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[The untold story behind Mr. Ricky's real desire to bring Jackie Robinson into the all-white baseball league](#)



FILE: From left, Brooklyn Dodgers baseball players John Jorgensen, Pee Wee Reese, Ed Stanky and Jackie Robinson pose at Ebbets Field in New York on April 15, 1947. (AP)

When Travis Ishikawa smashed the home run that put the San Francisco Giants into the World Series last week, many baseball fans flashed back to what may have been the most dramatic home run ever.

That was “The Shot Heard 'Round the World,” aka “The Miracle of Coogan’s Bluff,” that the late Bobby Thomson hit in 1951. Thomson played for the same franchise (the then-New York Giants) and his walk-off blast, like Ishikawa’s, was hit with two men on base in the bottom of the ninth inning and put the Giants into the Series.

Yet I was struck by another connection to Thomson's dramatic home run 63 years ago: the famous image of a dejected second baseman named Jackie Robinson, his hands on his hips, watching to make sure Thomson touched each base as he joyously raced to home plate and broke the hearts of the Brooklyn Dodgers and their ever-loyal fans.

Ishikawa's faith in God got a ton of media attention over the last week. If not for his faith, Ishikawa said, he would not have been with the Giants, let alone get a chance to hit the home run that put them in the World Series.

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Yet it has been lost on history that Robinson would not have been with the Dodgers when Thomson hit his home run and, more importantly, that he never would have broken baseball's color barrier — if not for divine intervention.

Ishikawa was dumped by the Pittsburgh Pirates at the start of this season and then played so poorly for a Giants' minor league team that he thought of retiring. He cried in despair to a friend over the phone about how it might be time to give up and get a more stable paycheck for his wife and three kids. But then he did some soul-searching, prayed on it and decided to stick it out.

"There's times where it crosses your mind, that you wonder if God is continuing to put me through this trial, or if it's Him telling me that it's time to hang 'em up and do something else," Ishikawa said after his walk-off homer vindicated his decision to keep chasing his dream.

Jerry Reinsdorf, owner of the Chicago White Sox and the Chicago Bulls, has seen those kinds of agonizing decisions up close. "It's a great story because he probably never thought he'd make it," Reinsdorf told me in a phone conversation.

Reinsdorf grew up poor in Brooklyn, and he rooted for the Dodgers. He was at Ebbets Field on April 15, 1947, when Robinson became the first black man to play in the Major Leagues. But neither Reinsdorf nor any other Dodgers fan knew that Robinson's rise to the big leagues came after a consultation with God.

The conventional wisdom is that the Dodgers' president and general manager, Branch Rickey, a Methodist nicknamed "The Mahatma" for his deep religious convictions, was dead certain that signing Robinson to a contract was the just thing to do, and that his confidence never wavered.

But that's the Hollywood version you saw in the movie "42" and in a pile of books over the years. The truth is a little more complicated.

I've uncovered evidence that Rickey, in 1945, had second thoughts about whether he could really go through with signing the first African-American player amid intense pressure from baseball's white executives and team owners not to do it.

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Just how hard Rickey wrestled with his dilemma makes his ultimate decision all the more inspiring.

Until now, very few people knew that Rickey paid a secret visit to the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, the perfect setting for a monumental decision on civil rights. Its first pastor was the famed abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, and the church had been a stop on the Underground Railroad.

The pastor on this day was the Rev. Dr. L. Wendell Fifield, and he would share what played out in his office over the next hour with only person — his wife, June, who kept the secret until 1966, after both her husband and Rickey had passed away.

June Fifield wrote a five-page essay about the episode that was inserted into the weekly church bulletin. It got very little attention until I was tipped off to its existence and tracked down a copy.

According to Mrs. Fifield's account, her husband and Rickey knew each other only casually, so the pastor was surprised when his secretary buzzed on the intercom and said, "Mr. Rickey is here and asks to come in."

