

How Good a Player Was Jackie Robinson?

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Posted: 04/17/2013 9:59 am

The new movie *42* seeks to tell the story of Jackie Robinson to a new generation of baseball fans and Americans. Robinson was an extremely important figure for the U.S. generally and for baseball specifically. When Robinson stepped on the field on April 15, 1947 he changed the game and the country forever, and for the better. For that, he will always be remembered and celebrated.

Robinson played in his last game well over 50 years ago, and died over 40 years ago. Thus many baseball fans never saw Robinson play, and have only read about him or seen old footage of his playing days. Over time, not surprisingly, the story of Jackie Robinson, has surpassed the memory of Jackie Robinson as a player. Robinson was, however, a great player, and an unusual one. Looking more closely at what Jackie Robinson did on the field helps fill in the picture of who he was.

It is often forgotten that when Robinson joined the Dodgers in 1947, he was not only asked to be the first African-American big leaguer in over half a century, but he was asked to play a new position. Robinson had been a middle infielder until spring training of 1947 when he was given a first baseman's glove and told to play that position. This made sense for the Dodgers on the field, but learning a new position is not easy. Although fielding data from that era is spotty, anecdotal evidence suggests that Robinson handled first base fine.

The following spring, Robinson went back to second base, a more natural position for him. From 1948-1952, Robinson was the Dodgers full-time second baseman. During those years, Robinson hit .323/.418/.495 and played good defense. He was, for those years, easily the best second baseman in baseball, playing more games at the position while racking up more hits, runs, doubles and triples and stolen bases than any other second baseman. His OPS was a full .036 higher than any other second baseman for those years.

Robinson was moved off of second base in 1953 and spent the last four years of his career as a star player, but a utility player. During those years he played left field, third base, second base and first base. He finished in the top 20 in MVP voting in both 1953 and 1956, but was never a regular at one position after 1952. In these years, Robinson was, at least according to the numbers a valuable player, with a total of 14.7 WAR, but one without a regular position. This is an unusual career path for a star infielder of Robinson's caliber, even one who may have lost a step. It remains puzzling why Robinson who had an OPS+ of 136 in 1953 and 1954, did not have a full-time position. The Dodgers were a good team in those years but were giving playing time to players like Jim Gilliam and Don Hoak who were not nearly as good as Robinson.

At his peak, from 1949-1954, when he posted an OPS+ of 145, Robinson was one of the best players in baseball. He was an All Star each of those years and finished in the top 15 in MVP voting five times including finishes of 1st, 6th and 7th. In the years since Robinson integrated the game, only one other second baseman, another Californian playing on one of the greatest NL teams ever, enjoyed a better peak. Joe Morgan posted an OPS+ of 159 from 1972-1977. Morgan was a better player than Robinson, but the same cannot be definitively said for any other post-war second baseman.

Robinson's career was short. His retirement at age 37 following a trade to the Dodgers hated crosstown rival, the New York Giants is reasonably well-known. It also deprived fans of seeing Willie Mays and Jackie Robinson, two of the most exciting players in history, on the same team. However, Robinson lost a few years of his career to the segregation he helped smash, as he did not play a single game in the big leagues until he was 28. Robinson was honorably discharged from the military in late November 1944. He therefore lost two seasons 1945-1946 to segregation and probably another two or so to the military. Two more peak years would have given Robinson a better statistical line, but he still would have been a high peak, short career player.

Robinson combined a very high offensive peak, with strong defense, versatility, speed and base running acumen-he was successful in more than 75 percent of his stolen base attempts during the years for which data is available. Robinson was never a home run hitter, but he hit for enough power to frequently bat cleanup on a team that featured sluggers like Roy Campanella, Duke Snider and Gil Hodges. Although terms like chemistry and energy are overused and hard to prove, few would argue against the view that Robinson was a leader who made his teammates better. The Jackie Robinson story is well-known, as it should be, but the extent to which Robinson was a rare and great player on the field is in danger of being overlooked. Statistics can never capture the true impact of Jackie Robinson, but they can remind us of what an outstanding player he was.