in early July 1948 drew a crowd of 5,000, it was the Major League Baseball debut of a former Black Yankees pitcher that caught the attention of the American black community. Nearly 35,000 fans attended Satchel Paige's first game as a Cleveland Indian on July 9, 1948,

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<sup>284</sup> "Birmingham Wins Opener Before 8,000." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 8, 1948: 15.

<sup>285</sup> "Take Twin Bill from Kansas City." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 12, 1948: 14.

<sup>286</sup> "Barons in Front in NAL Race." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 19, 1948: 10.

<sup>287</sup> Nunn, William G. "Robinson's Timely Hits Help Scuttle Pirates." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 3, 1948: 10.

demonstrating the growing influence of Major League Baseball.<sup>288</sup> Paige, who was 42 years old at the time of his debut, quickly turned into a box office sensation. In a three-game series in late August 1948, Paige pitched before 80,403 fans over the course of three days.<sup>289</sup> In comparison, the Indians' Negro League counterparts, the Cleveland Buckeyes, brought in 9,000 fans for a matchup in Birmingham against the Barons.<sup>290</sup>

During this time, many Negro League teams occupied Major League Baseball ballparks; however, with the arrival of black players in the Major Leagues and attendance figures at Negro League games beginning to dwindle, these tenants were beginning to be evicted from Major League Baseball parks. A game played the week of September 18, 1948, between the New York Cubans and the Philadelphia Stars at Yankee Stadium began to highlight the discrepancy between the two American professional baseball leagues' attendance.<sup>291</sup> According to *Courier* writer Haskell Cole, "Attendance was first announced as 1,500 and later changed to 3,200, although the stands were sparsely populated."<sup>292</sup>

Management at the Polo Grounds, home of the New York Giants, informed the Cubans' ownership that they would not be permitted to play games there in 1949 due to a lack of

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<sup>288</sup> Dunmore, Al. "Satchel Impressive in Debut on Mound." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 17, 1948: 10.

<sup>289</sup> Dunmore, Al. "80,403 Awed as Paige Blanks White Sox 3-0; Has Drawn 201,829." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 28, 1948: 11.

<sup>290</sup> "Barons Win Two from Cleveland." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 14, 1948: 10.

<sup>291</sup> Cole, Haskell. "N.Y.'s Big League Clubs May Oust Negro Tenants." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 18, 1948: 10.

<sup>292</sup> Cole, 1948: 10.

revenue.<sup>293</sup> According to Haskell Cole, many Major League ballparks were beginning to follow suit, informing Negro League clubs in their respective cities that they would no longer be permitted to use the facilities for future seasons because of declining revenues.<sup>294</sup> Such decisions would also increase the speed at which the Negro Leagues would decline.

To keep the Negro Leagues operational, an attempt was made to break into additional Southern markets. An April 1949 article in the *Courier* covered the arrival of the Negro Leagues in Pensacola, Florida; however, the arrival of the Negro Leagues in the city seemed to be greeted with minimal fanfare. A crowd of just 1,800 attended the first-ever Negro League game in Pensacola,<sup>295</sup> according to the *Courier*, evidencing steady and steep decline of the community's interest in the Negro Leagues during the post-Robinson era.

Meanwhile, in Birmingham, 7,000 fans attended the 1949 season opener for the Black Barons, who defeated the newly minted Houston Eagles by a score of 3 to 1. The *Courier* described this as a "big crowd;" however, it should be noted that the 1949 season opener for the Barons saw a thousand-person drop-off from the 1948 season opener.<sup>296</sup> A year earlier, the Barons had played to a crowd of 8,000, according to the *Courier*.<sup>297</sup> It is another example of the dwindling attendance figures in 1949, even for established Negro League ballclubs.

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<sup>293</sup> Cole, 1948: 10.

<sup>294</sup> Cole, 1948: 10.

<sup>295</sup> "Sepia Stars Play in Pensacola Game." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 9, 1949: 23.

<sup>296</sup> "Barons' Big 1st Inning Stops Eagles in Opener." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 7, 1949: 23.

<sup>297</sup> "Birmingham Wins Opener," 1948: 15.

Continuing with these trends, the Chicago American Giants and the Louisville Buckeyes were forced to play games in Buffalo, New York; as a result, the attendance was predictably low, with a meager 3,600 fans on hand to witness a doubleheader matchup between the two teams.<sup>298</sup> This was due to the struggles of the Negro Leagues to secure the proper venues for games to be played, which led to ballclubs being displaced and playing matchups in cities that were not their own.

Despite the attendance woes, the *Courier* hyped up the East-West Game as a spectacle. A July 30, 1949 article read that a “banner crowd was expected for the August 14 East-West Game,” with an article from August 6, 1949 claiming that 40,000 fans were expected at the East-West Game.<sup>299</sup> This was not to be the case: nearly 10,000 fewer fans than expected showed up according to the August 20, 1949 edition of the *Courier*. With 31,907 people on hand for the all-star game, questions about the Negro Leagues’ long-term viability again began to emerge.<sup>300</sup> An article entitled “Slumping Crowds at East-West Game a Warning Signal” from the August 27, 1949 issue of the *Courier* detailed some of these problems. In 1948, over 42,000 people attended the East-West Game; in 1947, that number was over 48,000, according to the article.<sup>301</sup> “[A main reason] for the lack of interest in this year’s game may be that the Negro American League is selling its players up the river too fast,” according to author Luix Virgil Overbea.

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<sup>298</sup> “Chicago Giants Win Twin Bill.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 11, 1949: 25.

<sup>299</sup> Smith, Wendell. “West Early Favorites to Win East-West Classic: Banner Crowd Expected for Aug. 14 Game.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 30, 1949: 22.

<sup>300</sup> Nunn, William G. “West Held to Two Hits Before 30,000.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 20, 1949: 22.

