HISTORY This Week EP 315: Jackie Robinson Tries Out for the Majors
EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. April 16, 1945. I'm Sally Helm.

The Red Sox are leaving town today to begin the 1945 season. They're catching a 1 pm train to New York. And their general manager, Eddie Collins, seems to be hoping to run down the clock. He’s supposed to hold a tryout this week for three top Black baseball players. They’ve been in Boston for days, waiting for him to tell them when to show up at Fenway Park. But Collins just isn’t calling. And if he makes it to 1 pm, he’ll probably get away with denying them a tryout.

But the morning tabloids contain a rude awakening for Collins. Some harsh words from a sportswriter named Dave Egan. He writes that Collins really needs to remember two things, “that he’s living in 1945,” and not quote: “in the dust covered year 1865.” And that, “he is residing in the city of Boston, and not in the city of Mobile, Alabama. . .therefore we feel obliged to inform you that since Wednesday last three citizens of the United States have been attempting vainly to get a tryout with his ball team.”

The three Black players waiting for Collins’s call aren’t exactly shocked by all this. They know that racism exists in Boston just as surely as it does in Mobile, Alabama. And that it didn’t end in 1865. But the indignity does sting. One of the players, a shortstop named Jackie Robinson, says, “it really burns me up to come fifteen hundred miles for them to give me the runaround.”

With a journalist taking notice of the situation…Collins miraculously finds a couple hours this morning, before the train trip, to bring the three black players onto the field.

They show up at Fenway Park just before eleven AM. The three men take their positions on the field. Baseballs are hit to them; they all catch them with ease. They take batting practice, they all hit the ball hard–but Robinson is a standout.

And yet…this is not the tryout that launches Jackie Robinson on the path to fame.

He will go on to break major league baseball’s color line. And have a storied career with the Brooklyn Dodgers. But he won’t make his major league debut for another two years. The Red Sox won’t have a Black player on the team for another fourteen. And after the train pulls out of Boston’s Back Bay station at 1 pm on that day in 1945, the Red Sox won’t even call Jackie Robinson back.

He’ll later write, "not for one minute did we believe the tryout was sincere." He’d had too much experience with deceptions and humiliations like this one.
Today: the pre-history of the baseball career of Jackie Robinson. What do his experiences as a Californian, a college football player, and a soldier reveal about the history of race in America? And how did these things prepare Robinson to break baseball’s color line?

[SALTY HELM: The legend of Jackie Robinson typically begins on August 28, 1945. With a meeting in some offices at 215 Montague Street in Brooklyn. There, he meets Branch Rickey, the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers. And Rickey tells him: I want you to be the person to integrate the major leagues. Break baseball’s color line.

But Rickey has certain expectations. Almost requirements. Here’s baseball historian Ralph Carhart.

RALPH CARHART: It was important to Ricky that whoever it was that he brought up, not fight back, not right away. Right. He needed that person to be willing to suffer the slings and arrows and turn that other cheek.

SALTY HELM: And… as you might know… Robinson accepts Branch Rickey’s terms. And goes down in history as the man who integrated the major leagues.

The choice Robinson makes at this meeting will become an important part of the way he’s seen and talked about. At the time, among baseball fans. And in history.

AMIRA ROSE DAVIS: Part of the myth of Robinson is he had the right temperament. When there's a lot of evidence that, well, he still, he was fiery. He was described as fiery. But he has to become declawed. Right? He has to be mild. He has to be able to take it. He has to all of these things in many ways, it's a performance of another kind.

SALTY HELM: We talked about Robinson with Amira Rose Davis. She teaches history and African American studies at Penn State and hosts two podcasts about sports. And we started at the beginning. Long before that famous moment on Montague Street.

Jack Roosevelt Robinson is born the youngest of five children in Cairo, Georgia. This is 1919 in the Jim Crow South. When he's a kid, his mother Mallie makes a decision to leave in search of something better. Her brother's in Pasadena, California. So, she takes the family there.

AMIRA ROSE DAVIS: Pasadena provided a front row seat to watching how racism was in operation there in new ways. And so yes, you could swim at the municipal pool, right? But only on one day of the week. You could go to the Y MCA and play, but only during like the Negro Day of the week. And those institutional barriers remained, they weren't as hardened as some of the ones that we learned about or think about under the Jim Crow south, but they were super present still.
Ralph Carhart: Jackie's family was the only black family on the block.

