



## 1

# Hero

---

**A**s I began this book, many Americans were beginning to be cautious about whom they called a hero. Athletes, actors, entrepreneurs, and celebrities had casually and carelessly been described as such. To do so after September 11, 2001, seemed preposterous. In the weeks following the attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., and the foiled attack that sent a plane crashing into western Pennsylvania, Americans saw the grim and affecting faces of genuine heroes—and they were caked in ash, blood, tears, toil, and sweat.

A man or woman might sink a basketball, strike a baseball, or scintillate before a camera lens. Those talents can be worthy. But real heroes risk their lives for others.

My wife and I were crossing midtown Manhattan about three weeks after the attacks and saw an assemblage of broad shoulders in blue uniforms with red patches standing outside the entrance to a church. The men and

JACKIE ROBINSON

women talked softly; anonymous black cars thrummed their motors softly; pink and white flowers were piled softly into the crooks of the concrete stairs. It was the funeral for a New York firefighter. We went inside, impulsively, and then stayed, decisively. Gerard Barbara, who was a fifty-three-year-old assistant chief of the Fire Department of New York, had died risking his life for strangers. It did not seem strange—in fact, it seemed important—to take a seat amid some of the men and women who had loved him. They wore blue uniforms, thick-soled black shoes, and red eyes. Mayor Giuliani got up to speak, a gravelly voiced man in a gray suit, who also had red eyes. It was Mayor Giuliani's fourth funeral service of the day.

“Your father,” he said to Gerard Barbara's son and daughter, “used his great gift of courage to serve others. The name he gave you,” he continued in the blunt tone of a commandment, “is now a permanent part of the history of this city. And now, I would like everyone here to stand and express their appreciation for your father.” We stood, cried, and clapped our hands until our palms burned like our eyes, then we applauded some more. A line of blue shoulders with red patches filed softly out of the church and back onto Fifth Avenue, where, for at least a time, FDNY had replaced DKNY as a signature of distinction.

The following weekend, we watched Cal Ripken Jr. play his last game of major league baseball—his 3,001st.

HERO

Over a quarter of a century as a professional athlete, Cal Ripken had become such an insignia of sturdiness and class that the umpires stood in a line to shake his hand. His opponents removed their fielding gloves to applaud him. The signs blooming amid the green seats of Baltimore's Oriole Park at Camden Yards said WE LOVE YOU CAL; THANKS, CAL; and CAL: WE'LL NEVER FORGET YOU. But the word *hero* seemed conspicuously, deliberately absent. Events had revised our national vocabulary. At least for the moment—it would be nice to think even for longer—it would be hard for Americans to look out at a mere playing field and see the kind of heroism we had been reminded to revere in men and women in blue uniforms with red patches.

But even by this wiser standard, Jackie Robinson was a hero. The baseball diamond is not simply a playing field in his story. It was the ground on which he was most open and vulnerable to taunts, threats, and sharpened spikes.

The first African American major league ballplayer of the twentieth century routinely took his rolling, pigeon-toed stride out into the infield or batter's box on days and nights when local police had culled the stadium's mail to show him an assortment of explicit and persuasive death threats. It is tempting today, when Jackie Robinson is enshrined in halls of fame, social studies curricula,

JACKIE ROBINSON

classroom calendars, songs, and statues, to suppose those threats were empty. But in the late 1940s, beatings, bombings, lynchings, and shootings scarred the landscape of the United States. They could be just as public as—well, as baseball games.

Jackie Robinson gave his life for something great; heroes do. He chose to bear the daily, bloody trial of standing up to beanballs and cleats launched into his shins, chest, and chin, and the race-baiting taunts raining down from the stands, along with trash, tomatoes, rocks, watermelon slices, and Sambo dolls. And then he performed with eloquent achievement and superlative poise. Robinson allowed that hatred to strike him as it would a lightning rod, channelling it down into the rugged earth of himself. All that America saw for many years on the baseball field was that iron as upright as a steeple, never bending. But inside, the strain slowed his body, whitened his hair, thickened his circulation, aggravated his diabetes, and rendered him slow and blind. He was dead by the age of fifty-three—a martyr (a word as deliberately applied as *hero*) to trying to make America live up to its creed.

If Jackie Robinson had not been selected to play the role he performed so well, no doubt other superb African American athletes would have soon stepped onto the stage. The skills of Larry Doby, Roy Campanella, Sam Jethroe, Ray Dandridge, Willie Mays, Monte Irvin, Ernie Banks, and an aging Satchel Paige were too great

not to tempt major league clubs who were searching for new sources of talent. World War II had moved many Americans to examine their nation's own self-image as a bulwark of freedom. Editorial writers and civic leaders were already clamoring for America to integrate the armed forces, which had just won the world's liberty, the schools, in which children learned about justice, and sports, which purported to epitomize American values. How could a young black man who might be called up to risk his life backing up Pee Wee Reese in Guam, or Yogi Berra in Normandy, not be allowed to earn a living alongside them on the same playing field?

