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JACKIE ROBINSON: A BASEBALL CELEBRATION -- STANDING BESIDE JACKIE ROBINSON

Reese Helped Change Baseball

By IRA BERKOW

VENICE, Fla.— The white boy was 13 or 14 years old, and his brother was about 16, when, with dusk descending on that summer day in Louisville, Ky., in the early 1930's, the older boy shouted a racial slur at six black kids, telling them, "Get off this street!" With that, the six black kids took chase after the white boys, and the two white kids ran with everything they had and made it safely home.

How did he feel about his older brother's action, the now 78-year-old man named Harold (Pee Wee) Reese, was asked recently.

Reese, recuperating from surgery for lung cancer a few weeks ago, rubbed a graying eyebrow in the living room of his winter home here as he thought about the incident involving him and his brother, Carl Jr.

"I thought it was stupid," he said. "I mean, to throw out a threat like that when there were six against two!"

Reese, the former star shortstop for the Brooklyn Dodgers, and a member of baseball's Hall of Fame, smiled, for of course there was much more to it than the numerical equation.

Some 15 years after that childhood incident, Pee Wee Reese became a pivotal figure in the acceptance and support of a rookie teammate, Jackie Robinson, who broke the color barrier in the major leagues in 1947.

Looking back now, 50 years after Robinson's historic breakthrough into the so-called national pastime, two moments in particular stand out between Reese and Robinson. Reese, in a cream-colored short-sleeve shirt, green pants and tan buck shoes, his hair gray, his arms creased with age and the flesh not as tight as in his Dodger days, and a slightly tired look in his eyes from a radiation treatment in the morning, thought back upon those years.

The first of the two incidents occurred at the beginning of spring training in 1947, when Robinson had been called up to the Dodgers from Montreal, Brooklyn's top minor league team, on which Robinson had starred during the 1946 season. A petition was drawn up by a group of mostly

Southern Dodgers players that stated they would not take the field with a black man.

"I'm not signing that," Reese told the ringleaders, who included Dixie Walker, Kirby Higbe and Bobby Bragan. "No way."

Reese, the soft-spoken but respected team captain, with a Southern upbringing, perhaps surprised the petition-carriers. "I wasn't thinking of myself as the Great White Father," Reese said. "I just wanted to play baseball. I'd just come back from serving in the South Pacific with the Navy during the Second World War, and I had a wife and daughter to support. I needed the money. I just wanted to get on with it."

But there was more to it than the money. And Reese's refusal to sign the petition, many believe, meant the end of the matter.

Robinson played, and endured vicious abuse from opposing teams, from beanballs and spikings to racial epithets and spitting. Robinson had promised Branch Rickey, the owner and general manager of the Dodgers, that for at least his first two years in the major leagues, he would hold his tongue and his fists, no matter the provocation. And one day -- it was probably in Cincinnati, Reese recalled, in 1947 or 1948 -- the attack was so nasty that Reese walked over to Robinson and put his hand on the black man's shoulder.

"Pee Wee kind of sensed the sort of hopeless, dead feeling in me and came over and stood beside me for a while," Robinson recalled, as quoted in the forthcoming biography "Jackie Robinson" by Arnold Rampersad (Alfred A. Knopf). "He didn't say a word but he looked over at the chaps who were yelling at me through him and just stared. He was standing by me, I could tell you that." The hecklers ceased their attack. "I will never forget it," Robinson said.

Over the years, Reese became perhaps Robinson's best friend on the Dodgers, though there were others who were reasonably close to him as well, including the white players Carl Erskine, Gil Hodges and Ralph Branca and, of his black teammates, Junior Gilliam in particular.

But Reese's attitude, including that defining gesture of solidarity on the field that they were, in the end, teammates and brothers under the skin, did not come from a save-the-world mentality.

"Something in my gut reacted to the moment," Reese said. "Something about -- what? -- the unfairness of it? The injustice of it? I don't know."

Still Modest About His Role

Reese's son, Mark, a 40-year-old documentary film maker, has wondered where that gut reaction from a man brought up in Southern mores came from.

"I think it might have something to do with that hanging tree in the middle of the town of Brandenburg, Ky.," Mark Reese said. Brandenburg is about 35 miles south of Louisville, and a few miles from Ekron, where the Reese family lived on a farm and where Reese's father, Carl Sr.,

became a railroad detective.

"When my dad was a boy of about 9 or 10 years old," Mark Reese said, "he remembers his father pointing out a tree in Brandenburg with a long branch extending out. It was there, his father told him, that black men had been lynched. I believe it was an important thing for my dad, because many times when we visited relatives in Brandenburg, he would point out that tree to me, and tell me about the lynchings. He never made a big point about the significance, but there was definitely an emotion in his voice, an emotion that said to me, anyway, that it was a terrible thing that human beings did to another human being, and only because of the color of their skin. And I imagine that when his dad told him the story, there was a similar emotion."

