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Jim Crow’s Playmates

Branch Rickey vs. the Color Line



A CURIOUS sort of hullabaloo has been aroused by Branch Rickey’s disclosure that when he went into the ring against Jim Crow, he found fifteen major league club owners working in Jim’s corner. It is strange that the news should stir excitement, for surely it couldn’t have come as a surprise to anyone.

NEW YORK, N.Y., February 19, 1948

At the time Rickey signed Jackie Robinson for Montreal, anybody who knew anything about baseball was aware that a Jim Crow law did exist in the game, although baseball men never had the courage to put it in writing. And after Robinson was signed, open opposition to his presence continued until publication of the news stories which killed the projected player strike against him last summer.

Well, no matter. A year ago Rickey was weaving and ducking and bobbing in an effort to elude people who wanted to have him stuffed and mounted as a prime specimen of tolerance. He insisted he was not interested in Robinson as a black man or a member of an underprivileged race and that his purpose in signing Jackie was not, as described in Arthur Mann’s song, to “triumph over prejudice and the excess profits tax.”

“I want ballplayers,” he said. “I don’t care if they’re purple or green and have hair all over them and arms that reach down to their ankles, just so they can beat the whey out of the Cardinals and win a World Series.”

That was his story, and it was as good as any except for the technicality that it wasn’t true. Here is the truth.

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In 1903, when Rickey was baseball coach at Michigan, he had a Negro named Charley Thomas on the squad. The first trip the boy made was to South Bend, Indiana, where the hotel management declined to let him register. Rickey blamed himself later for not having had the foresight to brief the kid in advance, preparing him for such experiences.

Rickey and the team captain were sharing a suite. When Branch learned of Thomas' difficulties, he hurried down and asked whether the management would let Thomas move into the suite. This was agreed, provided Thomas didn't register, and all three retired to their quarters.

Upstairs Rickey and the captain got to talking. Thomas sat on the edge of Rickey's bed with his head low, so that his face was concealed. When Branch tried to draw him into the conversation, the boy lifted his head. He was crying. He was wringing his hands between his knees, twisting the fingers as though trying to pull the skin off.

"It's these," the kid said, lifting his hands.

Rickey didn't understand.

"They're black," the kid said. "It's my skin," the kid said. "If it wasn't for my skin, I wouldn't be any different from anybody."

"My hands," the kid said. "They're black. If they were only white!"

Rickey said: "Tommy, the day will come when they won't have to be white." That was forty-five years ago. It was forty-three years before Rickey found the right time and the right place and the right guy in Jackie Robinson. In those years Rickey has gone a lot of places and done a lot of things and been pictured in many lights. He may be all the things they have called him—a rush of wind in an empty room, a glib horse-trader, a specious orator, a coon-shouting revivalist. He has been described, in purest Brooklynese and with faithful accuracy, as a "man of many facets—all turned on."

It remains a simple matter of fact that he has not forgotten Charley Thomas. He has kept up with Charley Thomas, knows where he is today and what he is doing and how he is doing. Charley's doing all right, by the way.

In the circumstances, it was not hard to believe Rickey yesterday when he described his feelings at the major league meeting where fifteen club owners approved a report stating that the employment of a Negro in professional baseball was jeopardizing their investment.

“I was,” he said, “deeply disturbed.”