

JACKIE ROBINSON: PRO FOOTBALL PRELUDE

By Bob Gill

Jackie Robinson was probably the most significant athlete of the 20th Century. For at least two years, 1946 and '47, his every action, on the field and off, was subject to public scrutiny, the pressure of which very few men could have withstood. Even after the first few years, when the "novelty" of Robinson's position had worn off somewhat, he was still a figure of supreme symbolic importance. As a result, Robinson's life from the moment he signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers has been chronicled, justifiably, in great detail.

It is often noted that Robinson was uniquely qualified to break baseball's color line because at UCLA, playing with whites, he had excelled at three sports and been accepted as a player and a person. But most people are unaware that before Jackie Robinson broke into organized baseball he was already a veteran of two seasons in an integrated pro football league.

The league was the PCPFL, or Pacific Coast Pro Football League. It was similar in status to baseball's Pacific Coast League – that is, technically a very strong minor league, but because of its geographical distance from the major leagues, functioning much as a major league in its own right. Particularly during World War II, when many NFL players were in the service, stationed on the West Coast, the PCPFL was genuinely top-notch.

There was, however, one important difference between baseball and football on the Pacific Coast: the football league allowed blacks to play.

In fact, the PCPFL was organized in 1940 around two main attractions: the Los Angeles Bulldogs, its best and most famous team; and Kenny Washington, its best and most famous player. People on the West Coast apparently had no qualms about watching Washington play with the white boys – in fact, crowds for games involving his team, the Hollywood Bears, were commonly 30-50 percent larger than for other games. The fact that the Bears, who also featured black end Woody Strode, quickly proved to be on an equal footing with the Bulldogs didn't hurt, either. And by 1941 Hollywood had supplanted Los Angeles as the league's strongest club.

Suddenly relegated to secondary status in his hometown, L.A. owner Jerry Corcoran needed something to boost his team's stock. In search of a drawing card to rival Washington, he concluded that a good choice would be a UCLA teammate of Kenny's who had comparable, if not equal, ability and drawing power. That player, of course, was Jackie Robinson.

Robinson, who signed with L.A. late in the season – right after Pearl Harbor, in fact – was not a crusader in pro football. At best, he was about the sixth black player to play in the PCPFL, the rest of the league having followed Hollywood's lead with regard to blacks in 1941. But he was, next to Washington, the most famous of the bunch.

Jackie's PCPFL debut came Dec. 14 against the San Francisco Packers. He played only about 12 minutes, and made a 41-yard touchdown run for the Bulldogs' final score in a 36-0 win. Still he was generally unimpressive, and the L.A. TIMES pointed out that his "yardage was in the minus column" before the scoring run, which came on a scramble after an attempted pass play broke down. The TIMES report also spoke disparagingly of Robinson's running style, complaining that he showed too much lateral maneuvering and not enough straight-ahead power.

A week later, the Bulldogs opposed the undefeated Hollywood Bears in the season's finale. The Bears had won the previous two meetings between the teams with relative ease, but this time L.A. took a 10-3 lead into the final quarter, due largely to the efforts of Robinson, who not only completed several passes, including one for a touchdown, but also displayed an improved brand of running. The TIMES spoke glowingly of the "new style Jackie Robinson [who] deserted hipper-dipper end runs for plunges through tackle and for accurate, damaging passes."

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In the end, Hollywood rallied to win on two fourth-quarter TD passes by Washington, but few, if any, went home disappointed. And apparently no one was offended by the fact that the game had been dominated by two black players.

For the next couple of years Robinson was in the service, spending at least part of the time in Hawaii, where he played some football – and probably some baseball as well – in local sandlot leagues. But in 1944 he returned to the mainland and resumed his pro football career.

That season, for the first time in its history, the PCPFL had a rival on the West Coast. A league called the AFL had signed many of the better available players and stolen much of the established league's thunder. The L.A. Bulldogs had fallen on hard times, with three AFL teams stationed in the same city, including the coast's strongest team, the Hollywood Rangers. So when Robinson returned from the islands in late October, it was only natural that Corcoran approached him about rejoining his former team.

To digress for a moment, it should be noted that by this time there were quite a few black players in action on the Pacific Coast. Kenny Washington, who had not been allowed to play in 1942-3 while working for the Los Angeles police, had returned with the AFL's second-best team, the San Francisco Clippers, and picked up right where he'd left off in 1941. The PCPFL all-league team named at the end of the season included at least two blacks, Mel Reid and Bull Lewis of the Oakland Giants. And with the Bulldogs, Robinson joined brothers Billy and Tommy Mills, both of whom were black.

Robinson made his 1944 debut Nov. 5 in San Francisco, against the Packers again. Despite the layoff, and limited playing time, he tossed two scoring passes in a 34-21 loss. One San Francisco paper speculated that if Robinson had seen more action the outcome might have been different.

The Bulldogs were idle Nov. 12, but a week later they played the Hollywood Wolves, replacements for the Bears, in Los Angeles. Robinson starred in the 21-13 win, turning in a 43-yard scoring run and amassing 101 yards for the day on 8 rushes.

Next to visit L.A. were the San Diego Bombers, easily the class of the PCPFL. The Bombers finished the season with a 9-0 record, averaging more than 37 points per game. Since 1941 their biggest star had been Steve Bagarus, who had taken the mantle as the coast's top player when Washington was forced into temporary retirement. Joining the Washington Redskins before the 1945 season, Bagarus turned in two all-star seasons in the NFL before a leg injury cut short his career.

The Nov. 26 game, not surprisingly, was billed as a duel between Bagarus and Robinson. But it failed almost completely to fill the bill. Bagarus, who was in the service and not always free to make road trips with the Bombers, was forced to stay in San Diego; and Robinson injured his ankle the first time he handled the ball and left the game for good. San Diego's 41-14 win proved somewhat anticlimactic for the fans and members of the press in attendance.

It was also an anticlimactic finish to the pro football career of Jackie Robinson. By the time the 1945 football season rolled around, he was making headlines in a different sport. And the real Jackie Robinson story was just beginning.