



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on April 13, 2013

## “42” Brings New Life to the Jackie Robinson Drama

“I don’t know who he is and I don’t know where he is, but he’s coming,” Branch Rickey declares in the opening scene of *42*, the highly acclaimed movie about Jackie Robinson’s breaking of the color barrier in organized baseball. It is also the story of an unconventional team owner determined to break an unwritten rule of the game by bringing a Negro player to the Brooklyn Dodgers.



Harrison Ford plays Rickey with an engaging, curmudgeonly charm, brilliantly portraying a crusty old baseball veteran with a wry sense of humor, cheerfully defying the conventional wisdom and determined opposition of baseball players and executives alike to achieve what they “knew” couldn’t be done. The film shows the baseball maverick as both a tough-minded idealist and a shrewd businessman. A devout Methodist who backs his stern convictions with frequent citations of Scripture, Rickey is determined to prove the commandment to “Love thy neighbor” is more than a pious platitude to be followed according to personal whims or prejudices. When standing before the judgment seat of God, he angrily warns another baseball executive, invoking baseball tradition as an excuse for keeping a black man out of the game “may not be sufficient!”

But Rickey is also portrayed as the pragmatist he was, concerned about the box office as well as the Bible. “There are a lot of black baseball fans in New York,” he explains, and he wants to give them a reason to buy tickets to Dodgers games at Ebbets Field. “Money isn’t black and white, but green,” he reminds a nervous team official. “Every dollar is green.”

Ford’s portrayal of Rickey is so engaging that it almost overshadows the performance of Chadwick Boseman as Robinson —almost, but not quite. Boseman brings Robinson to life as the proud and extraordinarily gifted athlete who seethes inwardly, while silently bearing the most ugly and vile racial taunts the bigoted mind can imagine. Indeed, many moviegoers will no doubt be offended by much of the language in this film, including the frequent use of the “N word,” an epithet that in recent times has aroused indignation even when found in a literary classic like Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. But it would be impossible to accurately portray what Robinson endured without including that and other racial epithets in the dialogue.

Alan Tudyk is a convincing villain as Ben Chapman, the loud and obnoxious manager of the Philadelphia Phillies, who is shown leading the race-baiters in his dugout in taunting Robinson unmercifully. “N\*\*\*\*r, n\*\*\*\*r, n\*\*\*\*r!” he shouts repeatedly, adding further insult by claiming the morally upright Robinson has been sleeping with his teammates’ wives. “You don’t belong here!” he screams at Robinson. “Get that through your monkey head!” Having promised Rickey he wouldn’t retaliate, Robinson stares long and hard at Chapman, barely able to contain himself. In the runway between the dugout and the clubhouse, he vents his rage by pounding his bat against the wall, shattering it to pieces.

Lucas Black turned in a strong performance as Pee Wee Reese, the Dodgers’ shortstop and team captain, who refuses to be drawn into the efforts of some of his teammates to keep Robinson off the team. Reese, a Kentuckian, is shown wavering, however, when prior to the team’s arrival in Cincinnati



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he receives a threatening letter, warning him against taking the field with Robinson. Rickey shows him folders full of death threats to Robinson, including threats against Robinson's wife and infant son. Later, on the ball field at Cincinnati, Reese is shown throwing an arm around Robinson and engaging in a friendly chat, making public a biracial show of solidarity with a troubled teammate.

Andre Holland plays Wendell Smith, one of the lesser-known but important figures in the story. A black sportswriter, Smith becomes, at Rickey's behest, Robinson's frequent companion, part-time chauffeur, and mentor, mixing good-natured needling with sober advice in helping the star athlete adjust to the daunting task of overcoming the institutional racism embedded so deeply in America's "national pastime."

Nicole Beharie is charming and graceful in her portrayal of Jackie's wife, Rachel, fusing humor and compassion as she shares in her husband's ordeals, both within and away from the ballpark. Christopher Meloni is altogether convincing as the fiery and unsentimental ("Nice guys finish last") Leo Durocher, whose profanity-laced defense of Robinson's inclusion on the team is that Robinson and other black players to come will help the Dodgers win pennants and cash World Series checks. The film does take some liberty with the facts by presenting Durocher's one-year suspension from the game as a consequence of his adventures in adultery. In fact, it was Durocher's friendship with alleged gamblers, not his womanizing, that prompted baseball Commissioner Happy Chandler to suspend the controversial manager.

On the whole, however, screenwriter and director Brian Helgeland has presented a faithful and compelling account of a dark side of American history and how it was changed by a courageous athlete and a determined baseball entrepreneur — without government intervention. Through their efforts, baseball was desegregated before public schools, water faucets, restrooms or even many churches were in some parts of the country.

One of the most poignant moments in the film comes when Rickey explains how he had so long been haunted by the stigma of racism in the game he had loved all his life.

"You," he tells Robinson, "you made me love baseball again."

42, which opened Friday in theaters nationwide, gets its name from Robinson's uniform number, a number now retired by all major and minor league teams and worn by all players for one game each year as a tribute to the man whose talent and courage paved the way for blacks and other racial minorities to bring their talents to the game. The human drama of Robinson's story will appeal to a wider audience than just baseball fans and will undoubtedly make it a box office, as well as artistic, success. But seeing the vivid recreations on screen of Robinson's batting and fielding skills, along with the excitement wrought by his speed and daring on the base paths, might also inspire fans who have drifted away from the game to rediscover the joys of baseball. They might just find in this film what Rickey discovered in Robinson.

"You, you made me love baseball again."



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