American Sports Legends

A Reading A–Z Level Z1 Leveled Book
Word Count: 2,765

Connections

Writing and Art

Imagine being a newspaper reporter interviewing one of the athletes from the book. Write an article about the interview including both the questions and answers.

Social Studies

Choose one of the athletes from the book. Create a timeline of that athlete's life. Record at least ten events including his or her birth and death.

Reading A–Z

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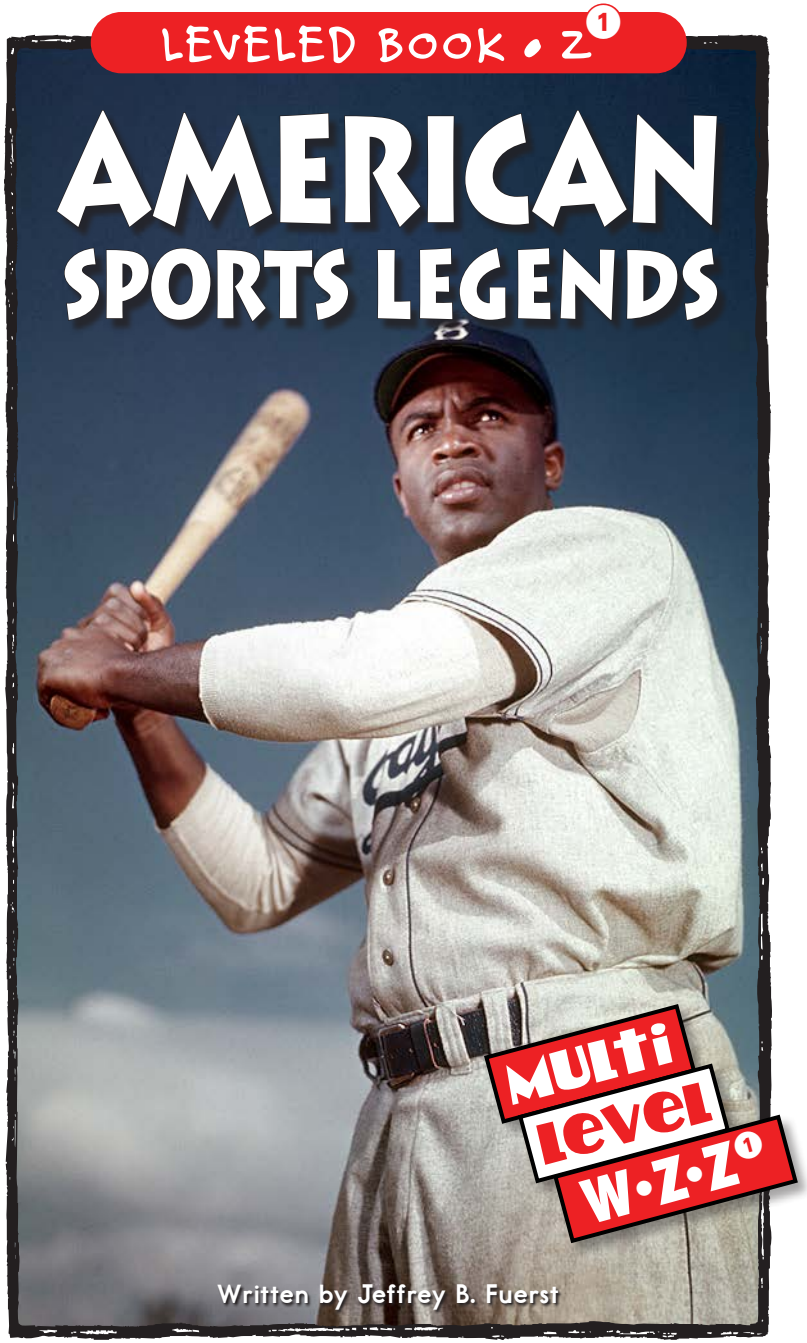

