



Despite Hollywood treatments, '42' a necessary history lesson

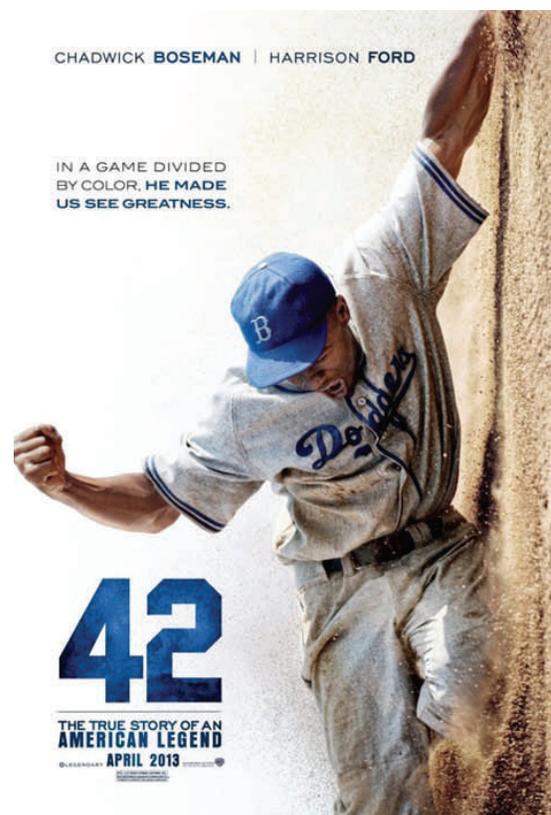
*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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When Hollywood gets its hands on history, well, often you get an alternate or inaccurate version of the actual timeline.

Like the climactic scene in “42,” as Jackie Robinson triumphs over yet another doubter and abuser, Pirates pitcher Fritz Ostermueller. The scriptwriters stage a “Natural” climax, minus the light towers exploding, as Robinson slugs a pennant-winning homer off Ostermueller in Forbes Field on Sept. 17, 1947. Robinson makes his tour around the bases in slow motion accompanied by uplifting music and the cheers of the crowd.

Too bad real baseball fans don’t actually write those scripts. In a road game, a Robinson homer wouldn’t actually win the pennant by itself as if it’s the game-ender. The Pirates would have last wraps at home. And in the actual Sept. 17, 1947 contest, Robinson’s blast was merely the Dodgers’ first run in the top of the fourth in an eventual 4-2 victory. Technically, the homer was the winning run, but hardly of the walk-off dramatic type that Bill Mazerowski provided in the exact same location 13 years later.

Early in “42,” which has gotten off to a roaring start at the box office, Robinson’s Kansas City Monarchs bus is depicted stopping off “Interstate 24” at a rural Missouri gas station in 1945. Ahem, scriptwriters, interstates did not exist until later in the 1950s, after President Dwight D. Eisenhower pushed through the biggest highway-building program in history. It might be “Missouri (route) 24” or “U.S. 24” in 1945.



"42" is the most talked-about baseball film of the year.

OK, I'm picky. The Dream Factory will always embellish, invent and condense the truth. A disclaimer at the start of "42" said the story was "based" on real-life events.

But as an overall history primer and long-awaited biopic of Robinson's epic breaking of baseball – and society's – color line, "42" is on target. Re-living the inspiring saga of the father of the civil-rights movement – Martin Luther King said he couldn't have done what he did without Robinson – never gets old, and needs repeating. The passage of time and the ignorance of history require such refreshers.

Some two decades ago, a disturbing story briefly passed our attention. Apparently, a poll had been made of African-American baseball players. Some had never heard of Jackie Robinson, let alone the trailblazer impact on their careers. And the athletes weren't the only ones whose memories were short. They had tens of millions of colleagues in which past was never prologue.