<sup>301</sup> Overbea, Luix V. “Slumping Crowds at East-West Games Is a Warning Signal.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 16, 1949: 22.

“What is the purpose [of the Negro Leagues] and what happens to the money? What benefits do the ballplayers get out of the game? Does it help them as the Major League game does big league players?”<sup>302</sup> Such questions were beginning to emerge far more regularly as the Negro Leagues limped along throughout 1949.

Meanwhile, at the Major League Baseball level, the traveling teams of black Major Leaguers were drumming up strong fan interest from both races. Jackie Robinson’s All-Stars were attracting capacity crowds on the exhibition circuit in the fall of 1949. 17,000 fans of both races flocked to Pelican Stadium in New Orleans to watch Robinson and his fellow all-star teammates.<sup>303</sup> While the Negro Leagues were struggling to stay afloat, Robinson was drawing capacity crowds everywhere he went, even for exhibition games. In Houston, Robinson brought in 13,000 fans.<sup>304</sup> Major League black ballplayers such as Luke Easter also participated in exhibition games, matching up against white Major Leaguers like Cleveland Indians pitcher Bob Feller. A contest between Easter’s team (consisting of black players) and Feller’s team (which had white Major Leaguers) drew 5,000 spectators in Los Angeles the week of November 5, 1949.<sup>305</sup>

On opening day 1950, just 3,000 fans attended the Birmingham Black Barons’ two-game series against the Cleveland Buckeyes.<sup>306</sup> This was a 4,000-person drop from the 1949 series

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<sup>302</sup> Overbea, 1949: 22.

<sup>303</sup> Jones, Lucius. “Jackie’s All-Stars Turn ‘Em Away in ‘Orleans.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 29, 1949: 22.

<sup>304</sup> Davis, Jay Don. “Robinson All-Stars Pack ‘Em In at Houston; Win 9 to 4.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 5, 1949: 24.

<sup>305</sup> “Bob Feller, Luke Easter’s Stars Split.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 5, 1949: 22.

<sup>306</sup> “3,000 Watch Birmingham Win, 7-6, 6-0.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 1, 1950: 22.



opener the Black Barons played against the Houston Eagles.<sup>307</sup> Despite the optimism of Negro League owners heading into the 1950 season, it appeared that the Negro Leagues were continuing their steady decline. Reading the coverage provided by the *Courier*, the Black Barons were considered to be one of the flagship teams in the Negro Leagues, and yet the team's attendance figures remained low. Attendance increased for a series against the Indianapolis Clowns the week of April 22, where 7,196 fans attended the ballpark,<sup>308</sup> but these figures were still largely untenable for long-term growth.

For opening day in Kansas City, 19,000 fans were expected, as published in the May 6, 1950 issue of the *Courier*.<sup>309</sup> Given the attendance figures of other games played at the time, this seems surprising, despite the fact that Kansas City remained one of the most supportive Negro League markets at the time. In addition, according to the same issue, 25,000 fans were expected to see the Baltimore Elite Giants take on the Philadelphia Giants on May 7, 1950, at Memorial Stadium in Baltimore.<sup>310</sup>

Unsurprisingly, opening day in Baltimore fell well short of expectations. 25,000 fans were expected to see the Elite Giants' May 7 season opener at Memorial Stadium; however, only 10,000 fans actually showed up, according to the May 13 edition of the *Courier*.<sup>311</sup> This was yet

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<sup>307</sup> "Barons' Big 1st Inning Stops Eagles in Opener." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 7, 1949: 23.

<sup>308</sup> "Black Barons Stop Naptown Clowns Twice." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 22, 1950: 23.

<sup>309</sup> "Monarchs, Buckeyes May Draw 19,000 in Opener." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 6, 1950: 23.

<sup>310</sup> "25,000 Fans Expected at Memorial Stadium." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 6, 1950: 24.

<sup>311</sup> "Elite Giants Win Opener, 4-3, Before 10,000 Fans." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 13, 1950: 23.

another example of an opening day crowd failing to meet expectations for the Negro Leagues, and the attendance issues were spreading throughout the country. Bad weather in Memphis was blamed for the poor attendance in the Black Yankees-Red Sox series (in which the final two games of the series would be rained out),<sup>312</sup> and only 6,000 fans ended up attending the opening series of the New York Cubans and the Indianapolis Clowns at the Polo Grounds.<sup>313</sup> Yet again, the Negro Leagues were limping along, barely surviving.

Kansas City failed to meet expectations for opening day crowds, but to a far lesser extent than Baltimore. 16,490 fans watched the Monarchs open their season against the Cleveland Buckeyes, lower than the expected 19,000 but still a solid attendance figure relative to other teams' attendance at the time.<sup>314</sup>

The Major Leagues continued to sign black players and draw fans to the ballpark. For black pitcher Luke Easter's Major League debut for the Cleveland Indians, 23,138 fans of both races attended the game, the highest attendance at a professional baseball game since opening day, according to the *Courier*.<sup>315</sup> While the Negro Leagues struggled to bring in fans, black ballplayers were thriving at the Major League level.

During the season, the New York Cubans were one of the hotter teams in the Negro Leagues and proved it by defeating the Baltimore Elite Giants in a series 2-1. 3,500 fans attended the series, which was still a paltry number for the survival of the Negro Leagues.<sup>316</sup> In

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<sup>312</sup> "Bad Weather Ruins Series." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 13, 1950: 23.

<sup>313</sup> "Clowns, Cubans Split Twin Bill." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 13, 1950: 23.

<sup>314</sup> "Kansas City Wins Opener from Bucks." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 13, 1950: 24.

<sup>315</sup> "When Luke Hits 'Em He Draws the Fans." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 13, 1950: 24.

<sup>316</sup> "Cubans Get Hot, Win Two." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 20, 1950: 23.