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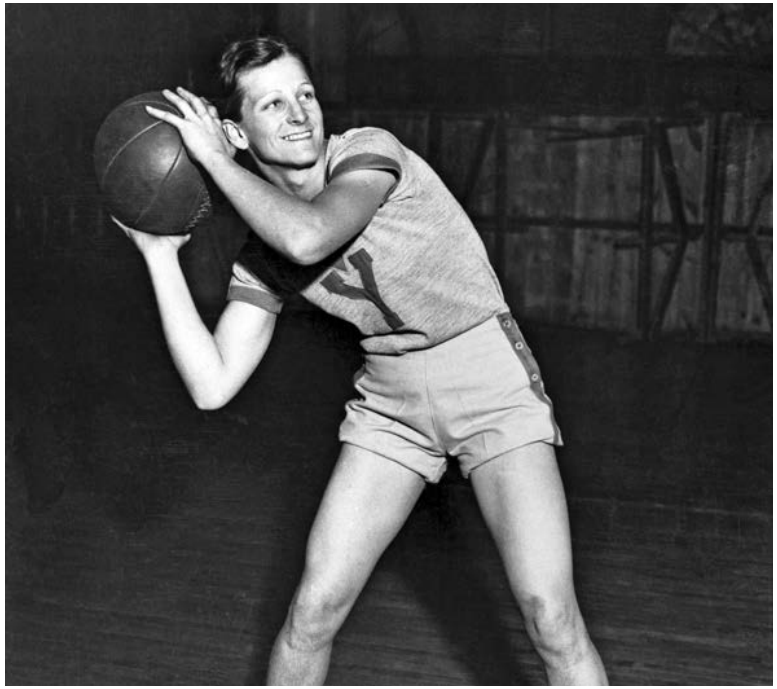
AMERICAN SPORTS LEGENDS



Written by Jeffrey B. Fuerst

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Focus Question

Who are some American sports legends, and why do we remember them?

Words to Know

demeanor	intimidated
determination	legacy
discriminated	ordeal
ideals	revolutionized
inscription	sharecropper
integrate	versatile

Front cover: Jackie Robinson

Back cover: Jesse Owens set the long jump record at the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936. His record held for twenty-five years.

Title page: Mildred Didrikson Zaharias

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Correlation

LEVEL Z1	
Fountas & Pinnell	W–X
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	60

Jesse Owens

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Jim Thorpe

The Greatest Athlete of the 20th Century: Jim Thorpe (1887–1953)

Who would you say was the greatest athlete from the last century? Soccer's Pelé? Basketball's Michael Jordan? Hockey's Wayne Gretzky? Tennis's Billie Jean King?

Good choices. These record-setting superstars **revolutionized** their sports and deserve to be in the running for that No. 1 spot. But the athlete named the greatest of the great was Jim Thorpe, a Native American born in 1887 in Indian Territory (now Prague, Oklahoma). He was a **versatile** athlete who played professional baseball, was the biggest football star of his day, and performed legendary feats in track and field.

Let's go back to 1912, to the Summer Olympic Games in Stockholm, Sweden . . .

Jim Thorpe throws the shot put.

The Native American runner from the Sac and Fox tribes crouches at the starting line for the Olympic 200-meter dash. It's the third event of five in a new Olympic event, the grueling pentathlon. "On your mark," calls the starter. "Get set . . ."

At the blast from the starter pistol, Jim Thorpe bursts out of the blocks. He has already scored an easy victory in the long jump, but has placed a disappointing third in the javelin throw behind two Swedish athletes. I need this race, *he thinks as he sprints down the track.*

But, running his hardest, it seems he just can't pull ahead of the other runners—until the last moment. At the finish line, Jim Thorpe wins by a hair!

Before he appeared at the Summer Olympics of 1912, Jim Thorpe was already a well-known college football and track and field star. As an All-American halfback from Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, he thrilled crowds with his blinding speed and strength. He could just as easily run over would-be tacklers as run past them. He was also his team's punter and place kicker.