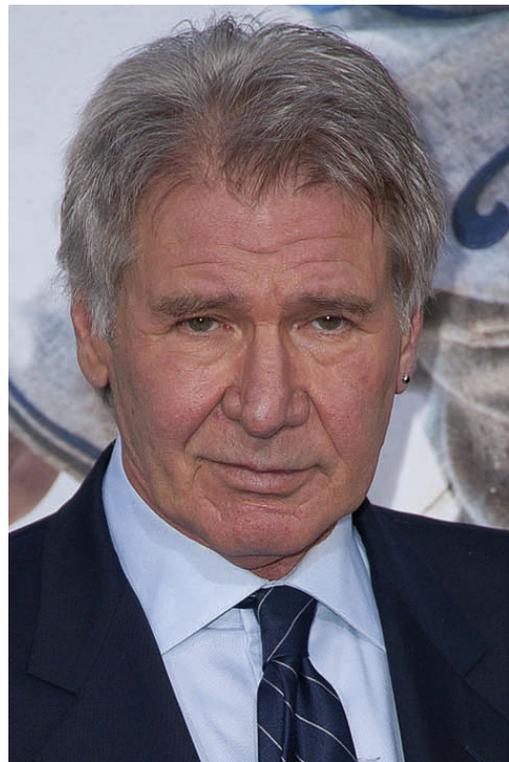
Money should have trumped racism

Early on, in a scene in baseball integration impresario Branch Rickey's office, Rickey is cautioned he's violating baseball's "unwritten law" in signing Robinson. Soon, the ridiculous nature of this code is emphasized by Rickey's own words. Anyone able to put two and two together would think hard off this scene.

"New York is full of Negro fans," said Rickey, expertly played by Park Ridge's Harrison Ford, 180 degrees removed from Indiana Jones here. "Dollars aren't black and white. They're green."

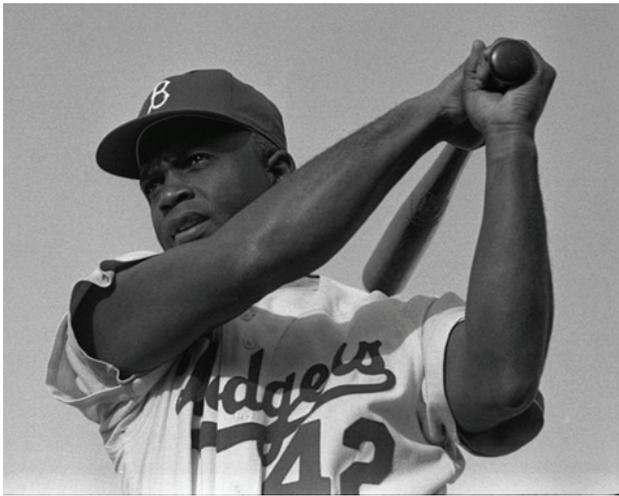
And that statement makes most forms of racial discrimination nonsensical. If money is the root of all evil, or money is the motivation, it should have trumped the superstition, fear, arrogance and ignorance that were at the root of racism. Everybody wants to make money, from the Rockefellers down to the basest Southern cracker. Why wouldn't baseball owners, seeing the success and hero-acceptance of Joe Louis, Jesse Owens and other African-American sports celebrities of the 1930s, tap into the bountiful ranks of black talent?

Almost every baseball team suffered at the gate in the Depression. Attendance did not recover until after World War II. In addition to the religious, social-justice and patriotic motivation for signing Robinson as cited by Rickey, he had a practical, economic motivation for the move. And there were no other like-minded owners who needed to dramatically boost their bottom line? Maybe they were bogged down in mental quick-



Park Ridge's Harrison Ford at the recent Los Angeles premiere of "42."
Photo credit [Tom Sorensen](#).

sand, anyway. If many owners resisted putting their games on radio to spur interest in buying tickets, they certainly weren't going to jump to the radical step of integration.



Jackie Robinson's break-in season will always make for compelling storytelling.

Rickey reaped the whirlwind. Dodgers attendance boomed to 1.8 million in cozy Ebbetts Field in 1947. Robinson became baseball's best gate attraction after Babe Ruth. Some say he was the second-most prominent American after President Harry S Truman in '47. When Robinson played his first game on April 15, 1947, Rickey said the player had 5,000 requests for appearances and invitations to social engagements. The haters, loud as they were, were far outnumbered by admirers.

A handful of National League owners learned quickly. Their American League counterparts were slow on the draw.

True baseball integration came only in stages, lasting through the 1970s. And even one team, the Cubs, seemed to go backwards in attitudes behind the scenes – partially the fault of an inattentive local media. That's grist for another story, or book.

