Jackie, of course, came first. Fifty years ago this spring, Jack Roosevelt Robinson blazed into America’s consciousness while tearing down baseball’s apartheid. With the hopes of his race flung across his flannel shoulders, Robinson played with such fire and passion that only the most ardent segregationist could avoid concluding that he, if not other qualified African Americans, belonged in the major leagues.

Robinson was an immediate success on the field and at the gate. Still, most owners in the game, including those who owned the Pittsburgh Pirates, were slow to follow the lead of Branch Rickey and the Brooklyn Dodgers, sticking instead to an all-white lineup.

Rickey, however, found himself out of a job in Brooklyn in the fall of 1950. John Galbreath, a leading member of the syndicate controlling the Pirates, didn’t let his friend sit idly by. Upon his departure from Flatbush, Rickey was offered the challenge of running the hapless Bucs. “The Mahatma,” as the press referred to the wise old Rickey, needed little time to accept the proposition.

The Pirates were not only a lily-white organization, but one practically barren of talent, as well. There was Ralph Kiner and little else. Rickey, being an astute judge of talent, later told a reporter, “My disillusionment was complete when I realized that I had nothing at all, substantially, to hold on to.” Rickey had his scouts scour the country. His biographer, Murray Polner, wrote, “He held mass tryout camps before anyone else; he sought out talented convicts on prison teams; his scouts watched Army and Navy teams.”

These unorthodox scouting techniques did little to boost the Pirates’ place in the standings. Nineteen fifty-one to 1953 was perhaps the worst string of seasons in the team’s long and storied history; with a cumulative record of 156-306, the club finished a combined 142 games out of first place. Although several players signed during this period would

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later contribute to the 1960 World Champion club, including
Vernon Law, Bob Friend, and Dick Groat, Rickey and his scouts
made no concerted effort to desegregate the club, while many
other front offices did.

Why did Rickey, the “Great Emancipator,” move curiously
slow in bringing a black to Pittsburgh? By 1951, the surge in black
attendance after Robinson’s debut had subsided. Signing a black
no longer made a discernible difference at the turnstiles. In
addition, the Mahatma often seemed lost at the Bucs’ helm; his
management was frequently questioned in the city’s newspapers.

Following the ’52 season, Rickey attempted to cut the
contract of his one star, Kiner, by 20 percent, though Kiner had led
the league in home runs for the seventh straight year. Kiner
protested, but Rickey told his slugger: “We finished last with you,
we can finish last without you.”

But if Rickey would so easily dispatch his most prolific hitter,
could he not have brought a black player or two into the fold
without harming the team’s prospects? Such logic is quickly shot
down by Rickey’s successor, Joe Brown.

“I don’t think it took him so long to bring a black to Pitts-
burgh,” Brown stated in an interview. “There’s no sense integrat-
ing with players who weren’t good enough. You’ve got to get
your hands on good players — acquiring contracts, signing
players, buying them, trading for them — that are good enough to
help you.”

How many major league caliber black ballplayers were
available during the period is impossible to calculate. Whether
Pittsburgh had the scouting force, and the inclination to flush out
the talent, is another question. Clearly, Rickey’s passion had
dimmed.

Then, on October 22, 1953, a little more than a month af-
ter the Chicago Cubs became the eighth big league team to field a
black player, 24-four-year-old Curtis Benjamin Roberts became
the property of the Pittsburgh Pirates.

Curt Roberts entered professional baseball directly upon
graduating from McClymonds High School in Oakland, Califor-
nia. At 18, he then joined the legendary Kansas City Monarchs of
the Negro American League. As a Monarch, Roberts played under
the tutelage of Buck O’Neil, and alongside such notables as
Satchel Paige, Gene Baker, Hilton Smith, Hank Thompson, Elston
Howard, and Ernie Banks.

Very few players remain from Roberts’ first season, and, as
we shall see, few of those bothered to get to know Roberts
anyway. Roberts died tragically at the age of 40 when he was hit
by a drunk driver, and so his wife, Christine Roberts, remains the
best source on her husband’s life, including his revolutionary duty
as a Pirate.

According to her, anyone would have been glad to see the
rigors of the Negro League end. “All those fellows had hemor-
rroids from riding in those buses, sleeping in those buses, eating
in those buses,” Roberts said. “It was a miserable way to live.

They’d be gone two, three weeks at a time. Once they got to their
destination, though, all they wanted to do was play baseball. It
was a lifestyle.”

The long and brutal barnstorming trips were made tolerable
only by the club’s return to town. “When they came to [Kansas
City], everything was spit and polish. There were parties, music,
barbecues, everything. Everybody wined and dined them. Curtis
was wide-eyed then, just like me. We just sat back and watched
everything going on around us.”

Following the 1950 Monarch season, Curt, as was his custom,
traveled south to play winter ball. After four years of traveling
country backroads with the Monarchs, Roberts got the break he
was looking for when Bob Howsam, the general manager of the
minor league Denver Bears, discovered him playing in the
Mexican League.