Thorpe starred on the school's baseball and basketball teams, too. He excelled in golf, tennis, swimming, hockey, and just about any sport he tried.

Jim Thorpe poses in a football uniform.

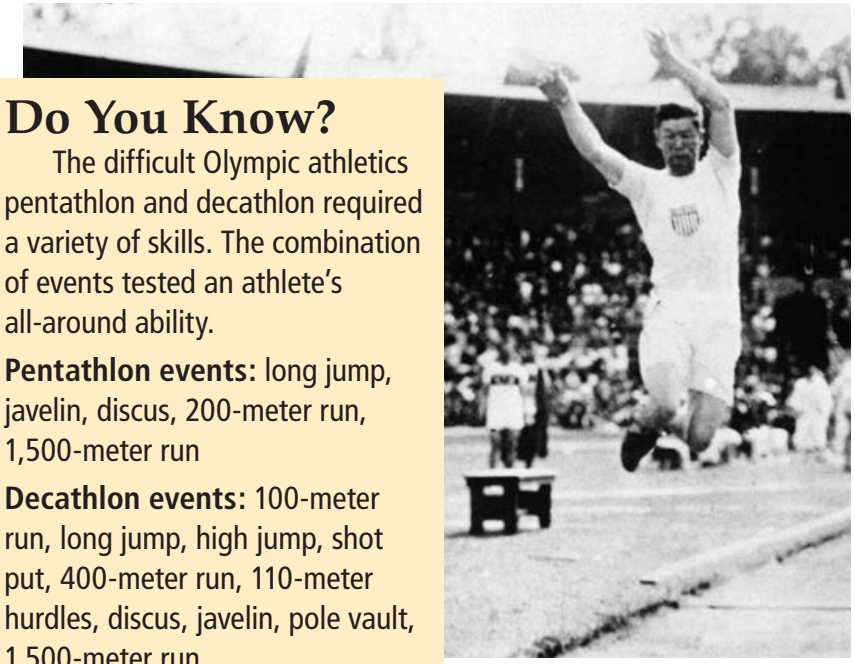
At the 1912 Olympics, Thorpe represented the United States in the two toughest track-and-field events: the pentathlon (five events) and the decathlon (ten events). It was the first time in modern Olympic history that these two events were added to the games.

Do You Know?

The difficult Olympic athletics pentathlon and decathlon required a variety of skills. The combination of events tested an athlete's all-around ability.

Pentathlon events: long jump, javelin, discus, 200-meter run, 1,500-meter run

Decathlon events: 100-meter run, long jump, high jump, shot put, 400-meter run, 110-meter hurdles, discus, javelin, pole vault, 1,500-meter run



Jim Thorpe in the long jump

Over the span of a few days—one day for the pentathlon and another two for the decathlon—Jim Thorpe achieved the unimaginable. He won four of the five events in the pentathlon, set a world record for the decathlon, and won the gold medal in both events—amazing! No one in Olympic history had done this before Jim, and no one has done it since.

When King Gustav V of Sweden called Jim to the awards stand to present the medals, he said, "You, sir, are the greatest athlete in the world."

Always a man of few words, Jim replied, "Thanks, King."

Jim Turns Pro

After the Olympics, Jim was famous the world over. He received a letter of congratulations from President William H. Taft at the White House. Professional sports teams offered him rich contracts, which he turned down to return to Carlisle and play one more season of college football under the leadership of his longtime coach, Glen "Pop" Warner. He scored twenty-five touchdowns and made a total of 198 points. He married his college sweetheart, too. What a year!

Then, in 1913, he became a professional baseball player with the famous New York Giants. He was great at swinging a bat, and his superior strength and speed also made him great at covering the outfield. He played six seasons with the Giants and then spent some time in his last season of professional baseball playing for the Cincinnati Reds and the Boston Braves.

