

Jackie Robinson Stadium

Next week the baseball playoffs begin, and millions of Americans will turn their attention to the National Pastime. But there is one baseball story every American should know. On the wall of my office hangs a cover of "Sport Magazine" signed by Hall of Fame baseball legend Jackie Robinson. It pictures Robinson, playing second base for the Brooklyn Dodgers, pivoting on a double play throw. Shortstop Pee Wee Reese is pictured behind him.

Jackie Robinson is one of America's great civil rights heroes, yet his story is fading from public view. Born in racially segregated Georgia in 1919, Robinson's father abandoned the family leading his mother, Mallie, to move the five Robinson children to Pasadena, California in search of a better life.

Jackie excelled at sports and won a scholarship to UCLA where he was an All American halfback and a superstar baseball player. Upon leaving school, he enlisted in the Army to fight in World War II. But after refusing to go to the back of the bus while training in Texas, the Army charged him with insubordination. Subsequently, he was acquitted of all charges and honorably discharged.

After playing baseball in the Negro League, Brooklyn Dodger General Manager Branch Rickey brought him to the Major Leagues in 1947. Robinson was then 27 years old, and was the first black front line player ever.

Predictably, all hell broke loose when Robinson hit the diamond that year. He was vilified on and off the field, called obscene names non-stop, and some opposing pitchers even threw at his head. Only once did he lose his cool in public. An umpire actually said to him, "Go back to the jungle, you little n—."

Robinson punched the ump in the mouth.

The Philadelphia Phillies and Cincinnati Redlegs were particularly nasty to Robinson. In one incident, the Cincinnati players were screaming at the Dodgers, stuff like "how can you play with that n—?"

Having heard enough, Pee Wee Reese, from Louisville, Kentucky, walked over to Robinson and put his arm around him.

Jackie Robinson played in the big leagues for nine years and, while things improved a bit over time, he was constantly demeaned and humiliated by fellow Americans. Yet Robinson prevailed. He compiled Hall of Fame statistics and was the National League's Most Valuable Player in 1949, the year I was born.

Try to imagine what Jackie Robinson endured in the land of the free. Just for a moment, put yourself in his cleats. Hatred is a brutal thing; personal attacks can cut right to the heart of a human being. For Robinson, they were non-stop.

How brave was this man? Because of him, the face of American society changed quickly and decisively. Opportunities for millions of black and Hispanic athletes opened up, and that changed attitudes everywhere. Suddenly, Willie Mays was a hero, and Bill Russell a role model.

Jackie Robinson died young at 52 from diabetes complications. His suffering, triumph and legacy must be remembered. In a couple of years, The New York Mets will unveil a new stadium just a few miles from where Jackie Robinson played in Brooklyn. The Mets are now considering what to name their opulent new home.

But, really, there is only one name that should be attached to that building. In bold letters, forever, in Queens, New York, the name "Jackie Robinson Stadium" should stand as a monument to one of the most courageous Americans of all time.

Number 42 deserves no less.