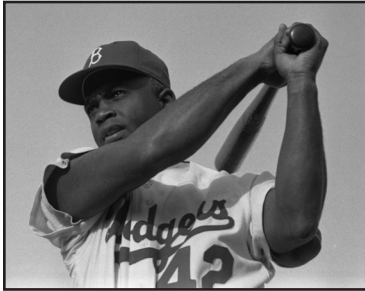


Sports in America

Jackie Robinson and Race Relations

Any discussion of the effect of sports on American culture and society really has to begin with **Jackie Robinson**. Robinson was a Californian, grew up in Pasadena, attended Pasadena City College, and then enrolled at UCLA. In his time at UCLA, Robinson proved himself to be arguably the greatest athlete ever to attend the school. That's really saying something, given that UCLA's list of athletic alumni includes Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Arthur Ashe, Jackie



Joyner-Kerssee, Troy Aikman, Michelle Kwan, and the winners of 230 Olympic medals. While he was at UCLA, Robinson lettered in four different sports--football, basketball, track, and baseball. Of the four, baseball was considered his weakest sport.

Once Robinson graduated, he joined the United States Army, and was in the service for about a year during World War II. After being discharged in 1944, he began to think about his career. As a gifted athlete, there was only one way for him to earn a living playing sports. There was no NBA yet, and those professional basketball teams that did exist were all-white. The NFL was still segregated, as well. There was no such thing as a professional track athlete back then. And so, that left baseball. The United States had, at that time, a fairly successful collection of all-black baseball teams known as the Negro Leagues. So, Jackie signed a contract to play with the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro Leagues for the 1945 season.

Around the time that World War II ended, the Brooklyn Dodgers hired a young, aggressive new general manager named Branch Rickey. Rickey knew that the teams of major league baseball had an unofficial agreement not to sign black players. However, he was determined to win, and he believed--correctly--that black players represented a valuable and untapped source of talent. So, he decided he was going to ignore the unofficial agreement. But for that very first player, the one that would break the "color line," Rickey knew he needed just the right guy. Specifically, someone who was:

1. Educated
2. A military veteran
3. Very talented at sports
4. Disciplined enough not to be provoked into fights by racist players or fans

Of course, the man that fit the bill was Jackie Robinson. And so, the Dodgers signed him to a contract in 1946. Although he was certainly good enough to begin play in the major leagues immediately, they sent him to their top minor league team in Montreal to prepare him for the pressure and the racist abuse he would face. He played very well there, and so in April of 1947, Branch Rickey and the Dodgers' manager Leo Durocher began to make plans for Robinson's promotion to the major leagues. Please watch clip 1.

The clip illustrates the profound impact that Robinson had, not only on African Americans, but also on other groups who might feel marginalized in American society at the time--women, Jews,

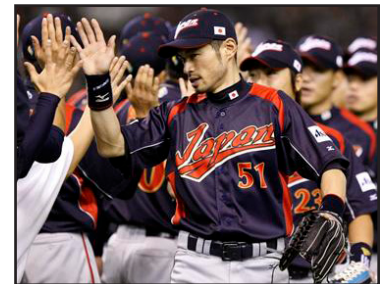
etc. As you heard, the rebellion against him by the white, Southern members of the Dodgers was ended quickly. And when other teams' players threatened not to play if Robinson took the field, Major League Baseball--to its credit--came down hard. The commissioner of baseball announced that, if anyone refused to play against Robinson, they would promptly be banned from baseball for life. That stopped the boycott threats, but Robinson nonetheless had to put up with verbal taunts, with balls thrown at his head, with players trying to hit him with their cleats while sliding into second base, and so forth. He stood up to it with grace and still performed his job with great skill, winning the Rookie of the Year award for 1947, and ultimately putting together a 13-year career that landed him in Baseball's Hall of Fame. In 1997, in honor of the 50th anniversary of Robinson's debut, Major League Baseball retired his number throughout baseball. There are only two exceptions to this. The first is that some players are allowed to wear #42 on April 15 each year--"Jackie Robinson Day." The second is that any player that had #42 in 1997 was allowed to keep wearing it. And so, as it turns out, the Yankees' Mariano Rivera will be the last player to wear #42 on any day other than April 15.