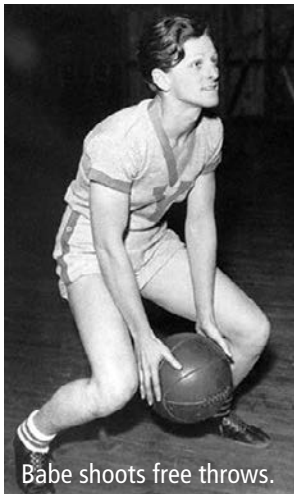
Although Jim was good at baseball, he preferred to play football. In 1915, when professional football was just getting started, Jim joined the Canton (Ohio) Bulldogs. He led his team to three championships: in 1916, 1917, and 1919—while also playing baseball during the summer months. Jim kept playing football until 1928 with teams including the Cleveland Tigers, the Oorang Indians, and the New York Giants.

In 1920, Jim became the first president of the American Football Association, which later became the National Football League. One of his goals was to make the game more popular—especially for children. To excite the fans at halftime, Jim would stand at the fifty-yard line and drop-kick a ball over the goalposts; then he would face the other direction and do it again! He could punt the ball up to seventy-five yards.

Today, a statue of Jim Thorpe greets visitors to the Football Hall of Fame. An **inscription** below the statue lists Jim's football accomplishments. It is a tribute to the founding father of professional football and its first true star, the greatest athlete of the 20th century.

Jim Thorpe in 1932, dressed in traditional ceremonial regalia

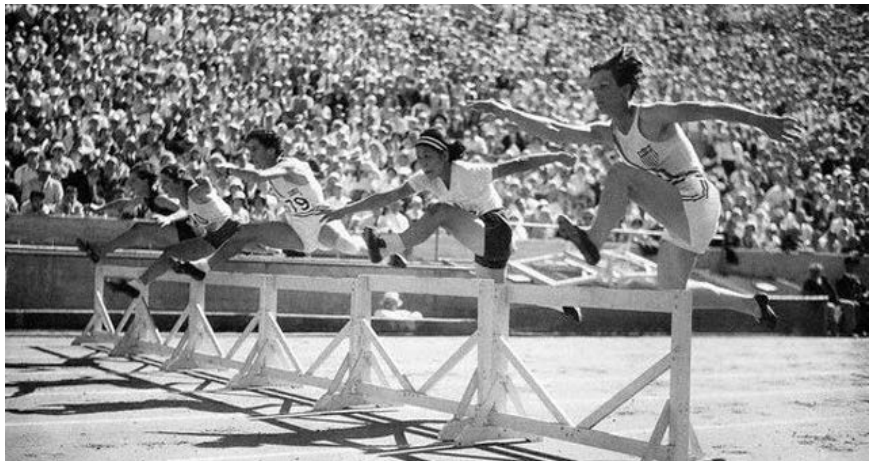
The Other Babe: Mildred Didrikson Zaharias (1911–1956)



Babe shoots free throws.

Jim Thorpe may have been named the greatest athlete of the 20th century, but sports lovers might also consider another all-around candidate. Mildred "Babe" Didrikson was an all-around athlete who dominated women's basketball, track and field, and golf in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. Her nickname was borrowed from baseball's famous Babe Ruth after she hit several home runs in a baseball game with the neighborhood boys. She was a serious, rough-and-tumble competitor at a time when women, even athletes, were expected to be modest and ladylike.

Babe Didrikson was born to Norwegian immigrant parents in Port Arthur, Texas, in 1911, the sixth of seven children. In high school, she was a standout in volleyball, baseball, swimming, tennis, and especially basketball, the most popular women's sport at the time. Her high-school team never lost a game. Never. She often scored thirty points by herself when twenty was considered a respectable total—for the whole team!



Babe Didrikson, far right, smashed another world record when she sprinted the 80-meter hurdles in 11.7 seconds.

Babe's interests shifted to track and field. A firm believer in strength training, Babe lifted weights, which few women did at that time. Babe's serious workouts and natural abilities paid off at a national track meet in July 1932 where she entered eight events and won five. What's even more astonishing is that she single-handedly won the meet, scoring thirty points on her own while twenty women on the runner-up team only scored twenty-two points collectively.