Birmingham, 4,142 fans attended a Black Barons game against the Indianapolis Clowns played on the week of May 20, 1950.<sup>317</sup>

Attendance continued to lag in the Negro Leagues throughout 1950. A New York Cubans game played at the Polo Grounds against the Birmingham Black Barons drew just 5,000 fans the week of June 17.<sup>318</sup> When the Cubans-Barons series moved to Birmingham, attendance continued to be low. In fact, attendance was significantly lower in Birmingham than it was in New York; just 3,921 fans attended the game played on the week of June 24.<sup>319</sup> Despite clutch performances from future Major League stars and generational talents like Willie Mays (who was batting .289 over his previous twenty games for the Barons),<sup>320</sup> fans still showed little interest in attending games in Birmingham. One state over, in Memphis, just 5,000 fans attended the Memphis Red Sox-Philadelphia Stars series, despite Memphis winning both games of the series.<sup>321</sup> As demonstrated by the abysmal attendance figures, the Negro Leagues continued to struggle mightily in the South.

On July 8, 1950, one of the newer Negro League franchises was evicted from their home stadium mostly due to attendance issues. The Houston Eagles were forced to pack up and leave town after regularly failing to draw more than 5,000 fans to games.<sup>322</sup> According to *Courier*

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<sup>317</sup> "Birmingham Splits with Ind. Clowns." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 20, 1950: 23.

<sup>318</sup> "Cubans Halt Birmingham's Win Streak." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 17, 1950: 22.

<sup>319</sup> "N.Y. Cubans Chill B'Ham in Twin Bill." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 24, 1950: 22.

<sup>320</sup> "N.Y. Cubans," 1950: 22.

<sup>321</sup> "Stars Bow Twice to Memphis." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 24, 1950: 24.

<sup>322</sup> Davis, Jay Don. "Houston Eagles Seek New Hunting Grounds." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 8, 1950: 23.

sportswriter Jay Don Davis, “failure of Negro fans to support the hometown entry was the sole reason for the Eagle owners making the move [out of Houston].”<sup>323</sup> The Eagles had experienced success earlier in the 1940s playing in Newark, New Jersey under the ownership of the enigmatic Effa Manley, but attendance woes plagued the team during the end of its run in Newark.<sup>324</sup>

In Memphis, the Negro Leagues still struggled to draw crowds. A game played the week of July 15 against the Negro Southern League All-Stars attracted only 5,500 fans to the ballpark to see the hometown Red Sox.<sup>325</sup> Even a team of black all-stars failed to draw spectators to Red Sox games, signifying just how far the Negro Leagues had fallen since 1947.

Birmingham’s slumps continued well into July, with just 3,561 fans watching the Barons clinch a series win against the Indianapolis Clowns.<sup>326</sup> The Barons would win the series two games to one, but few fans were present to witness the success of the Barons on the diamond.<sup>327</sup> During another series in the middle of August, Birmingham attracted just 2,013 fans in a series against the Houston Eagles.<sup>328</sup>

Ignoring these obvious warning signs, yet again, league officials believed that attendance for the 1950 East-West Game would be exceptionally high. Despite the lagging attendance numbers in most markets outside of Kansas City, the Negro Leagues expected 40,000 fans to

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<sup>323</sup> Davis, 1950: 23.

<sup>324</sup> Davis, 1950: 23.

<sup>325</sup> “Red Sox Top Stars in Memphis.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 15, 1950: 22.

<sup>326</sup> “Barons Take Game from Clowns.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 29, 1950: 22.

<sup>327</sup> “Barons Take Game,” 1950: 22.

<sup>328</sup> “Bill Powell Gets Split for Birmingham.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 19, 1950: 14.

attend their version of the All-Star Game, according to the August 12, 1950 issue of the *Courier*.<sup>329</sup> A week later, Negro League officials lowered the number to 35,000 according to a quote from that week's *Courier*.<sup>330</sup> Like previous seasons, the game would be played in Chicago, at the home of the Chicago White Sox, Comiskey Park.<sup>331</sup> The actual attendance for the East-West Game drew 10,000 less fans than anticipated by the *Courier*, with only 24,614 spectators showing up for the game.<sup>332</sup>

#### The Decline of the Negro Leagues as Covered By the Sports Pages of the *Courier*, 1948-1950

In an October 2, 1948 opinion piece, sports editor Wendell Smith opined that a talent deficiency was beginning to emerge in the Negro Leagues:

Now that the doors of organized baseball are open and Negro players have made spectacular entrance, there's a wild race going on between scouts of Major League clubs for more of these bronzed gems.<sup>333</sup>

Smith noted that this development was "encouraging" as it meant a "brighter future" for talented young black ballplayers as they entered the Major Leagues, but it also created an issue with generating new black talent for the Negro Leagues. "The fact that the Cleveland Indians signed

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<sup>329</sup> "40,000 Expected to See Annual 'Dream Game.'" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 12, 1950: 22.

<sup>330</sup> "Expect 35,000 to Witness Eighteenth Annual East-West Classic in Chicago." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 19, 1950: 12.

<sup>331</sup> "Expect 35,000," 1950: 12.

<sup>332</sup> Smith, Wendell. "West Captures 18th Annual East-West Game, 5-3, Before 24,614 Fans." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 26, 1950: 10.

<sup>333</sup> Smith, Wendell. "It's Hard to Find Negro Talent." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 2, 1948: 10.

