Celebrating Jackie Robinson Day, Robinson's 100th birthday

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On April 15, 2019, the baseball world marked Jackie Robinson Day with various celebrations around the country honoring Robinson who was a monumental figure in breaking the racial barrier in Major League Baseball.

This year, the celebrations honored not only Robinson’s entry into the MLB in 1947 but also recognized Robinson’s 100th birthday, which would have been last Jan. 31. During his career, Robinson became an almost immediate superstar and was named Rookie of the Year, Most Valuable Player and gained notoriety both on and off the field for his athletic prowess. Robinson died from cardiac arrest at the age of 53 in 1972.

To celebrate, the Los Angeles Dodgers, Robinson’s home team when they were still the Brooklyn Dodgers, honored both Robinson and his surviving wife, Rachel Robinson, in a ceremony at their home stadium. After the ceremony, the Dodgers played against the Cincinnati Reds, bringing home a victory with a final score of 4-3.

Although the MLB has made great strides in equality for black players, there is still a huge issue within the league regarding players of color. Currently, only 8.4 percent of MLB players are black, down from 18 percent in the early 1990s.

However, many players have spoken out about the huge influence that Robinson has had on their lives and how important celebrating his success is. Cincinnati Reds outfielder Yasiel Puig, who is Cuban, commented after the ceremony: ‘If not for Jackie Robinson, I probably wouldn’t be here today playing baseball [in the United States]. That’s the reason we respect this day.’

The celebrations also included 42 of the Jackie Robinson Foundation scholars, who were welcomed onto the Dodgers field. The Scholarship foundation was established in 1973 by Robinson’s wife and is a generous scholarship organization that offers both financial resources as well as support services to help scholars succeed in continuing Robinson’s work in equalizing the playing field for black students and athletes around the country. In honor of Robinson’s 100th birthday, MLB players around the country made a combined effort to donate $100,000 to the foundation.

To celebrate Robinson’s centennial birthday, the Dodgers also hosted a private party at the stadium club, during which previews of the displays which will be at the soon-to-open Jackie Robinson Museum were revealed. The museum is set to open in New York City in December 2019.
Although the Dodgers observed Jackie Robinson Day in true form, many teams in the MLB and the MLB itself have come under fire for not celebrating in the traditional fashion. Red Sox pitcher David Price took to Twitter to express his frustration that the MLB schedule left one-third of the teams off the playing field on the iconic day.

Price tweeted Monday evening, “Hey @MLB every year on April 15th we celebrate Jackie Robinson Day ... EVERYONE plays on that day next year, deal? No one should have an off day let alone 10 teams!!”

The MLB Committee responded to Price's outburst in an official statement: “In a perfect world, all teams would play on Jackie Robinson Day. Unfortunately, there are some scheduling challenges when April 15 falls on a Monday, which is a heavy travel day for clubs. MLB worked with the clubs who were not playing on Monday to ensure that their players would wear 42 and have festivities on Tuesday to celebrate. While it is not ideal, one benefit is that this extends the celebration and awareness of Jackie Robinson Day over two days and guarantees that every one of our players participates.”

Although some teams did not play on Monday, many players expressed their gratitude and respect for Robinson on various social media outlets.

Chicago White Sox shortstop Tim Anderson even made Jackie Robinson Day into a community activity, after inviting over 75 local kids to a screening of Robinson’s biopic “42.”

“It’s tough to watch it. But, it’s brave on his part, for him to be that guy to go through that and just be a leader and basically break the barrier. [He’s really] a guy that I look up to, and a guy that motivates me,” Anderson said.

Although Robinson made huge progress for black baseball players, it took many years to fully integrate black players into the MLB. Black players were often held to an incredibly high standard in comparison to their counterparts. Today, the MLB, as well as various other professional sports leagues, are working towards equity across the board for all players.
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