A few weeks later at the Summer Olympics, Babe won two gold medals and one silver, and set world records in the 80-meter hurdles, javelin, and high jump. Now a celebrity, Babe drew attention to women's basketball by putting together a team that toured the country playing against men's teams.

No Game She Can't Play

Babe's real fame was yet to come, and in a different sport: golf. Although she didn't pick up a club until age twenty-one, she practiced her swing with focus and **determination**. Beginning in 1934, she played golf exclusively and would hit one thousand balls a day, taping over blisters that formed on her hands. Just a year later, in 1935, she won her first championship.

Babe poses with one of her trophies.

In the next twenty years, Babe won eighty-two tournaments, including an astonishing seventeen in a row in 1946 and 1947. She and fellow golfer Patty Berg cofounded the LPGA (Ladies Professional Golf Association) in 1949.

In 1953, while at the top of her game, Babe was diagnosed with cancer. Following an operation, her doctors thought she would never play again. Only four months later, she was back on the pro tour playing in the Tam O'Shanter "All-American" golf tournament. Babe needed to prove to herself and her fans that she could still compete at a professional level.

It is the 18th hole of the Serbin Women's Open Tournament in Miami Beach, February 1954. Babe Didrikson's booming first shot lies in the center of the fairway. She takes out a 5-iron and smacks the ball. It soars high and straight before landing on the green. Babe pulls back her putter and sinks the ball. She has won the tournament—her first win after cancer surgery.

Babe drives for the green.

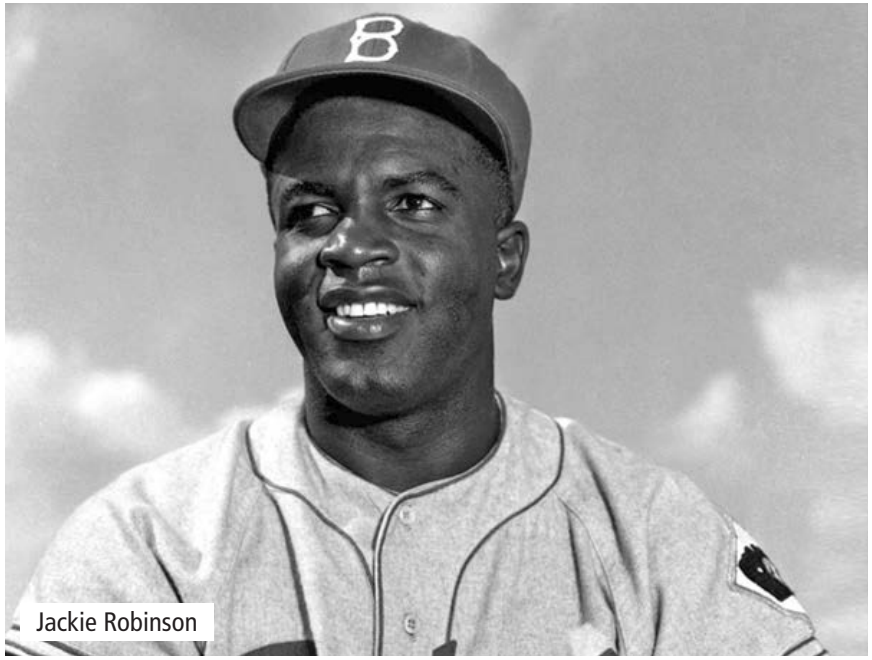
Her family and millions of fans were devastated when the cancer returned the following year, and Babe Didrikson passed away at age forty-five.

Her life of sports achievements gained her a place in two Halls of Fame: golf (1951) and track and field (1974—after her death). But her real **legacy** is the lasting example of her independent spirit. Babe was a courageous, outspoken individualist who blazed a path for future women athletes by playing her own way.

Do You Know?

Didrikson excelled at golf, track and field, softball, baseball, volleyball, tennis, swimming, diving, bowling, and billiards. "The only thing I don't play," Babe joked, "is dolls."