Sally Helm: Ralph Carhart, again.

Ralph Carhart: There were times in which he got in trouble as a kid. He was a member of a group called the pepper street gang, and they certainly weren't a gang. Like, you know, we think of gangs. They were kids causing a little trouble and it was a group of kids made up of a fellow black, kids like Jackie. There were some Japanese kids, there were some Mexican kids, they were the minority kids.

Sally Helm: Robinson would later write in his autobiography that they stole golf balls from the local course, then sold them back to the golfers. They challenged other groups of boys to football games, betting small amounts of money. And those scrappy matchups would grow into something bigger. By the time Robinson was in high school:

Ralph Carhart: He starred in football, basketball, track, tennis and baseball.

Sally Helm: And he's not the only Robinson who's big into sports. Not by a long shot. His older brother Mack is a track and field star. And when Jackie is still in high school, Mack competes at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, in Nazi Germany. He wins a silver medal in the 200-meter race, behind the great Jesse Owens.

We talked about this with Howard Bryant, an author and writer for ESPN. He said, winning that medal should have been an unqualified triumph for Mack and his family.

Howard Bryant: Mack Robinson represents his country, comes back with a silver medal and can't find a job.

Amira Rose Davis: He returns to nothing, to crumbs. He's a street sweeper. He works digging ditches.

Sally Helm: For his younger brother, who idolizes Mack, watching this is a formative experience.

Howard Bryant: These ideas of hypocrisy are going to stay with you. And most black people during that time, the response was, “well, this is how it is. You have to sit and take it.” And Jackie was like, “no, actually, I don't.”

Sally Helm: Ralph Carhart told us about one incident in Robinson's youth, when he faced discrimination—and fought back. He's a teenager. Coming home from the movies.

Ralph Carhart: He and another one of his friends were singing loudly
Sally Helm: Specifically, singing the pop song "Flat Foot Floogie."

Ralph Carhart: They were approached by a police officer who very obviously was targeting them because they were black.

Sally Helm: There was a verbal altercation.

Ralph Carhart: Jackie rebelled, because he saw that he was being targeted for the color of his skin. And he ended up in jail for the night because, you know, he picked a fight with this cop.

Howard Bryant: It's almost as if he made a decision at a very, very early age that he was going to be willing to deal with the consequences even before he was old enough to know what those consequences were going to be. Things had to change. And if it was going to be him who was going to be the one who caused the trouble, then so be it.

Sally Helm: Many colleges wanted to recruit Jackie Robinson. But he ultimately chose UCLA. Close to where he’d grown up, in Pasadena. And home to some of the earliest Black athletes in the white college system. On the football team in particular, there a number of Black stars who will go on to become big names. Kenny Washington, who would break the color line in the NFL. Tom Bradley, who would become mayor of Los Angeles. Robinson, remember, is a multi-sport athlete. And at UCLA, he gets national recognition as a football player.

Archival Newsreel: To Jackie Robinson who was going around, right and getting away for a considerable gain to their yard line. Finding his man throws one intercepted by Jackie Robinson of UCLA, but runs it back 20, 30, 40, 45 yards.

Sally Helm: Baseball, on the other hand...

Ralph Carhart: Baseball was actually Jackie's weakest sport in college. She was actually much better at others. For a little while all you wanted to play was football and track. And he wanted to, to focus on those because he wanted to compete in the 1940 Olympics.

Sally Helm: Like his brother had in 1936. But World War II breaks out, and the 1940 Olympics are canceled. So, Robinson no longer needs to specialize. And he doesn't. He does football, basketball, track, and baseball.

Ralph Carhart: He became the first and still only four-letter athlete in UCLA history.

Sally Helm: It's also at this time that Robinson meets a UCLA nursing student, Rachel Isum.

Amira Rose Davis: They're meeting their courting, they're falling in love, and she becomes such an important person in his life, both to bounce ideas off of, to be shoulder to shoulder
with him as he goes through things, she goes through them herself. But also, she comes in with a fairly keen analysis herself about the ways of the world and about their place in it.

Sally Helm: Soon after college, Robinson starts playing for a professional football team, the Honolulu Bears. It was the only team that offered him a job. And he wasn't hired just to play.