Too bad the baseball moguls weren't motivated like the gas-station owner on "Interstate 24." As he begins to fill up the big tank of the Monarchs' bus, he spies Robinson trying to use his whites-only bathroom. The owner calls out to Robinson. In response, the combative ballplayer urges the traveling party to move on to buy gas elsewhere. Given a choice to maintain Jim Crow or make a quick buck off the big gas purchase, the owner lets Robinson enter the bathroom. You then wonder why, as a prime example, the University of Alabama enthusiastically maintained athletic segregation until 1970 rather than admit the state's bountiful African-American football talent, maintain a Yankees-style national championship college-football dynasty, and see the cash larder burst at the seams.

Long-gone baseball images come to life

Beyond its underlying message, "42" is a wonderful time-trip to a lost baseball era. Computer-generated graphics re-created all the long-gone ballparks – Ebbetts, Forbes Field, Crosley Field – in which Robinson played. I like vintage cars, and the producers of "42" certainly gathered all the mint-condition 1940s models they could get their hands on. At last the on-screen images had historical accuracy. No Alan Alda types keeping their 1970s long hair in a Korean-War M*A*S*H* setting.

Most accurate was Ford as Rickey. He truly immersed himself in his part to where you don't notice the old sci-fi, action-adventure hero. Morphed into Rickey, Ford perfectly emotes the famed baseball Mahatma, part sanctimonious, part silver-tongued. Rickey's office was known to newsmen as "The Cave of the Winds." Rickey was master salesman

even as he dispensed BS. Few visitors could resist. There was nothing wrong with the Rickey character being the dominant personality in “42.” Integration was his brain-child, carefully calibrated. There would have been no Robinson without Rickey. Any other attempt to break the color line might have failed; the player would have fought back if not for Rickey’s firm admonition, sometimes evoked in a Biblical framework, that he turn the other cheek to inevitable racist insults.



Actor Chadwick Boseman captured Jackie Robinson's humor, intensity and frustrations. Photo credit [Tom Sorensen](#).

Some critics jump “42” for not portraying Robinson as a multi-layered character. You would need an HBO-style mini-series to truly do justice to Robinson and the entire color-line-busting process. In the two-hour, eight-minute running time, actor Chadwick Boseman captures Robinson’s moods from humor to abject frustration after Phillies manager Ben Chapman’s racist verbal lashing. And if Boseman isn’t multi-layered enough, what about the scene where Robinson looks at his newborn son, Jackie, Jr.? Remembering how his own father abandoned the family when he was an infant, Boseman/Robinson vows that he’ll always be there for Jackie, Jr. The athletic Boseman also accurately mimicked Robinson’s aggressive, pigeon-toed leadoffs that intimidated pitchers.

Two other Chicago connections were “42” highlights. The amoral Leo Durocher, discredited for his horrible handling of the 1969 Cubs down the stretch, comes off as a semi-hero in warning the rebellious Dodgers that Robinson was only the first of many players of color who’d possibly claim their jobs. Meanwhile, sportswriter Wendell Smith, asked by Rickey

to be Robinson’s “Boswell” and guide, is shown also to be the victim of discrimination, this time from the still-elitist Baseball Writers Association of America. He has to type his stories on his manual machine balanced in his lap in the grandstands, as Smith cannot yet be admitted to pressboxes due to his race. Andre Holland, as Smith, is a perfect younger image of the real, affable media personality, who narrated Chicago baseball highlights as WGN-TV’s 10 p.m. sportscaster in the eight years before his death in 1972, soon after Robinson’s passing.

One disappointment in “42” in capturing the flavor of the Robinson fervor of 1947 is not including a scene depicting the record paid crowd of 47,101 at Wrigley Field to witness Robinson’s first Chicago appearance on May 18. Apparently, the scriptwriters never noticed the Mike Royko Chicago Daily News column penned upon Robinson’s death. Royko, who attended the game as a teen-ager, described tens of thousands of

reverential black fans, garbed in their Sunday best, streaming off the L and streetcars – many in their first-ever visit to the North Side. The CGI people could have gone to town depicting such a near-revival mass meeting, in contrast to close-ups of alternately jeering and cheering white and black fans. Movie producers love to use Wrigley Field; why not have shown the old girl in a really significant historical event?

If you want to hand out stars, here's three and some change for "42" overall, and four for Ford's performance as Rickey.