40-year old Paige indicates that there is a definite shortage of talent, both white and Negro,” according to Smith.<sup>334</sup> Smith claimed that the Negro Leagues possessed far greater talent in the 1920s and 1930s, and that if Major League Baseball had integrated during that time period, “probably every big-league club would have a Negro on its roster.”<sup>335</sup>

Two months later, a critical blow was dealt to the future of the Negro Leagues when the Negro National League seemed to be defunct. Teams such as the Homestead Grays, the New York Black Yankees and the Newark Eagles had appeared to disintegrate, and the league was on its last legs.<sup>336</sup> The *Courier* ran a headline, “Negro Baseball League Fighting for Survival,” showing definitively just how devastating integration had been for the league’s ability to bring in revenue and endure in the changing marketplace.<sup>337</sup>

In December 1948, owners of various Negro League clubs organized and devised a plan to save the Negro Leagues for the 1949 season.<sup>338</sup> The purpose of the meeting was to arrange plans for spring training, as well as various venues to host the baseball teams moving forward. The plans worked at least in the short term, and teams such as the Grays were revived and ready to go for the upcoming season.<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Smith, October 2, 1948: 10.

<sup>335</sup> Smith, October 2, 1948: 10.

<sup>336</sup> “National Circuit Folds Up.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 11, 1948: 11.

<sup>337</sup> “Negro Baseball League Fighting for Survival.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 11, 1948: 11.

<sup>338</sup> “Baseball Moguls Ready for Spring Comeback.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 25, 1948: 10.

<sup>339</sup> “Baseball Moguls Ready for Spring Comeback,” 1948: 10.

However, despite the revival of organized black baseball for the 1949 season, several clubs were unable to mount comebacks for the next season. The financial burdens of supporting a team with miniscule attendance proved to be too much for several clubs. Players from these teams were then able to be drafted by other Negro League clubs in order to continue their careers playing professional baseball for the 1949 season.<sup>340</sup> The existence of such a draft demonstrated just how dire the situation was becoming for the Negro Leagues.

Writers for the *Courier* began expressing various creative ways to revive the Negro Leagues and retain fan interest for the future. In a February 1949 column, the editorial board of the *Courier* suggested that black colleges and universities held the key to maintaining successful organized black baseball leagues. “Due to the fact that Negro baseball – operated and conducted in a quaint and unstable manner – is tottering and leaning toward the chasm of oblivion, something must be done immediately to develop young Negro players,” according to the article.<sup>341</sup> “It seems to us that the responsibility must fall upon the shoulders of the Nation’s Negro Colleges.”<sup>342</sup> Here, the *Courier* proposes that black colleges serve as a feeder system to the Negro Leagues in order to develop and create black baseball players and sustain the league.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> “AL Teams Draft Stars of Clubs Calling it Quits.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 19, 1949: 11.

<sup>341</sup> “Sports Editorial – Negro Colleges Must Develop the Big League Stars of Tomorrow.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 12, 1949: 11.

<sup>342</sup> “Sports Editorial,” 1949: 11.

<sup>343</sup> “Sports Editorial,” 1949: 11.

On May 14, 1949, Wendell Smith issued a stern warning to Negro Leagues fans. “This is the year which will determine whether or not we are going to have Negro baseball in the future,” writes Smith. “At least – whether we are going to have it in the same gaudy colors and the identical, corny routine.”<sup>344</sup> This column served as yet another plea from Smith for fans to save the Negro Leagues, advertising the talent on the ballclubs as being far superior to the previous season. At the same time, Smith issued a call to owners and administrators of these Negro League teams to work alongside their fans to keep this community pillar alive:

The men who control the Negro baseball scene must realize right now that they cannot ignore the public; that they must inform them what is happening, where their teams play, supply the papers with the proper standings and weekly results, and keep their version of the game on a level of dignity. If they don’t do those things, their show is going to fold before it ever approaches the last act. The lights will go out with a shocking suddenness, and the skeptical critics will write: *The show that was produced under the title of ‘Negro Baseball’ was a rousing flop and has disappeared from the sports scene.* This is the final curtain call, gentlemen!<sup>345</sup>

Smith could see the writing was on the wall for the Negro Leagues by May 1949. His *Courier* column reads as a final warning to owners and fans to save their uniquely black cultural institution before it goes under for good.

Sensing trouble in the Negro Leagues, Major League Baseball scouts began to pressure financially burdened Negro League clubs to sell their best players and assets to the big clubs.

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<sup>344</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Negro Baseball’s ‘Do or Die Year.’” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 14, 1949: 22.

<sup>345</sup> Smith, May 14, 1949: 22.



Wendell Smith identified three notable players in the Negro Leagues that were candidates for being sold to the Major Leagues due to their exceptional play in 1949: Piper Davis, Lenny Pearson and Ed Steele. “Any one of them, or all three, are likely to be snatched up at any moment [by a Major League team],” writes Smith. “That is why it is advisable for fans of Negro baseball to journey to Chicago on August 14 and witness the East-West game between teams in the Eastern and Western divisions of the Negro American League.”<sup>346</sup> Here, Smith is encouraging black baseball fans yet again to support their local teams in order to keep these ballclubs stockpiled with talent.

After the dismal failure of the East-West Game, Smith’s September 3, 1949 column reflected on some of the financial worries of Negro Leagues owners and players. Quoting a fellow team owner, Smith printed that “Negro baseball owners are operating with fear in their hearts. They think they are doomed because the majors have finally accepted their players. They think they’ve lost the patronage that they once had.”<sup>347</sup> This mentality was only reinforced by the much lower than anticipated attendance at the East-West Game, and further showed just how far the Negro Leagues had fallen in a short span of time.

In the Majors, just one short year after integration, black baseball players were having an immediate impact. As covered by Wendell Smith in his October 8, 1949 column, it was black players that were proving to be the best players on the diamond in that year’s World Series. In the column, Smith notes that Jackie Robinson and Dodgers catcher Roy Campanella were the best active players at their respective positions in baseball that season, which further served as a

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<sup>346</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Scouts Hounding Negro Teams.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 9, 1949: 22.

<sup>347</sup> Smith, Wendell. “This Man Believes in the Game.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 3, 1949: 22.

catalyst for increasing fan support of the Major Leagues amongst black fans.<sup>348</sup> The great black baseball talent was beginning to make a legitimate impact on critical big league games, further driving a wedge between the black community and the Negro Leagues.