Ralph Carhart: It was, part-time playing for the Honolulu bears and part-time working as a construction worker. . .that was part of the gig

Sally Helm: Robinson did not love it. And the Bears are not a thriving organization.

Ralph Carhart: In the last game that Jackie ever played for them, there were like six people in the crowd.

Sally Helm: He leaves Hawaii on a ship on December 5, 1941...two days before Pearl Harbor. He first knows something is wrong when the crew starts painting the windows black so that the ship would be less vulnerable to an enemy strike. He later writes, "When we arrived home, I knew realistically that I wouldn't be there long. Being drafted was an immediate possibility, and like all men in those days I was willing to do my part."

Four months later, Jackie Robinson is drafted into the US Army.

Amira Rose Davis: I think that he enters the military service. Like many people do not naive understanding what the country is and what the experience is, but certainly ready to serve and ready to demonstrate through service, how fit for citizenship he is.

Sally Helm: Many Black soldiers felt this way. Their military service will end up driving a renewed push for civil rights.

Robinson is assigned to Fort Riley, in Kansas and it is not Pasadena.

Howard Bryant: When he goes into the, the military. Now he's in a place where you are in extreme segregation with extreme attitudes.

Sally Helm: Robinson tries to enlist in Officer Candidate School. It had been made race neutral in July of 1941, and Robinson and some other Black candidates all pass the initial tests. One month goes by. Then two, then three. Robinson watches as less educated and less qualified white officers are admitted to the school, while he is assigned to work in the stables, holding horses' heads steady while they get their vaccinations.

Robinson is outraged. And he knows someone who can help.
**Ralph Carhart:** He actually needed to enlist the help of another recruit at Fort Riley, world famous heavyweight boxer, Joe Lewis

**Sally Helm:** Joe Louis, the active heavyweight champion, was perhaps the most celebrated Black American in the country at the time. He had enlisted in the Army and happened to be stationed at Fort Riley. He and Robinson had become friends. And Louis uses his connections and his clout to get Robinson and other Black candidates accepted into Officer Candidate School.

At the same time, Robinson, being who he is, is getting involved in sports. Though football is what he's known for, he first tries to join the Fort Riley baseball team. This could have been a huge opportunity.

**Amira Rose Davis:** Military baseball teams are not just important because obviously you get to play baseball. But especially for folks of color, they offered more opportunity of freedom, especially in World War II, there's all of these stories from black folks, from Asian folks, who are saying when I'm in my military uniform, I'm still being subjugated. But if I change into my baseball uniform, I suddenly can walk here or go there or speak in a certain way.

**Sally Helm:** But the Fort Riley baseball team...doesn't want Jackie Robinson to join.

**Amira Rose Davis:** He has a white teammate tell him, “Oh, I heard the officer say I will die before I ever put a N-word on my team.”

**Sally Helm:** Fort Riley officials try to get Robinson to join the football team. But he refuses. On the grounds that he wasn't allowed to play baseball.

**Ralph Carhart:** It reached a point at, at Fort Riley where, you know, between the fuss that he kicked up with Joe Lewis and the officer candidate school, and then, you know, refusing to play football where the folks at Fort Riley had labeled him a troublemaker and were done with him. And he soon found himself shipped off to Fort Hood in Texas.

**Sally Helm:** After completing Officer Candidate School, Robinson is now a Lieutenant. At Fort Hood, he's assigned to take over a platoon of the 761st Tank Battalion, even though he later writes he has quote "no knowledge, background, or experience in whatever it was a tank battalion did." Robinson is honest about that with his men and earns their respect.

But then…there’s an incident in 1944 that will ultimately bring his time in the military to an end. It’s a hot summer day at Fort Hood:

**Amira Rose Davis:** One day he boards a bus,
**Sally Helm:** A military bus, for people to get around the base.

**Amira Rose Davis:** He boards with the wife of another black officer and she's very fair she could pass. She's read as light enough to be perceived as white, light enough for people on the bus to be concerned about his proximity to her.

**Sally Helm:** Davis told us; military transportation had been desegregated… but…

**Amira Rose Davis:** The idea of black men near white women has been historically cause for many deaths, much violence, a lot of calamity. And so, the driver says, “what are you doing near that woman?”

**Sally Helm:** Robinson later writes: "I didn't even stop talking, didn't even look at him."

**Amira Rose Davis:** He is told he needs to move. He needs to move to the back of the bus. He needs to get away from her.

