

Who was Jackie Robinson's Jackie Robinson?

By [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#)

May 10, 2013

My husband and I went to see **42** the other night. Good film, well worth seeing. There was the tiniest layer of cheese over the movie, and the score was not the least bit subtle. But it was well done, and it captured the essence of his story, [at least according to Robinson's widow](#).

A church member had told me to be on the lookout for references to faith, and they were certainly there. Branch Rickey (played by Harrison Ford) quotes scripture as a justification for signing Robinson to the Dodgers, though he's also clear that it's a good long-term business decision. Loved the line at the beginning: "Robinson's a Methodist! I'm a Methodist! God's a Methodist!"

During their first meeting, Rickey talks to Robinson about how he is to respond to the racist vitriol that will come—he cannot fight back, even if provoked, because he will inevitably be deemed the instigator by a wary and suspicious public. His job is to play ball and to do it well. (Which he does... and there are clear elements of the trickster in the way Robinson toys with the pitchers when stealing bases.)

[Jackie Robinson](#): You want a player who doesn't have the guts to fight back?

[Branch Rickey](#): No. I want a player who's got the guts **not** to fight back.

This idea is connected explicitly to Jesus' teachings later on during a conversation between the two characters.

Given the Christian images that wove throughout the movie, I longed for just one scene of Jackie Robinson in church. It's not that I need that validation as a Christian or anything. But there is no real sense of the community Jackie grows out of. Whenever we see him in the movie, he's either on the field, with Rickey, or with his wife.

We see him inspiring countless African-Americans at the time (and it was cool to read that one of the most “Hollywood” moments of the story, involving a young boy at a train station as Robinson and the team pull away, [was based in reality](#)). But who inspired and sustained Jackie Robinson? Who did he look to for support? During the torrent of abuse, the pitches thrown at him, the petitions circulating behind his back, was there a community that he leaned on?

Even trailblazers need a community.

[As I wrote last week](#), John Lewis talked recently about the training the civil rights activists received around non-violent resistance to racist attitudes and barriers. That kind of training didn’t spring fully formed in the 1950s, post-Robinson; it rises from a long history and a deep grounding in the stories of liberation in the Bible. I understand that in a movie you have to be economical with the story, but it felt a bit strained for Rickey, an old white guy, to be Robinson’s sole mentor helping him along the way. (Though I loved the character.)

Maybe a Jackie Robinson fan will come along and shed some light—and for all I know the film may be accurate that he was kind of a loner. But there’s a bigger point. I’m always a bit bothered by this kind of portrayal of our heroes. It strikes me as a very American way to tell the story—it’s the bootstrap myth on steroids—but it’s ultimately inadequate. What’s powerful about real-life hero stories is that they tell about real flesh-and-blood people who rise out of a community in a specific time and place. They may see themselves as nothing special, but their gifts and circumstance conspire to thrust them into greatness. Even so, they cannot do it alone.

Not everyone is called to be Jackie Robinson. Heck, not everyone *can* be Jackie Robinson. But our world needs people to aspire to great things. If the cultural story we tell is of the lone hero, I suspect that most people will choose to sit out because they think they don’t have what it takes. But if we get to stand on the shoulders of others who’ve gone before, I suspect that more people will get to climbing.

*Originally posted at [The Blue Room](#)*