America's modern civil rights revolution was already stirring by the time Jackie Robinson arrived in major league baseball. With Vernon Johns, Thurgood Marshall, A. Philip Randolph, and many more, it had already produced heroes. But Robinson's courage and accomplishment put a familiar face on the kind of bravery that it took for blacks to stand up for their rights. His heroism was no greater than that of millions of others—some achievements simply cannot fit into box scores. But Robinson's renown gave his heroism reach. It is possible to see, in Robinson's slow, purposeful walk into the face of taunts and threats, some of the same unbowed courage that Americans would later admire in the civil rights marchers who faced down stinging water sprays, sharp rocks, and snapping police dogs. When Robinson joined Dr. Martin Luther King's nonviolent campaign in

JACKIE ROBINSON

Birmingham in 1963, marchers called out, “Show us, Jackie!”

Jackie Robinson is so highly esteemed for his Gandhian restraint against the onslaughts of bigotry that it is easy to mistake him for a social activist. He certainly became a militant campaigner for civil rights, an outspoken newspaper columnist, and a combative Republican when that party was more identified among blacks with Lincoln, La Guardia, Rockefeller, and Lindsay, while the Democrats were dishonored by Strom Thurmond, Orville Faubus, and George Wallace.

But first and last, Jackie Robinson was a hard-nosed, hard-assed, brass-balled, fire-breathing athlete. The Jackie Robinson that his old Pasadena and UCLA teammates remembered could be a petulant star. He mocked lesser competitors and came to expect that his regal status on fields of play would excuse him from the need to attend class or complete assignments; and so it did. When, on a couple of occasions, Robinson’s high spirits and dark skin brought him into the grasp of the Pasadena police, his case was considered with compassion by a local judge, who was loath to deliver a penalty that would cause the accused to miss next Saturday’s game. Few other young black men in Southern California could rally so effective a defense as Robinson’s in rushing yards, passes caught, and punts returned.

Jackie Robinson played less than a single season in the Negro Leagues, for the fabled Kansas City Monarchs.

HERO

Among a group of gifted professionals who had to endure all-night rides on bone-clattering buses and blocked doors at whites-only diners and motels, Jackie Robinson was remembered more for griping about the league's showboating and lack of training and discipline. He let his teammates know that he considered the league beneath his talents (and maybe it was—for all of them).

The Jackie Robinson who stayed on to become a perennial major league star after he became a hero could be prickly. Another way to say it is: Jackie Robinson could be a prick. Even after he had become one of the most admired personalities in America, Robinson could spring up and cry racism at umpires with the impudence to call him out on a close slide or a strike. He could crash into an opponent's knees on inconsequential plays, just to let them know he could hurt them. He harangued opposing players, and sometimes his own teammates, with graphic epithets of the kind that would have once been considered legal provocation for a duel (although the epithets were never racial and rarely sexual—Jackie Robinson was no racist, and he was even a bit of a prude).

But Jackie Robinson was no less a hero for being a full-blooded human being. When he was summoned by history, he risked his safety and sanity to give history the last full measure of his strength, nerve, and perseverance. In the end, real heroes give us stories we use to reinforce our own lives.

JACKIE ROBINSON

• • •

Shortly before nine o'clock on the morning of September 11, 2001, Jackie Robinson's widow, Rachel Robinson, and Dorothy and Mark Reese, Pee Wee Reese's widow and son, were in New York's City Hall, along with old Dodgers Ralph Branca and Joe Black. They were there to choose among five sculptor's models arrayed on a conference table, each depicting that fabled moment from the 1947 season in which Pee Wee Reese had crossed the field from his post at shortstop during a downpour of racial taunts to slip his arm encouragingly around Jackie Robinson's shoulders.

Before the group could choose a model to be cast in bronze and put up in Brooklyn, they heard a boom, then a commotion. New York police officers rushed them onto a bus. The bus got blocked and could not move through the tangle in the streets. New police officers sprinted aboard and took the Dodger family members into the bomb shelter of a nearby bank building, which is where they were, huddled and held rapt before a television set, when the first World Trade tower fell from the skyline. Dorothy Reese turned to her son, who is a California filmmaker. "I'm just glad," she said in the first gloom of the attack, "that Jackie and your father aren't here to see this." Mark Reese gently, consolingly, disagreed. "I think Pee Wee and Jackie are here," he told his mother. "And

we need their courage now.” I can’t think of a time when we don’t.

The story of Jackie Robinson’s arrival in the major leagues is a heroic American legend. It is not in the same rank as Valley Forge, Gettysburg, Lincoln’s trials, Harriet Tubman’s bravery, Chief Joseph’s valor, or the gallantry of the police and firefighters who ran willingly into the firestorm of the World Trade Center. But Jackie Robinson’s story still testifies to the power of pure personal courage to turn history and transform adversaries into admirers. It is a story that endures all the nicks and nits of revisionism because, when the last page is turned, it plays on in our minds and lives: a bold man, dark-skinned and adorned in Dodger blue, who displays the daring and audacity to stand unflinchingly against taunts, strike back at beanballs, and steal home with fifty thousand people watching and waiting for *Jackie Robinson* to spring willingly into the path of a pitched ball and slide into the ironbound clench of a catcher protecting home plate. It is a story that still rouses us to shake off dust, blood, and bruises and *keep going*.

