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Film Review: 42 (2013)

The film *42* depicts the struggle of an African American man, Jackie Robinson, born in 1919, who played Major League Baseball for the Brooklyn Dodgers and faced both criticism and segregation. This movie was released in 2013, and was directed by Brian Helgeland. It featured Chadwick Boseman, T.R. Knight, Harrison Ford, and Rachel Robinson. *42* was named after Jackie Robinson's Brooklyn Dodgers' uniform number and showed the beginning of desegregation, and how one man's triumph can start a transformation on a national scale. This film is an accurate description of his career and importance of desegregation, but it did not satisfactorily acknowledge his contribution off the field in changing the status of blacks in American society.

Jackie Robinson was portrayed accurately on the field in this movie. His batting average and ability to play baseball was uncanny. As a rookie, he achieved 12 home runs, 29 steals, and ended the season with a .297 batting average. He was a rising star in 1947, and by 1962, was presented with the honor of a position in the Baseball Hall of Fame.⁴ His first major league baseball manager, Leo Durocher, played by Christopher Miloni, truly believed in him. Robinson attracted many supporters from the black community, but that still was not enough to convince the majority of people that he was just as capable of playing the great American pastime.

The movie depicted the struggle that Robinson faced within himself, through his teammates, and by society. During one of his first games with the Brooklyn Dodgers, a teammate, much to everyone's surprise, stood up to the opposing team member as Robinson went up to bat. The opposing team yelled out profanities and made unnecessary noise as he stepped up to the plate in hopes of intimidating Robinson. He struck out, emotionally broke down, went to the dugout, and broke his bat in half. This scene was the first and only time throughout the film in which Robinson is shown reaching his breaking point. No matter what challenges he faced and no matter how mad or angry he became, however, he always stepped up to the plate and excelled on the field.

When Robinson first started playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers, not everyone was thrilled to have him. His teammates did not want to play with a black man, so they started a petition and used it to unanimously vote to remove him from the team. With only his coach standing beside him, he did his best to resist the backlash from his team. Leo Durocher quickly shut down the petition. He held a meeting and told the players that regardless of skin color, they needed to respect each other. The director used this as a turning point to show that there were

⁴ "About Jackie Robinson," Jackie Robinson Foundations, last modified 2011, <http://www.jackierobinson.org/about/jackie.php>.

supporters, besides his coach Leo Durocher and his wife Rachel Robinson.

The teammates who once petitioned to have Robinson off the team made the choice to stand up for him when Robinson faced verbal abuse from opposing teams and Dodger fans. When Robinson went up to bat, people from the crowds repeatedly taunted him. They would shout “You don’t belong here.” After seeing him play, individuals quickly changed their opinions. Robinson felt more empowered and continued to excel in baseball. As his teammates witnessed this, they were then motivated to support Robinson, despite racial differences. After this scene, teammates as well as fans from the “whites only” and “colored sections” showed their support. Pep talks, fans, and the change he was making kept him going even when the majority of Americans wanted to see him give up.

42 did a great job at showing what life was like for all African Americans in the mid-twentieth century, not just Jackie Robinson. Throughout the film, Robinson's wife and friends had to challenge segregation. Jackie and Rachel Robinson were kicked off a flight, because Rachel used a “whites only” restroom. This shows how close-minded and unfair society was towards blacks in the United States well into the twentieth century. The entire black community faced segregation, but Jackie Robinson put himself in the eyes of the public and made himself a prime target for abuse.

The film *42* depicted what life was like for Jackie Robinson on the field, but it did not show his involvement in transforming the status of blacks in the United States when he was off the field in any capacity. Jackie Robinson shaped the status of blacks in the United States throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960's, through activism and financial support. Robinson became heavily involved in work in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other organizations aimed towards helping the black community. Robinson became a businessman and wrote several columns on issues blacks faced in society. He traveled throughout the United States, and gave lectures on racial tolerance and how to respect one another, despite racial differences. Finally, through several campaigns, he was able to raise large amounts of funds for the NAACP.⁵

Unlike most films that depict African American history through slavery, the film *42* addresses black history through sports. Being accepted on a Major League Baseball team in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s was a huge accomplishment for anyone of color. Being taken seriously alone was a significant obstacle for Jackie Robinson. This makes his accomplishment only that much more inspiring, however.

Jackie Robinson paved the way for African American rights

⁵ Ibid.

during segregation. He broke the color barrier in American baseball, and also opened opportunities for future non-white athletes in society. Even though the majority of the population was not accepting of his race, Robinson still took pride in what he was setting out to accomplish. Throughout his career, he received harsh criticisms and humiliation. The movie reflected a mix of opinions among these two groups. Robinson was forced to play in a stadium, on a team that did not want him. As hard as this was, he was able to pull through and challenge segregation.

Alexandra Martin