She was voted "Woman Athlete of the Year" six times. No other person has been honored so often.



Jackie Robinson

Baseball's Most Daring Player: Jackie Robinson (1919–1972)

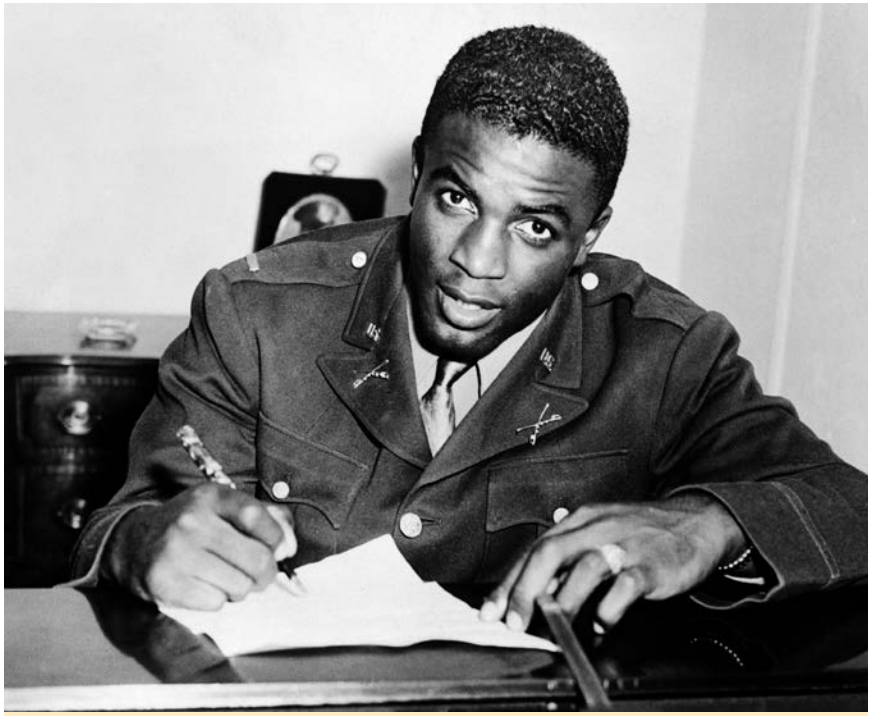
What would Major League Baseball be like today without superstars such as Frank Thomas, Derek Jeter, and Alex Rodriguez? How might the Hall of Fame look without great outfielders and hitters such as Hank Aaron, Willie Mays, Roberto Clemente, and so many other brilliant African American and Latino ballplayers?

Hard to imagine that omission, but very possible—were it not for the courage and determination of Jackie Robinson. On April 15, 1947, he became the first African American to play Major League Baseball.

The Washington Senators, a Major League Baseball team, at a time when black players were still excluded from the league

During this time, black and other non-white people were **discriminated** against in many ways, including in sports. Only white players were allowed to play in the Major Leagues. So baseball-loving black players formed their own Negro Leagues. These leagues supported economic growth in black communities, developed talented stars, and had many fans.

The general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Branch Rickey, knew it was wrong to keep talented players out of the Major Leagues because of their skin color. It was wrong for the players and wrong for baseball. Rickey wanted to **integrate** the teams, but he knew it would take a very special person, with a specific **demeanor**, to stand up against racism and break the color barrier while keeping calm and demonstrating grace. Then he discovered Jackie Robinson.



Do You Know?

Jackie had won a scholarship to UCLA, where he earned varsity letters in four sports: baseball, basketball, track and field, and football. He had also been one of the few African American officers in the Army in World War II.