With the Major Leagues growing rapidly with black audiences, Smith used his November 5, 1949 column to question the apathy and indifference that was shown by Negro League owners:

Since Robinson, [Don] Newcombe, and Campanella pitched their tents on major league soil, Negro baseball has shown signs of collapsing. It is now on its last legs – at least in its present form – and must be saved if possible. The lethargy on the part of the owners, however, is as much to blame for its present plight as anything else. Despite the fact that they had a poor, unprofitable season in 1948, they have made no obvious move to get down to work and try to remedy the situation.<sup>349</sup>

Smith further noted that despite the weak attendance figures from August's East-West Game, the Negro League owners had not come together for meetings or correspondence. According to Smith, "nothing has been done whatsoever to combat the various problems facing [the Negro Leagues] in 1950."<sup>350</sup>

Adding to the list of various problems, Major League Baseball executives were now recruiting black ballplayers at a quick pace. The *Courier* warned that Major League executives

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<sup>348</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Series Hinges on Bums' Negro Stars." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 8, 1949: 22.

<sup>349</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Today's Stars from Negro Leagues." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 5, 1949: 22.

<sup>350</sup> Smith, November 5, 1949: 22.

were planning on being in hot pursuit of black ballplayers prior to the 1950 season in an article published on December 17, 1949.<sup>351</sup> With the signings of star Negro Leagues players such as Sam Jethroe (who signed a contract with the Boston Braves during the 1949 offseason),<sup>352</sup> the Negro Leagues were struggling to find star players to build teams around and attract black fans to the ballparks. This was yet another factor in the rapid decline of the Negro Leagues.

Despite all of the apparent red flags, Negro League owners entered the 1950 season with optimism and a hope for a return the glory years of the sport. According to Wendell Smith, many Negro League owners were quite unprepared for Robinson integrating baseball, and as such, a plan was not in place to effectively survive the post-Robinson era.<sup>353</sup> By 1950, Smith reported that Negro League owners felt ready to market their on-field products to black communities around the country again.<sup>354</sup> In the midst of great chaos, Smith's report conveyed a rare optimism, that black baseball fans would long for the nostalgia of the old days and return to support their old teams and cultural institutions.

In his column "Negro Baseball Won't Give Up," published on February 18, 1950, Smith wrote that the Negro Leagues remained resilient in the face of great adversity:

Owners contended that Negro players in the majors would kill attendance at the Negro games. When it did happen, attendance was not killed, but it was certainly badly

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<sup>351</sup> Boyack, James E. "Baseball Moguls Eye Tan Stars at Annual Meeting." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 17, 1949: 23.

<sup>352</sup> Boyack, 1949: 23.

<sup>353</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Negro Baseball Owners Expect 1950 to Be Their Greatest Since 1945." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 18, 1950: 23.

<sup>354</sup> "Negro Baseball Owners Expect 1950 to Be Their Greatest Since 1945," 1950: 23.

mangled. The lush days for these owners, who were thriving on segregation and discrimination in baseball, came to an end. The people who wanted to see Negro players perform no longer had to attend Negro games. They could go see the Dodgers, Indians and Giants.<sup>355</sup>

Despite this, Smith wrote, the Negro Leagues continued to survive, at least for the 1950 season. Even with shrinking attendance, the Negro League owners believed they were capable of fighting onward for another season of baseball, even though, according to Smith, “the aroma from around the owners meetings does not smell so good, nor does the future loom bright under present conditions.”<sup>356</sup>

Smith still lobbied for the saving of the Negro Leagues. In another article written on February 18, 1950, he wrote that “it would be tragic if Negro baseball disappears from the sports scene. The main reason is because it has made a great contribution to baseball.”<sup>357</sup>

Meanwhile, Smith continued to champion black ballplayers in the Major Leagues, describing it on March 18, 1950, as “the great experiment that paid off.”<sup>358</sup> Continuing down a similar trajectory, on May 27, 1950, Smith wrote that the best black baseball players had already signed deals in the Major Leagues, further adding fuel to the grim situation the Negro Leagues faced at the time:

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<sup>355</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Negro Baseball Won’t Give Up.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 18, 1950: 22.

<sup>356</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Rickey’s Pen Changed the Picture.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 18, 1950: 22.

<sup>357</sup> “Rickey’s Pen Changed the Picture,” 1950: 22.

<sup>358</sup> Smith, Wendell. “The Great Experiment Paid Off.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 18, 1950: 22.

Before you approach any owner and demand Negro players, be sure you have one good enough to be considered a prospect. Frankly, there are few Negro players today, if any, good enough to step into a major league uniform. If there are any, they are now playing on a minor league club owned by a big league team and their future depends solely on ability.<sup>359</sup>

This was indicative of the situation the Negro Leagues faced throughout 1950. Many of the black players simply were not good enough to cut it on big league teams, leaving the Negro League teams with a drained talent pool and not enough talent to sustain itself moving forward.

Two weeks later, on June 10, 1950, *Courier* sports columnist Jack Saunders noted that every black player that had been an everyday baseball player in the Major Leagues for over a full season had been selected to either the Major League Baseball National League or American League All-Star team. “This proves that,” according to Saunders, “if given an equal opportunity, Negro baseball players will prove themselves to be as good if not better than most of the white players brought up to the Major Leagues.”<sup>360</sup>

Smith wrote about the attendance woes throughout the league in the June 17, 1950 issue of the *Courier*. Even in light of these issues, Smith wrote that the owners in the Negro Leagues were insistent on carrying on and continuing. Owners blamed the attendance problems on the bad weather striking the United States throughout 1950. “Many of our most important games have been rained out,” Negro Leagues commissioner J.B. Martin told the *Courier*. “And consequently, the teams have been losing money. The weather has been our greatest handicap.