**Sally Helm:** The driver threatens to "cause him trouble." Robinson describes the scene in his autobiography: "I told him hotly that I couldn't care less about his causing me trouble. I'd been in trouble all my life, but I knew what my rights were."

**Amira Rose Davis:** He refuses one because he knows that the military buses have been formerly desegregated and two, because he's literally escorting this woman and he's a gentleman's gentleman and he is not gonna leave her side.

**Sally Helm:** Things escalate.

**Amira Rose Davis:** The driver, is yelling at him and ordering him around and threatening him with arrest and, and more, and he just stands his ground. He allegedly says, stop [bleeped out expletive] with me.

But he is resolute in his refusal. And so shortly after that, two military police officers show up and arrest him, drag him away.

**Sally Helm:** Howard Bryant told us, in the context of that time and place, a racist encounter like this:

**Howard Bryant:** It was common. It was no different than waking up and walking down the street every day.

**Sally Helm:** But it does expose a dissonance. After all, this is an army base. Robinson is a solider.
Howard Bryant: You are supposedly fighting for freedom that you don't have. You are asked to fight for people who generally have no regard for you as a person. And you are expected to carry all of this with dignity. You're expected to carry it with respect. These are the ways that you are expected to behave. It doesn't work like that in everyday life. Everyday life you're dealing with indignity and humiliation and frustration.

Sally Helm: The Army basically throws whatever charges they can at Robinson.

Amira Rose Davis: It's insubordination, it's disturbing the peace, they insinuated that he was drunk.

Sally Helm: But some people do come to his aid.

Amira Rose Davis: It actually gets news stories. It actually gets coverage and traction and the coverage, especially that in the black press leads to protests. It leads to the NAACP getting involved, actually a kind of full-on, supportive campaign on his behalf.

Sally Helm: At his court-martial, Jackie Robinson is found... not guilty.

But soon after, he is honorably discharged; it seems like he and the army are done with each other.

Robinson briefly returns to playing football, this time for the Los Angeles Bulldogs. Then he starts coaching college basketball. And during that gig, he gets to thinking about a third sport he loves… baseball. He writes a letter to the Kansas City Monarchs, a Negro League baseball team.

Ralph Carhart: And said, I'm a ballplayer and I'd like a job.

Sally Helm: Baseball wasn't his best sport, but he thought it could provide him with the best career. The Negro Leagues were the most established of the Black professional sports leagues.

Ralph Carhart: And they wrote him back and said, okay, Come to spring training. If you make the team, we'll give you 300 bucks a month. And Jackie said, how about 400?

Sally Helm: And the Kansas City Monarchs say: okay. And so, for the first time in his life, Jackie Robinson is going to be a professional baseball player.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Jackie Robinson's professional baseball debut comes on April 1st, 1945. He gets a hit, and a newspaper reports that, in the field he made "three snappy double plays."
He's playing in the Negro Leagues. Everyone on his team is black. Baseball is still segregated. And the Major Leagues are all white.

But World War Two is now drawing to a close. And the national view of baseball's color line is beginning to change.

**Howard Bryant:** We talk about the impetus for integration in baseball, being the liberation of the world during World War II, that this contradiction of how could you fight for the world? How could you call yourselves free and still have segregation at home? How could you not be able to play baseball when you fought overseas?

**Sally Helm:** There's a public pressure campaign building around the country. And particularly in Boston. Both politicians and the press are saying: let Black players at least try out for the team.

**Howard Bryant:** The Red Sox under pressure reluctantly agreed to do a try out that they had no interest in. They were not pioneers. They were not willing to be pioneers.

**Sally Helm:** But very soon after his professional baseball debut in the Negro Leagues, Jackie Robinson gets an invitation. Come to Boston to try out for the Red Sox.

**Howard Bryant:** So, on April 16th, 1945, they bring in three players.

**Sally Helm:** After their first tryout is cancelled, Jackie Robinson, Sam Jethroe, and Marvin Williams, finally suit up in Red Sox uniforms and take to the field. As one version of the story tells it, while they're hitting, they hear a word yelled from the stands.

**Howard Bryant:** There’s, a story that has gone on for 70 years as to whether or not there was a gigantic racial slur taking place that was said when the black players were hitting.

**Sally Helm:** According to Boston Globe sportswriter Clif Keane, who was there, the slur was used to order the three players off the field.