The story of Jackie Robinson is the best known example of how sports and race relations have come together in this country, but there are many others--Kenny Washington (the first black player in the NFL), Arthur Ashe (the first African American to win Wimbledon), Doug Williams (the first black quarterback to win the Super Bowl), Tiger Woods, etc. Sports has always been just a bit ahead of the rest of American society, because for most people, winning is even more powerful than racism.

The rest of this lecture will explore four other ways in which sports are of interest to scholars.

Sports and American Values

Sports are an important indicator of a nation's or a culture's values. To briefly illustrate this point, consider **the American version of baseball versus the Japanese version of baseball**. This is the same sport, and the rulebook in the two nations is virtually identical. And yet,



because the two cultures are different, their approach to baseball is very different. Here are a few examples:

1. In American baseball, stealing bases is a fairly common occurrence--maybe two times a game or so. In Japanese baseball, stealing is legal, but is never done because it's considered an insult to the pitcher.
2. Americans value individuality and freedom of expression, and so in American baseball you are allowed to cheer or yell or say whatever you want at any time you want. Japanese culture does not emphasize individualism, instead they are more conformist. As such, you can only make noise at Japanese baseball games when you are told to by the "yell leader" of your section.
3. Americans do not tolerate tie games in baseball; as the famous quote goes, "a tie is like kissing your sister." The Japa-

nese, by contrast, do not demand a winner. If the game goes on long enough--14 innings--and remains tied, they regard both teams as having demonstrated skill and effort, and they are satisfied.

This is just a very quick example, but this general point is indicated in other ways, as well. Consider, for example, a list of the 10 most popular athletes in America (done by the Gallup Poll each year), which currently includes Derek Jeter, Kobe Bryant, Tom Brady, Tim Duncan, Peyton Manning, and Michael Jordan. This indicates a number of things about American culture, I think, among them that we're more racially tolerant than we once were, that we value winners highly (everyone on the list has at least one championship), and that if you ARE a winner then your bad deeds will be forgiven or forgotten (Kobe Bryant, for example, or Michael Jordan).

Sports and International Relations

Sports have also had a significant role in the relationships between nations (for good or for bad), and never was this more true than during the Cold War. As the United States and the USSR competed with one another over Vietnam or Korea or who could build the most nuclear weapons or who could put a man into space first, they also worked to defeat one another in sporting contests, particularly the Olympics.

One of the darkest chapters in this story, at least for Americans, came in 1972. Among all the Olympic sports, the one that



we tended to regard as "ours" was basketball. The game was invented in the United States, and prior to 1972, we had won every single Olympic gold medal. That year, the title came down to the U.S. vs. the USSR, and though the championship game was close, the final buzzer sounded with the Americans victo-

rious by a score of 50-49. Or so it seemed. However, after the game had "ended" the referees decided that a mistake had been made and they put more time on the clock and gave the Russians the ball. This time, the game ended yet again with the Americans ahead by one point. But hold on, the referees decided for a second time that a mistake had been made, and they once again put time on the clock and gave the Russians the ball. This time, they scored a quick layup and the Americans went down to defeat, 51-50. The U.S. team was so angry, they refused to accept their silver medals, which to this day are sitting in a vault in Switzerland.

Since the United States had been beaten at "our" sport by the Russians, we were determined to get revenge by beating them at "their" sport, which was hockey. So, four years later, we got our very best professional players together and sent them to the 1976 Olympics. The players did not have time to learn how to play together as a team, however, and so they got crushed by the USSR.