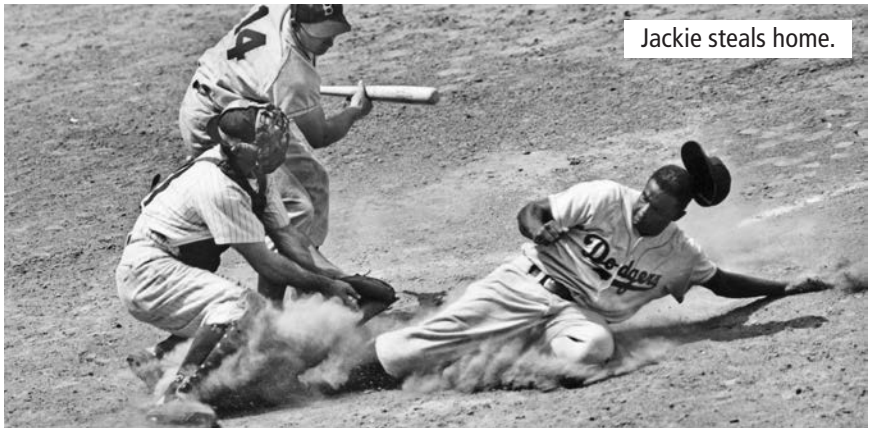
Jackie's intelligence and leadership abilities were a big part of why Branch Rickey knew he could handle the pressures he would face.

Jackie Robinson could hit, run, and field as well as anyone. His daring style of running and stealing bases excited fans and unnerved opposing players. He stole forty bases in 1946 alone. A fierce competitor, he could beat opponents with a bunt, a blast, and—most importantly—his brain.

Jackie Robinson and Dodger teammates on his first official day in the Major Leagues, April 15, 1947

After a year in the minor leagues, in which he led the league in batting and his team to a championship, Jackie, now twenty-eight, left the Kansas City Monarchs to join the Brooklyn Dodgers. Robinson's rookie season was an **ordeal**. Opposing players yelled insults at him. Pitchers purposely threw at him. Fans booed. His family was threatened. Even some of Jackie's teammates treated him badly.

Jackie took it all with quiet dignity—and determination. He never lost his temper and never fought back with his fists. Instead, he let his skills on the diamond speak for him. In his rookie year, he hit twelve home runs, led the National League in stolen bases, and won the Rookie of the Year Award. In 1949, he won the National League batting title (his average was .342) and also the highest honor, the Most Valuable Player Award. By 1950, he was the highest-paid Brooklyn Dodger and the team's leader.



Jackie steals home.

It is the first game of the 1955 World Series, a match between the rival New York Yankees and Brooklyn Dodgers. The Dodgers have been in seven World Series—and to date have lost every one. "Wait 'til next year!" had become the fans' annual cry.

Jackie Robinson leads off third base. He's thirty-six years old now and near the end of his career. But he is still a dangerous base runner, and his fans love to watch him. He takes an extra step toward home plate, then another. He dives back to third, safe.

Jackie dusts himself off. He stares down the pitcher and resumes his big lead. He darts right, then left, then . . . off he goes! The pitch flies to the plate, but not in time—Jackie is safe at home! The fans go wild!

Jackie's bold steal of home, the nineteenth of his career, pumps up his teammates, and they go on to win the World Series. In Brooklyn, "next year" has finally arrived!

The Arizona Diamondbacks baseball team in 2001 shows how baseball has become fully integrated.

Jackie Robinson showed that ability was what mattered—on and off the field. Any player who could perform at that professional level belonged in the Major Leagues. Soon, other teams began to hire black and Latino players. Today, the national pastime of the United States is composed of players, coaches, managers, and owners of all races and nationalities.

Jackie Robinson was inducted into the baseball Hall of Fame in 1962. He didn't break any baseball records, but he will be remembered long after the records are forgotten because he broke baseball's color barrier. His inner strength and commitment to equality made it possible for all players to participate equally in professional American sports.

The Fastest Man: Jesse Owens (1913–1980)

Born in Alabama in 1913, sprinting legend James Cleveland "Jesse" Owens burst onto the sporting scene in junior high school in Cleveland, Ohio. He set world records for his age group in the high jump and long jump.

The high school track coach invited Jesse to join the team. Being very poor, Jesse had to work after school and couldn't practice with the rest of the team. Instead, he got up at 5:00 a.m. to train with his coach.