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<sup>359</sup> Smith, Wendell. “The Best Negroes Have Been Signed.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 27, 1950: 22.

<sup>360</sup> Saunders, Jack. “They’ve Proved Themselves.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 10, 1950: 24.

Now that it has turned for the better we are all confident that things will pick up considerably.”<sup>361</sup> Furthermore, Martin floated the idea of trying to market the Negro Leagues to white audiences in order to generate interest and revenue.<sup>362</sup> This, if it had been successful, would have been effectively the end of the Negro Leagues as a purely black institution.

Smith also emphasized that it was ultimately the talent that would determine the future survival of the Negro Leagues. “The solution of Negro’s baseball problem is the sale of players,” wrote Smith. “Negro teams must continue developing talent and manipulating deals [with Major League teams] in order to continue. They must continue to feed the majors and top minor leagues with Negro talent or fold.”<sup>363</sup> The Negro Leagues were no longer going to be able to survive as a standalone league. It needed to serve as a feeder to the Major Leagues or else the structure of the Negro Leagues would collapse.<sup>364</sup>

The Major Leagues, as the 1950 All-Star teams proved, were greatly benefiting from the purchase of black players from Negro League teams. According to a July 1, 1950 article from Wendell Smith, the Major League Baseball All-Star teams for both the National and American Leagues were loaded with black players, many of whom were former Negro League stars.<sup>365</sup> Players like Luke Easter, Jackie Robinson, and Roy Campanella headlined the 1950 All-Star

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<sup>361</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Negro Baseball Struggles On.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 17, 1950: 22.

<sup>362</sup> Smith, June 17, 1950: 22.

<sup>363</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Player Sales Key to Success.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 17, 1950: 22.

<sup>364</sup> “Player Sales Key to Success,” 1950: 22.

<sup>365</sup> Smith, Wendell. “There’ll Be Plenty of Color in All-Star Game.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 1, 1950: 22.

Game squads, which showed the tremendous impact black players were having on Major League Baseball.<sup>366</sup>

In an attempt to bring attention to its own all-star game, Negro League officials devised a plan to drive up fan activity in the Negro Leagues. For the 1950 East-West Game, executives decided that they would poll fans around the country in order to determine each team's starting lineup.<sup>367</sup> A mailing address was provided by league president J.B. Martin, and fans were to send their ballots to the address provided by the *Courier*.<sup>368</sup> This attempt to bring fans closer to the game and regain interest would ultimately prove to be futile, however, as the East-West Game for the third consecutive year failed to meet expected attendance.

Wendell Smith again made note of the problems with the East-West Game, and connected attendance troubles with an apparent lack of talent on the diamond for Negro League clubs:

When Brooklyn signed Robinson in 1947, there was a wealth of Negro talent. Today, however, good Negro players are hard to find. We sincerely hope that the administrators in Negro schools across the country will recognize this fact and make an effort to encourage young stars who have major league possibilities. If they don't, the time may come when there will not be a Negro in the major leagues. If that happens, we have only ourselves to blame.<sup>369</sup>

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<sup>366</sup> Smith, July 1, 1950: 22.

<sup>367</sup> "East-West Officials Plan to Poll Fans for Starting Lineup." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 29, 1950: 22.

<sup>368</sup> "East-West Officials," 1950: 22.

<sup>369</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Future Stars Must Be Collegians." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 26, 1950: 10.

Smith claimed that black baseball is beginning to become talent deficient, and that necessary steps needed be taken by all involved in order to revive interest and talent in the sport.

The troubles for the Negro Leagues extended far beyond the East-West Game. Despite the leagues' best efforts, teams were continuing to cease to exist at a rapid rate. The Homestead Grays were still hanging on, splitting its home games between the Pittsburgh area and Washington, D.C.; after many issues, the Cleveland Buckeyes disbanded midway through the 1950 season, according to the July 29, 1950 edition of the *Courier*.<sup>370</sup> In addition, the Houston Eagles also announced that the franchise would be folding, further demonstrating the desperate state of affairs within black baseball during the 1950 season.<sup>371</sup>

After failing to latch on long-term with the Cleveland Indians, pitcher Satchel Paige made his much-heralded comeback to the Negro Leagues in late July 1950. In his return to black baseball, Paige allowed four runs, proving that he too was not the ballplayer he once was.<sup>372</sup> This attempt to drum up fan interest in the Negro Leagues (by welcoming an icon of black baseball back into the fold) was not successful, as attendance proved to be extremely low (with only 4,000 fans showing up to see Paige's first start as a Philadelphia Star).<sup>373</sup>

The Negro Leagues soon began using white players in an attempt to expand general interest in the ballclubs and to appeal to a wider audience. However, this was not without controversy. During the week of August 12, 1950, police officers in Birmingham barred white

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<sup>370</sup> Skinner, Thomas. "Pressbox Chatter." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 29, 1950: 24.

<sup>371</sup> Skinner, 1950: 24.

<sup>372</sup> "Satch Gives Up Four Runs While Pitching." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 5, 1950: 24.

<sup>373</sup> "Satch Gives Up Four Runs," 1950: 24.



players on the Chicago American Giants from taking the field for a scheduled doubleheader against the Barons.<sup>374</sup> The white players were then forced to watch the game from a white section in the stands. The *Courier* described the incident as “another ugly chapter in the racial history of Birmingham.”<sup>375</sup>

After the 1950 East-West Game, much of the coverage of the Negro Leagues dried up. Black Major League Baseball players continued to receive extensive coverage in the *Courier*, with the paper writing articles about the conquests and activities of black major leaguers on a weekly basis. However, after the disappointing crowds at the East-West Game, the paper would seldom mention the Negro Leagues until a December 16, 1950 report from Wendell Smith’s weekly column.<sup>376</sup> In that report, Smith briefs readers as to what had happened with the Negro Leagues after the East-West Game. During the 1950 season, the Negro National League ceased to exist due to financial burdens, with many teams folding along with it.<sup>377</sup> Several teams (such as the Homestead Grays) were absorbed by the Negro American League and limped along during the 1950 season. Smith noted that in 1950, every Negro League team managed to lose money. “It was probably the worst season in the history of Negro baseball,” Smith writes.<sup>378</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> “Chicago Giants Can’t Use White Players in Birmingham.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 12, 1950: 24.