Roberts spent two more seasons with the Bears, steadily
improving at the plate. This improvement culminated with a fine
1953 campaign, when Roberts hit .291, with 12 home runs, and 71
runs batted in. At 5-foot-8 and 165 pounds, though, the diminutive
native of Pineland, Texas, was better known for his sprite legs and
fancy glove at second base. It was his work around the keystone
sack that brought Curt Roberts to the attention of Branch Rickey.

In a scene reminiscent of Rickey and Jackie Robinson’s initial
meeting some eight years earlier, Curt and Christine Roberts were
called into the general manager’s Forbes Field office. “I want to
know every bill you’ve got,” Rickey bellowed to the young
couple. “I want to know how you and your wife get along. I want
to know every worry that you’ve got, because it’s going to be
rough.”

Rickey explained that he had chosen Roberts to break the
color barrier in Pittsburgh because he had a demeanor similar to
Robinson’s. “He wanted a person who could take the abuse he
was going to get,” Christine Roberts remembers. “He also wanted
to be sure that Curt had a wife that was backing her husband.”

The Pirate general manager went one step further, she
recalled. “He paid off all of our bills. We didn’t have many, but
what we had, Mr. Rickey paid off so we wouldn’t have that to
worry about.”

She recalls Rickey lecturing Roberts: “You will have to be
patient with people. If you hear something from the stands or
from any players, you’ll have to let it go. Since you are the first
black Pittsburgh Pirate, you are going to go through these things.
You can’t let your temper flare up.”

As spring training drew near, Curt’s apprehension grew. “He
paced like a lion,” his wife recalls. “He would walk and drink
coffee.”

Despite Rickey’s express wish that it would be Roberts who
made the team, two other blacks, Sam Jethroe and Lino Donoso,
joined the club in Florida for spring training.

Jethroe, the 1950 National League rookie of the year, came to
the Pirates from Toledo of the American Association. The fleet-
footed outfielder was so quick in his prime that one player claimed
he could “outrun the word of God.” But Jethroe, who played with several Negro League teams before becoming the first black Boston Brave in 1950, was at the end of his distinguished career, and his chance of sticking in the majors was not rated as high.

Donoso, at 32, was also considered a long shot. The hard-throwing left-handed pitcher was also a veteran of the Negro League, having spent three seasons with the New York Cuban Giants. Donoso also had experience in the Mexican League.

While their teammates enjoyed accommodations at the Bucs’ new spring training home in Ft. Pierce, Roberts, Jethroe, and Donoso stayed across town in the “colored” section of the city. “There was always a black family with a big enough house to take in players. It was always across the tracks,” Christine Roberts explains, still saddened, some 40 years later, by her husband’s experience. Seven months pregnant with their third child, Christine Roberts stayed behind at their home in Reno, Nevada, as Curt began his major league career. “He was like my father — protective — and he didn’t want me [in Florida]. I would call him every day and I could tell by the sound of his voice how he felt. Curt would ask about the kids and I would tell him what mischief one of them got into and we’d laugh. Then he would feel better if he was down. Whatever was happening in Florida, anything that made him feel bad, he wouldn’t tell me.”

Any prejudice, or any pressure he felt from trying to make the club, Roberts refused to let show on the diamond. He had a tremendous spring, batting .395 and showing strong play in the field, sealing his spot on the roster. Also arriving from the south with the Pirates was Sam Jethroe, but after just two regular season appearances, he was released.

Pittsburgh was not the only team employing a black for the first time in 1954. St. Louis (with Tom Alston), the Washington Senators (with Carlos Paula), and Cincinnati (with Nino Escalera), also joined the ranks of the edified. As the season began, 37 out of more than 400 players were men of color. Only four franchises remained “white-only”: New York, Boston, and Detroit of the American League, and Philadelphia in the National League.

The Pirates opened the season against Philadelphia on April 13 at their spacious Forbes Field home. On the mound for the Phillies was right-hander Robin Roberts. Batting second in the lineup, Curt Roberts stepped in for his first major league at-bat, against the future Hall of Famer, and lashed a triple.

In Reno, Christine anxiously awaited word of her husband’s debut. “Curt called me that night, and he was so excited,” Mrs. Roberts fondly recalled. “Everyone was sitting around the table waiting for me to tell them what Curt said. When I relayed the message everyone was so pleased. The whole room just lit up with smiles. I was so proud of him. He worked so hard, nothing came easy for him.”

Christine gave birth to the couple’s second son, Phillip, in early May. When she arrived in the Steel City with her three young children in tow, and Curt on the road with the team, Mal Goode, a reporter for the Pittsburgh Courier, was there to greet her. He helped the family settle into their new home on Findland Street in the Schenley Heights section of the city. “We had a great
relocated to the Adams Hotel, an inn across town where many other blacks stayed.

"He checked out, that was his protest," Christine says. "The Pirates supported him. They said it wouldn't be one of the hotels that they stopped at anymore. The Chase publicly apologized to Curtis, and said it wouldn't happen again. He felt better that they gave a public apology, and went back the next time the club was in town."

