

Opinion

Caddying for Jackie Robinson, an extraordinary man

By Chuck Freedman

Eye on the Ball

In 1961, having just graduated from Burdick Junior High School, I spent a good portion of the summer caddying for Jackie Robinson at the Pound Ridge golf course. He was Mr. Robinson to me, prematurely grey-haired, gravelly voiced, and retired from baseball. And although I knew, in the parlance of the day, that he was the first Negro to play in the Major Leagues, at 15 I was more impressed by how far he could hit a golf ball and that he would always tell me when to show up next time to caddy for him.

"It's my job to watch the ball when I am hitting it," Mr. Robinson would say. "It is your job to watch where it goes."

I did not understand the importance of the man until years later when the whole country, not just black people, awoke to the full value

of his achievements. For it was not just what he did but how he did it, with strength, resiliency and quiet pride, that made Jackie Robinson one of the great Americans of the 20th century.

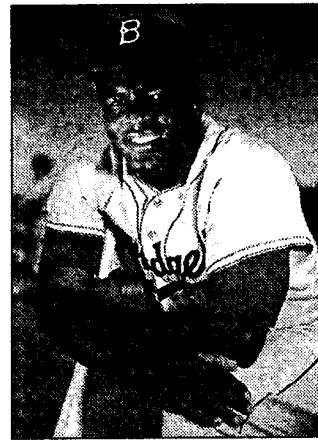
By pure coincidence, I later came to know his son, Jackie Junior, as we were classmates at Rippowam High School. For those who remember the old Murray the K rock and roll shows at the Brooklyn Paramount Theatre, a small gang of us were regulars in the audience, catching two shows a day and riding the milk train back to Stamford. Lord, we did love the Ronettes. And no one, not ever, could sing and dance like Jackie Wilson.

I mention Jackie Junior because I sometimes played at his house where I met his mother, Rachel. For all the tragedy in the Robinson family, like a father and son gone way too soon, over the years I have watched Rachel Robinson throw out first balls and speak with

eloquence of the many trials and achievements she shared with her husband. Across the airways and thousands of miles apart, there is no way she could know that I felt she was talking to me.

When I left Stamford for college in the fall of 1964, I never returned to live there, although I did drive through to gaze at my old house on Howes Avenue, visit my old girlfriend and pay my respects to Rippowam, which is not even a high school anymore. In college, my Stamford experiences contributed to my civil rights and anti-war activities, which led me to serve as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Palau islands.

In the epic of life, fate landed me in Hawaii, which has been my home for 36 years. Here I have experienced a pluralism that is unique and is a great teacher. We are not without prejudice in Hawaii, but we are more tolerant of others and more willing to share and find value in our differ-



AP file photo

ences. The rest of America could learn a lesson from us, I have thought over the years. Ironically, while I was self-righteously philosophizing, America was changing. It was change for the better and more than most of us could imagine.

When island-born Illinois U.S. Sen. Barack Obama was considering running for president, I co-founded Hawaii's Draft Obama campaign. On the merits, here was a leader who could

bridge across generations, race, cultures, even nations, and build a future from common ground. Quite extraordinarily, he was running against a woman whose capacity to lead stood on its own merits as well.

The resulting Democratic presidential primary has been more than a Herculean political test for the candidates. It has been the closing of a chapter in American history that began with school integration, voting rights, brave people breaking the barriers of race and gender in so many different ways and the coming of age of a country in its views of itself.

Lest I sound naive, nothing about the campaign suggests that the struggle for social justice is over, but history has given us an all too rare, shining milestone. We have lived up to our principles.

During a rally at a downtown high school auditorium in Honolulu, just before the local presidential caucuses here, I saw Bettye Jo Har-

ris, a black woman in her 80s who has been fighting for civil rights since she was a girl growing up in the South. "Chuck," she said in the middle of a very classic hug, "this is a dream I never would have dreamed."

There is no debating that we live in a world where one trauma or another seems to crouch around the corner and in which the news of the day is generally marked by humanity's lowest common denominator.

So this is a moment to savor and to connect to the individual past that each of us owns — in my case to one summer in Stamford when a most extraordinary man told me to come back next week to carry his clubs and to watch where the ball goes.

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