<sup>375</sup> “Chicago Giants Can’t Use White Players,” 1950: 24.

<sup>376</sup> Smith, Wendell. “Report on the Status of Negro Baseball.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 16, 1950: 14.

<sup>377</sup> Smith, December 16, 1950: 14.

<sup>378</sup> Smith, December 16, 1950: 14.

Despite the obvious warning signs, Negro American League president J.B. Martin insisted that black baseball would continue into 1951. “We are definitely going to operate next season,” Martin told the *Courier*, “and we think we’ll do much better than the past three seasons. I have discussed the entire situation with the owners and they all agree that we should keep our league intact.”<sup>379</sup>

Smith’s column reads almost like a postmortem for the Negro Leagues. “Before the major league doors opened,” Smith writes, “Negro baseball was strictly on its own and doing fine. There was no competition from organized baseball for Negro players, nor was there competition from the majors for its fans.”<sup>380</sup> Perhaps this was the model for Negro League success: without the white leagues competing for talent and fans, the Negro Leagues were able to operate as an independent entity – a firm fixture within the black community.<sup>381</sup> Once Robinson integrated Major League Baseball, the idea of a specialized black baseball league became obsolete. Like organized black professional baseball itself, the coverage of black baseball in the *Courier* went out with a whimper, not a bang.

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<sup>379</sup> Smith, December 16, 1950: 14.

<sup>380</sup> Smith, Wendell. “To Develop Big League Talent...” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 16, 1950: 14.

<sup>381</sup> “To Develop Big League Talent...,” 1950: 14.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

During the years 1945 to 1950, Jackie Robinson was not as important to black communities as many public figures of today suggest. His status as an American cultural icon has grown significantly over the years. Meanwhile, the front page of the *Courier* served as a de facto mouthpiece for black communities across the United States by covering stories of civil rights violations and racial injustices. Listening to contemporary speakers such as Desmond Tutu, one might assume that Robinson's accomplishments were the primary front-page story of every issue.

Tutu described Robinson as “a black man who had made it against the most tremendous odds.”<sup>382</sup> Famed Civil Rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once remarked that “[people will] never know how easy Jackie Robinson...made it for me to do my job by what [he] did on the baseball field.”<sup>383</sup> In one of his final speeches given as President of the United States, celebrating the World Series champion Chicago Cubs, Barack Obama stated that “there’s a direct line between Jackie Robinson and me standing here [in the White House].”<sup>384</sup>

Public figures outside of the baseball diamond continued to discuss Robinson's impact on the racial landscape of the United States, demonstrating that his stature within American society

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<sup>382</sup> “9 Quotes About Jackie Robinson.” The Jackie Robinson Foundation, January 31, 2018.

<sup>383</sup> Perry, Dayn. “MLK’s Telegram to Jackie Robinson.” CBSSports.com, January 21, 2013.

<sup>384</sup> Sullivan, Paul. “President Obama’s Words of Unity Inspire Cubs During White House Celebration.” *The Chicago Tribune*, January 16, 2017.

has grown largely in the ensuing decades since his 1947 Major League Baseball debut.

Journalist and television personality Larry King attended Robinson's first game as a Dodger, an event that he describes as having a profound impact on his life. "I was 14 years old, and I sat in the bleachers in Ebbetts Field and watched this incredible man come on the field and change history," said King. "Jackie Robinson was an extraordinary man on the field, but he was an even more extraordinary man off the field. He was eloquent, decisive, and he changed the room whenever he walked in."<sup>385</sup>

At the time of Robinson's integration of Major League Baseball, the Negro Leagues were establishing themselves as a black cultural institution. Cities such as Kansas City and Pittsburgh were developing black baseball stars like Satchel Paige, Buck O'Neil, Buck Leonard and Josh Gibson, athletes who had profound impacts in the communities in which they played. By the mid-1940s, in postwar America, black baseball was experiencing a resurgence of interest. This came to a screeching halt when Robinson joined the Major Leagues in 1947, opening the floodgates for players like Larry Doby and Satchel Paige to join him in the Majors. The death of the Negro Leagues was rapid, but quiet, with all of the *Courier's* coverage of the decline of the Negro Leagues taking place away from the front page. By the end of 1950, the Negro Leagues as it had existed before was no more. It died irrelevant, financially insolvent, and out of the public consciousness.

To study the impact of Robinson's integration of baseball and the decline of the Negro Leagues through the lens of an influential black newspaper, the *Courier* was chosen for several reasons. With two Negro Leagues teams calling the Pittsburgh area home for much of the 1940s,

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<sup>385</sup> Bowling, Suzanna. "The Reverend Al Sharpton, Larry King, Paul Sorvino and More Unveiling the Long-Lost Jackie Robinson 'Color Barrier'-Breaking Contracts." *Times Square Chronicles*, April 11, 2016.

the city was a natural black baseball market, making the *Courier* a logical choice to analyze the rise and fall of the Negro Leagues. The *Courier* was far more than merely a local newspaper. It had a national audience, with a high circulation of weekly readers across the country during the mid-1940s. Finally, the *Courier* also had Baseball Hall of Famer Wendell Smith on staff as a sportswriter and editor. Smith was a critical mover and shaker in getting Robinson to the Major Leagues, arranging tryouts for him with Major League Baseball teams and ultimately recommending him to Branch Rickey, the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers.<sup>386</sup> These factors gave the *Courier* credibility as a newspaper covering the Negro Leagues.

