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The A Student Who Gave Up the Law for Baseball

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It’s been 50 years since Jackie Robinson made history by striding onto the diamond at Ebbets Field in the uniform of a Brooklyn Dodger. Few people realized that Robinson was following in the footsteps of another black major league baseball player who had preceded him by more than 60 years.

The Law School was part of this making of history — twice.

When the head coach of the University of Michigan baseball team resigned suddenly, University officials started looking around for a replacement. Then several people told the Athletic Director about an outstanding candidate in his own backyard. It turned out that a young man who had coached baseball both at Ohio Wesleyan University and Allegheny College and then been a catcher for several major league baseball clubs (before his throwing arm went dead) was a student in the Law School.

After receiving glowing reports about the young man (let’s call him by his first two initials, WB.), the Athletic Director offered him the head coaching job on the condition that he persuade the Dean of the University of Michigan Law School that he could study law and coach baseball at the same time. But when the student approached him, the Dean was incredulous. He also became quite angry. Emphasizing that the Law School was an extremely competitive place, the Dean maintained that it was “absolutely impossible” for any student to both hold a varsity team and earn passing grades in law school. After cramming every day in every class, he would be called on with his studies, he would be called on every day in every class. WB. told the Dean that was fine with him.

WB. did not let the Dean down. The baseball team enjoyed a highly successful season and WB. continued to attain high grades in law school. After cramming three years of law school into two calendar years, WB. graduated with an A average.

WB.’s record in law school was so outstanding that the Dean invited him to join the faculty. But WB. declined the opportunity to be a law professor. He was much more interested in practicing law than teaching it. He and two friends from his college days had decided to form their own law firm.

WB.’s career in baseball seemed to be over. But there was one problem with his law firm. It failed to attract any significant clients.

Fortunately, WB. had left the University of Michigan baseball team with the understanding that he would be welcomed back if he decided to return in the near future. WB. soon had enough of law practice. A few months after he left Ann Arbor, he wired the U-M Athletic Director: “Am starving, will be back without delay.”

When WB. returned to the Michigan campus he became a part-time scout for the major league’s St. Louis baseball club family. WB.’s former teacher at Ohio Wesleyan had been critically ill, WB. had taken over his class in elementary law, refusing to accept any compensation so that his former teacher’s family could continue to receive his full salary.

The Dean of the Law School had also underestimated this student’s powers of persuasion. WB. pointed out that while teaching at Ohio Wesleyan he had taken night classes at Ohio State Law School, some 25 miles away. In addition, WB., while coaching both baseball and football at Allegheny College he had taught freshman English, Shakespeare and Greek drama at the college — and “read for the law” in his free time.

Moreover, and this probably impressed the Dean most of all, WB. argued convincingly that the law came easily to him — as evidenced by the fact that he had completed his first year at the University of Michigan Law School with a straight A average.

After a two-hour meeting with his student and the University’s Athletic Director, the Dean relented. He ruled that WB. could coach the baseball team and continue to study law on one condition — to make certain he was keeping up with his studies, he would be called on every day in every class. WB. told the Dean that was fine with him.

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When WB. returned to the Michigan campus he became a part-time scout for the major league’s St. Louis baseball club as well as the coach of the University’s baseball team. He impressed the owner of the St. Louis team so much that in two years time WB. was managing the team.

After a few detours, WB. was finally on...
You may not recognize his picture, but you probably recognize his name: Branch Rickey, '11. The photo is of the 1912 University of Michigan baseball team and Rickey was its coach. After graduation from the Law School, Rickey became a leader in professional baseball and in 1947 was the man responsible for bringing Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers as the first black player in major league baseball in modern times. Robinson made his debut with the Dodgers in April 1947.

PHOTO COURTESY BENTLEY HISTORICAL LIBRARY

Can you identify the man at the far right in the back row?

To many, his name will always be linked with Jackie Robinson, the player he signed to a contract in 1945 and the player who trotted on to Ebbets Field, home of the Brooklyn Dodgers, on Opening Day, 50 years ago last spring — the first black athlete to play major league baseball.

Robinson once said of Rickey: "He was like a piece of mobile armor, and he would throw himself and his advice in the way of anything likely to hurt me." Unlike many of his counterparts in the national pastime, Rickey was open to the need for change. As demonstrated by the way he went about breaking major league baseball's "color line," when motivated by a strong conviction that he was doing the right thing, Rickey was prepared to move decisively and willing to confront rebelliousness. I like to think the fact that he went to the University of Michigan Law School had something to do with that, too.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: There are a goodly number of books on Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey, '11. For an especially thoughtful and moving account of the obstacles that Robinson had to overcome (often with the help of Rickey), see Jackie Robinson — An Intimate Portrait (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1988), by Robinson's widow, Rachel Robinson. For a succinct but extraordinarily rich and insightful account of the Robinson-Rickey story and its great significance, see the Foreword to Rachel Robinson's book by Roger Wilkins, '56.

the road that would take him to baseball's Hall of Fame.

WB's full name was Wesley Branch Rickey. When he died, a half-century after leaving Ann Arbor with his law degree, New York Times sports columnist Arthur Daley wrote that "only Alexander Cartwright, who drew up the original baseball rules, left a greater impact on the sport." Some may consider that a slight exaggeration, but many would agree that the Mahatma (as he was often called) was the most prescient, best organized and most effective baseball executive in the history of the game. I like to think the fact that he went to the University of Michigan Law School had something to do with that.