Jesse's legend grew. At a national high school track meet, the teenage star tied the world record for the 100-yard dash at 9.4 seconds and set a new world record for the long jump at 22 feet 11¾ inches (7 m).

In 1935, at a college championship meet, Jesse set new world records for the 220-yard dash, long jump, and 220-yard low hurdles. He tied the world record of 9.4 seconds for the 100-yard dash. Never before had a track-and-field athlete accomplished so much. And he did it in about an hour—with a back injury from falling down a flight of stairs. Yet, for all the records he set, his greatest triumphs lay ahead.

Jesse Owens races several strides ahead of everyone at the 1936 Olympics.

An Olympian for Eternity

In 1936, just before the start of World War II, Jesse traveled to Berlin, Germany, for the Summer Olympic Games. But his participation in the Olympic Games was controversial. Nazi leader Adolf Hitler ruled Germany and believed that Aryans—non-Jewish white people—were a "master race" superior to all others. Nazis called black people "primitive," and Hitler thought that the games would be proof of his **ideals**.

Jesse was not **intimidated** by Hitler's attitude or by threats. He firmly believed that individual excellence, not race, color, or where you were from, distinguished one person from another. And he proved it on the track in Berlin—four times.

It is August 1936, the final day of the Olympics. Jesse Owens has already breezed to the gold medal in the 100-meter and 200-meter races. Chancellor Hitler has left the stadium rather than shake his hand. Hitler's ideals have taken a crushing blow.

Being snubbed does not bother Jesse Owens. He is focused on his next event. Although the long jump is his best event, he almost did not qualify because earlier, a German judge claimed he fouled. Now Jesse and Luz Long, a German, have both jumped 25 feet, 10 inches.

It is the final round. With a few deep breaths and long, measured strides, Jesse sprints down the path. He springs into the air and sails into the landing pit for a record-setting leap of 26 feet, 5½ inches. Another gold medal!

Jesse set out to do his best at the 1936 Olympics. He earned four gold medals, a first in Olympic history and a feat that would not be matched in track-and-field events for twelve years.

And, by letting his accomplishments speak for themselves, he embarrassed an evil dictator.

Jesse returned from Germany to a ticker-tape parade and cheers of admiration, but little else. At that time, black athletes did not get product endorsement or appearance contracts. His fame produced little income or stability for his family. To earn a living, Jesse participated in promotional stunts. He raced racehorses and motorcycles and even played basketball with the Harlem Globetrotters for a while. At Negro League baseball games, he raced the fastest players, often giving them a ten-yard lead!

He went on to be a playground director for the city of Cleveland and a well-known speaker. He toured the country and the world inspiring young people to do their best. The government named him America's Ambassador of Sports. Later in life, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Gerald R. Ford in 1976.

Jesse Owens' grandfather had been a slave. His father was a **sharecropper** who worked on other people's farms. Jesse grew up in poverty and worked odd jobs demonstrating that it is not where you come from that determines what you achieve. That is the legacy of Jesse Owens, a man who was always a step ahead.

Glossary

demeanor *(n.)* the way or manner in which a person behaves (p. 15)

determination *(n.)* the commitment or drive to work toward a difficult goal; resolve (p. 12)

discriminated *(v.)* treated a person or group unfairly because of gender, race, age, religion, or other differences (p. 15)

ideals *(n.)* guiding principles; standards of perfection (p. 21)

inscription *(n.)* words carved into stone or metal (p. 9)

integrate *(v.)* to bring different ideas or groups of people together (p. 15)

intimidated *(adj.)* made to feel frightened or overwhelmed (p. 21)

legacy *(n.)* something handed down from the past to the present (p. 13)

ordeal *(n.)* a hard or difficult experience (p. 17)

revolutionized *(v.)* made enormous changes (p. 4)

sharecropper *(n.)* a farmer who works on someone else's land in return for part of the profit from the crops (p. 23)

versatile *(adj.)* usable in many different ways (p. 4)