The tryout ends, and these men never hear from the Red Sox again.

**Ralph Carhart:** It was all just a show for the papers you know, to say, look, no, we tried, they just aren't good enough.

**Howard Bryant:** So, the red Sox had a chance on April 16th, 1945, to integrate they didn't integrate until July 21st, 1959. Instead of having the chance to be the pioneers, to being the first team, to integrate the Red Sox, ended up being the last team to integrate

**Sally Helm:** Robinson never let them forget it. Particularly the team's owner, Tom Yawkey.
Howard Bryant: When the Red Sox made the world series in 1967, he said, “Tom Yawkey is the most bigoted man in baseball.”

Sally Helm: After the tryout, Jackie Robinson returns to the Kansas City Monarchs, and spends the year playing in the Negro Leagues. But he wasn’t happy.

Howard Bryant: He hated the Negro leagues. The Negro leagues were offensive to him for the exact same reasons as segregation.

Sally Helm: The Negro leagues had fewer resources than the white major leagues, especially when it came to things like record-keeping and statistics, which are hugely important to baseball.

Howard Bryant: Jackie couldn't figure out his batting average because I couldn't figure out what games were official and which games weren't. And that was all because of segregation. It was all because of the perceived black inferiority. And that is something that was personally offensive to him.

Sally Helm: And on top of that, Robinson doesn't always fit in with the other players.

Amira Rose Davis: I don't want to say cliques, but there is like cliques within the leagues. You know, he's coming from a place where a lot of Negro leaguers aren't, they've come up in the minor leagues for the Negro leagues. They've been barnstorming together. They've played some, for black colleges. He's coming from UCLA; he's coming from the military.

Sally Helm: And he also grew to dislike day-to-day living on the road.

Ralph Carhart: Staying in segregated hotels and eating, you know, in when they could find one, a segregated restaurant. Otherwise, it was, you know, a sandwich at a gas station that hopefully some white guy inside would be kind enough to sell them.

His time in the Negro leagues was an eye-opening experience for him and you know, not a good way.

Sally Helm: Robinson doesn't finish the season with the Kansas City Monarchs. Because he gets a message from Branch Rickey of the Brooklyn Dodgers. He wants to meet at the Dodgers’ offices on Montague Street, to make Robinson an offer to become the man to break major league baseball’s color line. But only if he’s willing to turn the other cheek when abuse inevitably comes his way.

Ralph Carhart: Jackie had to be convinced that despite how often in his life to that point, he fought back. Jackie had to be convinced that in this one case to win the ultimate fight, he couldn't.
Sally Helm: Robinson wrote later about what he was thinking at that meeting: "Could I turn the other cheek? I didn’t know how I would do it. Yet I knew that I must."

Robinson agrees to Branch Rickey's terms. And signs a contract with the Dodgers. He will go on to become a legend, winning Rookie of the Year his first season, an MVP award in his third, and a World Series in his ninth.

But the terms that he agreed to at that meeting will always be difficult. Starting right at the beginning. Early in 1946, he marries Rachel Isum. And the two head down to spring training in Florida.

Ralph Carhart: They were on a flight. They ended up getting kicked off of that flight and replaced with other passengers specifically because they were black. They ended up having to take a bus, the last leg of the trip and it was a segregated bus. And Jackie had to sit at the back of the bus. And he had to sit in the back of this bus for the last leg of his ride to spring training, because he had promised branch Rickey that he was not going to kick up a fight.

Sally Helm: Jackie is experiencing what he's always experienced, as a kid in Pasadena, as a soldier, as an athlete. But this time, he doesn’t speak out.

[CREDITS]

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If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410. We are reading and listening, and we’d really love to what from you, so please reach out.

Special thanks today to our guests, Howard Bryant, senior writer for ESPN and author of Full Dissidence: Notes from an Uneven Playing Field; Ralph Carhart, baseball historian and editor of the upcoming book Not an Easy Tale to Tell: Jackie Robinson on the Page, Stage, and Screen; and Amira Rose Davis, assistant professor of history and African American studies at Penn State and co-host of the sports podcast Burn it All Down and host of season three of American Prodigies: Black Girls in Gymnastics.

This episode was produced by Ben Dickstein, sound designed by Dan Rosato, and story edited by Jennifer Goren. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Julie Magruder, Julia Press, and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.
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