Upon arriving upstairs, Rickey quickly made clear that he did not want to chat. He just wanted to sit and think while the pastor continued with his work. Then the baseball man began pacing the floor, clearly struggling with something and unable to verbalize it. It's a familiar routine for a pastor — a man who cheats his business partner or strays from his wife shows up at church, wrestling with his conscience.

By Mrs. Fifield's accounting, Rickey roamed around the room anxiously, stopping only to peer through the window at the church garden below.

"He paced, and he paused, he paced and he paused," she wrote. "Pace, pause, pace, pause; turn, gaze, pace, pause."

This continued for an agonizingly long time. The pastor glanced up from his work occasionally, but he didn't speak. "He knew that whatever brought Mr. Rickey to his presence was an extremely important and personal matter, and he gave him the privacy of his struggle," Mrs. Fifield wrote.

"Mr. Rickey stood with eyes closed and seemed to draw his great frame up to a new height. Then he'd sag again and pace. As the pauses grew longer, my husband once caught a kind of glow about Mr. Rickey as he stood in silence. Then, back to the pacing and pausing — and silence."

Finally, after 45 minutes, Rickey slammed his fist down on the pastor's desk, knocking over everything from a fountain pen to the intercom. "I've got it!" he said.

Rickey started to rush out of the room, but the pastor insisted he tell him what had been weighing on him so heavily.

"Wendell," Rickey said, tears glistening in his eyes, "I've decided to sign Jackie Robinson!"

Then Rickey slid his ample girth into an oversized easy chair, struggling to regain his composure before he continued.

"Wendell," he said, "this decision was a decision so complex, so far-reaching, fraught with so many pitfalls but filled with so much good, if it was right ..."

Rickey paused, thinking through the moment.

"I just had to work it out in this room with you," Rickey said. "I had to talk to God about it and be sure what He wanted me to do. I hope you don't mind."

Mrs. Fifield wrote in 1966 that she wanted this story known so that Robinson would realize the full extent of what had gone into launching his career, that "someone cared enough to grope for wisdom beyond himself, to call upon God's guidance."

I had the opportunity once to sit down with Rachel Robinson, Jackie's graceful widow, and she said she was certain that her husband — who died far too young at the age of 53 in 1972 — had never heard the story. But she said it certainly "reinforces" her high opinion of Rickey and how "thoughtful" he was in making such an important decision.

Branch Rickey III told me he never heard this chapter of the story, either, but it rings true because of his grandfather's deep faith and willingness to seek guidance from a higher being. He recalled another story that is particularly poignant, given what we now know happened at Plymouth Church.

Robinson signed his contract in 1945 and played in the minor leagues the next year before joining the Dodgers in 1947. A sports journalist remarked to the elder Rickey that when Robinson trotted out to his position at Ebbets Field, "all hell would break loose" for sure.

"My grandfather immediately responded to him, 'I believe tomorrow all heaven will rejoice.'" the young Rickey said.

Reinsdorf, whose White Sox won a World Series and whose Bulls won six NBA championships, has seen a lot of sports history. He describes attending Robinson's first game in 1947 as if it were a religious experience.

Ebbets Field was walking distance from Reinsdorf's apartment, but the excited 11-year-old took the subway because he wanted to get to the park more quickly and take in the sights and sounds.

When he emerged from the subway and got his first glimpse of the field, anything seemed possible, he said.

“Ebbets Field was in kind of a drab area, it was very gray,” the 78-year-old Reinsdorf says now. “And all of a sudden this green just burst upon you. I still — just talking about it I get excited. I remember it so clearly.”

Except he does not remember that day for the racial history that was made. Instead, he was just a baseball fan eager to see two rookies who joined the Brooklyn Dodgers that year — Robinson and a long-forgotten third baseman named Spider Jorgensen.

“I don’t remember thinking, ‘Oh one guy’s a white guy, one guy’s a black guy,’” Reinsdorf says. “I just wanted to see how good these guys were. I don’t remember — I wish I could tell you — but I don’t remember there was any particular buzz that there was a black player.

“You know, I didn’t realize the social significance of it.”

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