Each issue of the *Courier* published between 1945 and 1950 was analyzed for this thesis. Front-page stories were compiled into separate categories on a spreadsheet. These categories separated the types of stories that appeared in the *Courier* and allowed for more thorough results. After the data were organized, a chart was created to catalog the results of this research.

During the relevant 1945 to 1950 timeframe, Robinson's name appeared on the front page of the *Courier* 47 times, or 9 percent of issues of the *Courier* published. This pales in comparison to other pertinent issues covered on the front page of the *Courier* at the time, such as articles about lynchings, which appeared in 15 percent of *Courier* front-page stories. Stories regarding the police appeared on the front page of the *Courier* more than any other issue at the time, with 31 percent of *Courier* front-page stories involving police activity. These findings suggest that while Jackie Robinson was a newsworthy public figure, there were far more pressing stories that commanded the attention of readers during that time.

When Jackie Robinson signed a contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers in November 1945, the *Courier* ran several front-page stories covering the landmark event. Despite its appearance

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<sup>386</sup> "Wendell Smith and Branch Rickey." Baseball Hall of Fame.

on the front page, it was still not the lead news story of the week, with a story about black pilots being able to fly in Ecuador being deemed to be more important by the *Courier* editorial staff.<sup>387</sup> While Robinson's conquests with the Montreal Royals, the farm team of the Dodgers, were regularly featured in issues of the *Courier* throughout 1946, they were mostly confined to the sports pages of the *Courier*.

Robinson would again find himself on the front page of the *Courier* during the week of his first appearance with the Dodgers in April 1947. However, much like the coverage surrounding Robinson signing with Brooklyn in November 1945, Robinson's Major League debut was not deemed to be the primary news story of that week by the *Courier* editors. Instead, the newspaper staff chose an article about a racially motivated mob attack in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, that had also taken place that week to be the lead news story.<sup>388</sup> Articles about Robinson continued to appear on the front page of the *Courier* the following week, but they would disappear from the front page two weeks after the event.

The feats of Robinson appeared on the front page of the *Courier* intermittently from 1945 to 1950, which is more than can be said of the Negro Leagues. Articles about organized black professional baseball only appeared twice on the front page of the *Courier* in a six-year span. This was perhaps indicative of the public's feelings towards the decline of the Negro Leagues in the wake of Robinson integrating Major League Baseball. Because of the lack of front-page coverage in the *Courier* concerning the Negro Leagues, in order to study its demise, attendance

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<sup>387</sup> Saunders, Jack. "332nd Pilots to Fly Planes in Ecuador: Transport Concession Granted to Negro Line." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 3, 1945: 1.

<sup>388</sup> Graves, Lem. "Mob Attacks Mixed Group at Chapel Hill." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 19, 1947: 1.

figures and stories from the sports pages of the *Courier* published from 1948 to 1950 (the post-Robinson era of black baseball) were relied on exclusively for this thesis.

Attendance figures published in the *Courier* from 1948 to 1950 were featured in this thesis to demonstrate the downward trend in fan and community interest in the Negro Leagues. The numbers published in the *Courier* indicated a steep decline in attendance over the three seasons following the integration of the Major Leagues. Furthermore, opinion pieces and articles written by the *Courier*'s sports staff provide a glimpse into the state of chaos the Negro Leagues were experiencing at the time. Negro Leagues owners, in many instances, failed to sufficiently address the problems (both financially and in drawing fans to the ballpark to attend games) that plagued them in the post-Robinson era. With the exception of the Kansas City Monarchs, interest in the Negro Leagues faded quickly.

The 1950 East-West Game in many ways proved to be the last gasp for organized black professional baseball. Played at Chicago's Comiskey Park, team owners predicted 40,000 fans would attend the game, an ambitious number given the widespread attendance problems that plagued the Negro Leagues during the 1950 season.<sup>389</sup> In an obvious sign of trouble, a week later, owners dropped the expected attendance number down to 35,000 fans.<sup>390</sup> Instead, 10,000 fewer fans than anticipated attended the game, with just 24,614 spectators showing up for the game.<sup>391</sup> After this embarrassment, the *Courier* largely ignored the plight of the Negro Leagues,

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<sup>389</sup> "40,000 Expected to See Annual 'Dream Game.'" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 12, 1950: 22.

<sup>390</sup> "Expect 35,000 to Witness Eighteenth Annual East-West Classic in Chicago." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 19, 1950: 12.

<sup>391</sup> Smith, Wendell. "West Captures 18th Annual East-West Game, 5-3, Before 24,614 Fans." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 26, 1950: 10.

instead choosing to devote its baseball resources towards the successes of black players in the Major Leagues. Not long after the debacle in Chicago, the Negro National League folded, effectively spelling the end of the two Negro Leagues.<sup>392</sup>

Through a careful analysis of the front pages of one of the most important national African American newspapers of the time, the *Courier*, it can be determined that the breaking of Major League Baseball's color barrier and stories pertaining to Jackie Robinson were important events. However, based on the stories published on the front page of the *Courier*, Robinson's integration was not as critical at the time as modern popular culture would suggest. It was an major news event, but the *Courier* editorial staff deemed it to be secondary to other stories that took place at the time (such as reporting on lynchings throughout the country and the fight to integrate American colleges and universities). On the other hand, the death of the Negro Leagues closely mirrored the lack of front-page stories found in the *Courier*. This suggests that the community bond between black communities and their Negro Leagues teams might not have been as tight as it is believed to have been by many modern scholars. A critical component of a community is the emotional connection that is shared amongst the group while participating in an activity. While baseball has been widely believed to have been an emotional pillar of the black communities of the time, the evidence found here certainly suggests otherwise. In the wake of Robinson integrating baseball, the Negro Leagues died in the dark.

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<sup>392</sup> Smith, Wendell. "Report on the Status of Negro Baseball." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 16, 1950: 14.



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