In 1980--eight years after the loss in basketball--the winter Olympics were held in the United States. So this time, we were REALLY determined to win. And, learning from the mistakes made in 1976, this time the team was made up of good players, but ones who were not good enough to play in the NHL. That way,

they were able to practice together full time and to really learn how to work together has a team. The United States coach, whose name was Herb Brooks, was very excited about his team going into the **1980 Olympics**. And a couple of weeks before the start of the Olympics, they had an exhibition match against the Russians. Unfortunately, the Russians destroyed the Americans, winning by the blowout score of 15-2. So, it looked like the gold medal would be theirs yet again.

Once the Olympics started, however, the American team really began to click. They won their first match, then their second, then their third. When the time came to face the Russians, this time for real, they were feeling pretty confident. For the first two periods of the match



(hockey games have three periods), they kept it fairly even. At the start of the third period, the U.S. team was within striking distance, trailing by only one goal, 3-2. Please watch clip 2.

The American victory on that day in 1980 is arguably the most famous moment in U.S. sports history and has, as you likely know, been the basis for a number of movies and documentaries.

Sports and the Economy

The nation's athletes and sports leagues also have a major impact on the U.S. economy. To illustrate this, consider the story of a medium-sized shoe company in Oregon. Their business was not doing well in the early 1980s, and they feared bankruptcy. So, this company decided to put all their resources into one last basketball shoe, in hopes that the shoe would keep the company from going under. They tried to sign the nation's most popular basketball player, Magic Johnson, to endorse the shoe but he did not want to be associated with a company that might fail. Then, they moved on to the nation's second most popular basketball player, Larry Bird, but he passed for the same reason.

At this point, the shoe company decided to take a new approach. Rather than sign an established star, they decided to go for an up-and-coming youngster. And the most promising option seemed to be a sophomore guard from North Carolina who had hit the winning shot in the 1982 NCAA tournament, and had just been drafted



#3 by the Chicago Bulls (behind Hakeem Olajuwon and, oops, Sam Bowie). So this shoe company, Nike, signed Michael Jordan to a contract for \$1 million to endorse the new shoe, which was named the **Air Jordan**. The contract actually required Jordan to give back some of the money if the Air Jordans did not sell

well, but it turns out to have been a non-issue. In the first year, Nike sold more than \$100 million worth of Air Jordans. From that point, they grew to be one of the United States' richest and most powerful companies. And Michael Jordan, of course, went on to become a commercial force, endorsing batteries, and Gatorade, and underwear, and a dozen other products.

Indeed, to appreciate Michael Jordan's economic impact, consider this: On September 25, 2001, he announced his return to basketball with the Washington Wizards. In the hour after the announcement, people bought so many shares of Nike and PepsiCo and other companies associated with Jordan that the stock market gained \$20 billion in value. Again, that's in one hour.

Sports and Gender

Finally, we must note that the world of sports has been one of the last major battlefields in women's fight for equality in the United States. Before the 1970s, there were very few prominent female athletes, as the ranks of college and professional sports were both more than 99% male. But then the U.S. government adopted a series of guidelines for higher education, which included a provision known as "Title IX." Title IX declared that colleges were required to give an equal number of athletic scholarships to men

and to women, and paved the way for a dramatic increase in the number of high-profile female athletes.



Among the beneficiaries of this policy were the women who represented the United States in the **1999 Women's World Cup of Soccer**.

This was one of the greatest women's soccer teams ever to

take the field, and during their quest for the cup, they captured the attention of sports fans across the country. Ultimately, the title match pitted them against their greatest rival--China. The championship game was played at the Rose Bowl before 110,000 people--including President Bill Clinton--and regulation ended with a 0-0 tie. That sent the game into overtime, where it would be decided by penalty kicks. Please watch clip 3.

It would be difficult to argue that women's sports is the equal of men's sports in this country. That has not happened yet, and it might never happen. But

on that day in 1999, at least, they were equal. Further, if one observes the crowd in that clip, the number of young girls who are watching and are clearly inspired is quite evident. Even if those girls in the audience don't become athletes, but are persuaded to change the world and to challenge conventions in some other way, that is still part of the impact of the Women's World Cup soccer team.



And that concludes this lecture.