Roberts and Jackie Robinson became friends, since no one understood the indignities better than Robinson. In one letter to Roberts, Robinson warns that "your job in Pittsburgh is a ticklish one, you must be careful just as I had to for awhile.... Just don't defeat yourself by giving up."

"Jackie and Curt talked on the phone all the time," Christine Roberts recollects. "He was Curt's mentor. That communication with Jackie kept Curt going."

The 1954 season would be a lonely year for Roberts. On the road, he was left to fend for himself. After games, Roberts would dine alone, occasionally take in a movie, and then head back to his hotel room. While his place on the ball club was tolerated on the playing field, the relationship between he and his teammates could be termed cordial at best. His teammates certainly did not extend hands in friendship outside the white lines.

To his wife, the situation wasn't hard to evaluate. "He ate by himself. If he was treated good by his teammates, if he had been close to anyone, I would have seen some of them in my house. Our house was always full in Denver, white and black, Cubans, Panamanians.... Everybody came to our house. But there were never any white players invited to my house in Pittsburgh. That tells me Curtis wasn't treated well."

Frank Thomas, a teammate in 1954 from Pittsburgh, remembers Roberts as "a little guy who was easy to joke with. We always joked with him." Thomas, however, has promoted himself in the past as "one of the greatest agitators in the history of baseball." So, whether the jibes directed at Roberts were good-natured may be hard to say. Years later, as a Phillie, Thomas' "jokes" earned him at least one left hook in the jaw from African American slugger Dick Allen.

Bob Friend, winner of 191 games in his 15 seasons with the Bucs, was also a member of that 1954 club. "Curt was a great guy," Friend remembers. "Christ, he was a good little ball player. I wasn't real close to him, but I did like him."

Former Pittsburgh Courier columnist Bill Nunn retorts: "I would like to ask them, 'Was Curt ever invited to any of the get-togethers you guys had?' They didn't want to face what Curt was up against, so they were blind to it." He notes, as well, that African Americans during those years felt pressure "to keep our place" in a country where most whites were learning to suppress racial prejudice rather than to overcome it. "I know one damn thing. I know Curt didn't associate with the white players once he left the ballpark."

How much this sense of isolation affected Roberts in the field is up for debate. His season-ending batting average of .232 left much to be desired. Both the white and black press acclaimed his defensive prowess, but slick fielding would not be enough to earn him a longterm position in the major leagues.
“Trying too hard affected his play,” his wife believes. “He tried too hard to prove himself. This man was one big lump of nerves. He wanted to succeed for his fans. He wanted his teammates to respect him. He wanted to make good for his family to provide everything for us.”

Although he would spend time with the Bucs in both ’55 and ’56, his first full season in the majors proved to be his last. In the mid-1950s, black players did not sit on the bench. They either started or were shipped off. Instead of being a valued utility infielder, as would have been the case two or three decades later, Roberts was traded by the Pirates to the Kansas City Athletics organization. For the next eight years, he bounced around the minor leagues in such cities as Columbus, Montreal, and Spokane, where he accumulated a respectable lifetime batting average and continued his solid play in the field.

“Curt loved to play ball,” Christine Roberts says. “When he wasn’t able to play he would worry me to death. He would oil up his glove. Then… he’d clean his baseball bats, he’d clean his baseball shoes. This went on all winter long. He would be packed two months before it was time to head to spring training. Curt was a real family man, but he was not complete, he was not whole, unless he was playing baseball.”

The family settled in Oakland, California, and Curt Roberts worked as a campus police officer at the University of California. Before his untimely death, his wife believes, he was able to find some peace out of baseball. “He became comfortable with his job. He was with a group of men again, [and] the camaraderie of the job, the fellowship, reminded him of baseball.”

On November 15, 1969, the Robertses were together when the left rear tire of their car blew out as they were about to enter the MacArthur Freeway. Curtis Roberts was in the process of changing the tire when he was struck. He died two hours later at Kaiser Hospital. It was later determined that the reckless driver was intoxicated.

Today Curtis Roberts is little more than a footnote in baseball history. He played in 171 games and compiled a meager .223 lifetime average in the majors. But in a profession where merit appears so easily measured, the tendency is to miss the real life that goes on behind the statistics. In fact, most who play baseball are not superstars — black or white. Most who make it to the majors do not enjoy long or famous careers. For every Jackie Robinson or Willie Mays, there is Hank Thompson, Gene Baker, John Kennedy, and Curt Roberts.

Some are great players, and we remember them today accordingly. But all were pioneers in a society where individual effort against formidable odds is, when recognized, frequently applauded. In the case of Curt Roberts, recognition is long overdue.

On July 12, 1997, the Pittsburgh Pirates will honor the careers of Curtis Roberts and other early black players in a pre-game ceremony at Three Rivers Stadium. An evening of entertainment, food, and African American culture culminates in a game against the Houston Astros. Further information is available by calling the Pirates at 1-800-289-2827.