Pee Wee Reese shrugged at this interpretation. It is his innate manner to play down himself and, apparently, his contributions, particularly in the area of Jackie Robinson, where, he feels, he might only be a deflection from the limelight that Robinson deserves. In the book, "Baseball's Great Experiment," a thorough study of the black entry into baseball, the author Jules Tygiel quotes Reese telling Robinson sometime before Robinson's death at 53 in 1972, "You know I didn't go out of my way to be nice to you." And Robinson replied, "Pee Wee, maybe that's what I appreciated most."

"I seem to remember a conversation along those lines," Reese recalled in his home here. "Sounds right." He laughed.

He recalled the first time he learned about Robinson. "I was on a ship coming back to the States from Guam, in the middle of the ocean, and was playing cards. Someone hollered to me: 'Hey, Pee Wee, did you hear? The Dodgers signed a nigger.' It didn't mean that much to me and I kept playing cards. Then the guy said, 'And he plays shortstop!' My God, just my luck, Robinson has to play my position! But I had confidence in my abilities, and I thought, well, if he can beat me out, more power to him. That's exactly how I felt."

From Rivals To Partners

It turned out that Robinson, in his first year as a Dodger, would play first base, and then for the next several years move to second base and team with Reese for one of the brightest double-play combinations in baseball, as the Dodgers won pennant after pennant.

Just as Reese does not give himself undue credit, he seems clear-eyed about others. And while Robinson has been raised in some circles to a near deity, Reese saw the man within.

"Jackie was a great player, a great competitor, and pretty fearless," Reese recalled. "He had only a fair arm, but made up for it at second base by never backing down when a runner came barreling in. And he'd do some things that I wondered about. He would actually taunt some pitchers. He'd shout at them from the batter's box to just try to throw at his head! I told him: 'Jackie, quiet down. They might take you up on it. And if they're still mad, they might throw at me, too!' " Reese laughed. "And after the two years were up in which he had promised Mr. Rickey that he'd turn the

other cheek, he became a guy who would stand up for himself. And he could be a tough bench jockey, and he might plow into a guy who was in his way."

One time, after Robinson had been in the league for a few years, he groused to Reese that the pitchers were throwing at him because they were racists. "No," Reese replied. "They aren't throwing at you because you're black, Jackie. They're throwing at you because they just don't like you."

Robinson smirked, and then smiled. Reese could say such things to Robinson because of their friendship, and because Robinson knew where Reese's heart -- and mind -- were.

After all, it was Reese who was the first Dodger in Robinson's first spring training camp to walk across the field and shake his hand. "It was the first time I'd ever shaken the hand of a black man," Reese said. "But I was the captain of the team. It was my job, I believed, to greet the new players."

But greeting, and associating with, a black man was something different, to be sure. "When I was growing up, we never played ball with blacks because they weren't allowed in the parks. And the schools were segregated, so we didn't go to school with them. And there'd be some mischief between blacks and whites, but, as I remember, it was just mischief. It wasn't hatred, at least not from me."

Challenging Bias In Small Moments

And it was Reese who first sat down in the clubhouse to play cards with Robinson. When Dixie Walker later took Reese aside and said, "How can you be playing cards with him?" Reese recalls that he replied, "Look, Dixie, you and Stell" -- Walker's wife -- "travel with a black woman who takes care of your kids, who cooks your food, who you trust -- isn't that even more than playing cards with a black?" And Walker said, "But this is different."

But not to Reese.

Today, Reese, at 5 feet 10 inches, weighs 165 pounds, after losing nearly 15 pounds in a week's stay in the hospital after the surgery for lung cancer (he quit smoking cigarettes about 10 years ago). A third of his lung was removed. Doctors believe they have cut the cancer out, but Reese must continue to undergo radiation treatments. He is strong enough, however, to be back playing golf and on Saturday celebrated his 55th wedding anniversary with his wife, Dotty.

After his playing days, he coached with the Dodgers for one year, in 1959, then broadcast ball games for CBS and NBC and was a representative for the Louisville Slugger bat company. But for Reese, now a great-grandfather, there remain some painful physical reminders of an athletic career. He has an arthritic thumb, perhaps the result of his youth as a marbles champion, from which he derived his nickname. And Reese walks with a slight tilt because of trouble with his knees -- he has had one knee replacement and may need a second. The injuries are a result, probably, of

a major league career in which he made eight All-Star teams and batted .269 over 16 seasons, 10 of those seasons with Robinson. Reese was considered one of the smartest players in the game (remember when he took the cut-off throw from Sandy Amoros and wheeled in short left field as though having eyes in the back of his head and fired the ball to first base to double off the Yankees' Gil McDougald to help preserve for Brooklyn the seventh and deciding game of the 1955 World Series?).

At Robinson's funeral, in Manhatttan on Oct. 27, 1972, Harold (Pee Wee) Reese, a son of the South, was one of the pallbearers.

"I took it," Reese said, "as an honor."

Photos: Teammates and friends: In 1952, Pee Wee Reese watched as Jackie Robinson completed a double play. Below, the two Brooklyn Dodgers signed baseballs in 1956. (Photographs by The Associated Press, top; The New York Times, above)(pg. C1); Pee Wee Reese, now 78 years old, was among the few Brooklyn Dodgers to welcome Jackie Robinson in 1947. (Joe Skipper for The New York Times)(pg. C4)
