

'42:' A Doorway to the Past

All baseball films (and sport movies in general, for that matter) follow the usual rags to riches, kid from nowhere turned superstar, “if you dream big and work hard, anything is possible” tropes that we keep coming back for. And for good reason. Who doesn’t want to feel good walking out of a movie? Like seeing a rag tag Cleveland Indians team in *Major League* push for a pennant against all odds, or reliving Scottie Smalls’ epic summer adventures in *The Sandlot*? Those movies left us feeling good, feeling happy. However, rarely does a sports movie come along that goes beyond pure entertainment and that ‘good’ feeling. That, instead, leaves its audience in awe of a man’s genuine, historic, and culturally significant achievements; one that transcends time, reminding us all the true meaning of bravery, bigotry, and sacrifice through the story of the man who changed baseball and the American way forever. Other baseball biopics based on true events like *Moneyball* and *The Rookie* are great films, however lack the cultural impact and overall significance of a Jackie Robinson rendition, which ultimately set ‘42’ apart from films like them.

Premiering April 13th, 2013, Brian Helgeland’s biopic ‘42’ recounts the compelling story of Jackie Robinson, the first African American man to ever play Major League Baseball. Following his bouts with societal rejection and racial prejudice, Robinson finds himself representing more than the number on his jersey and the team across his chest. Helgeland captures the tone and feel of the time, while providing intriguing examples of the sport for baseball fans and novices alike.

‘42’ provides uncanny set pieces for its superb actors to truly illustrate the look, feel, and culture of the United States during the 1940s, from everything including the classic formal attire of the characters to even the hue of gentle fuzz and light that 1940s cameras would produce being a mainstay throughout the film. Further, Helgeland rebirths baseball’s golden era with accurately detailed uniforms for the players and recreating historic parks such as Ebbet’s Field and Seals Stadium. The film’s star, Chadwick Boseman, shines as Jackie Robinson, instilling the quiet confidence and steadfast courage he displayed in real life on the big screen. Boseman also nails Robinson’s mannerisms on and off the field.

An important moment in the film regarding this notion and the strength of Robinson as an individual came during the scene in which the Dodgers faced the St. Louis Cardinals. Cardinal manager Ben Chapman jeered at Robinson during his at-bat, calling him the ‘n’ word repeatedly and yelling that he didn’t belong in a “white man’s game.” He then began jousting at the rest of the Dodger bench, accusing them of being ‘n**ger lovers’ and asking which one of their wife’s Robinson had accosted. This came during a time of great turmoil on the team, when most of Jackie’s teammates were still skeptical about his presence. Robinson just barely manages to shake off the urge to beat Chapman senseless, and Boseman solidifies his powerful performance

when his Robinson retreats to the dugout after the encounter, marches into the underground tunnel of the stadium and releases all the rage and anger building inside him from all his subjugators. However, during his next turn at the plate, while Chapman again verbally abuses Jackie, teammate Eddie Stanky (played by Jesse Luken) storms the field to defend the teammate he had once himself made similar racist remarks to earlier in the film. Jackie then singles his way on base, and effortlessly steals two bases to later score the game's winning run. This scene offered a glimpse of the pressures Robinson faced game after game, and his ability to let his play do the talking about whether or not he belonged rather than act out in anger, speaking to both Robinson the man and Robinson the player. It also showed just how deeply rooted the country was in segregation of African Americans, even in something as simple as the game of baseball; even more fascinating, Robinson's introduction to a game as simple as baseball proved to represent the beginning of a shift in American culture towards acceptance and desegregation in more than just sports. This culture shock lighted a spark in American history, and Helgeland and Boseman recreate its influence.

Towards '42's final act, the Dodgers take the field to their usual boos and racist shouts directed at them and at Jackie. One man amongst the spectators begins to scream at Jackie, and his son reluctantly joins his old man, repeating the 'n' word his father just used. Teammate Pee Wee Reese stops in the middle of their warm ups, jogs to Robinson, throws his arm around him. This sends the crowd even further into a frenzy of hate. Reese, portrayed by Lucas Black, says simply, "Thank you, Jackie." When asked for what, he gazed into the stands and claims, "I got family up there from Louisville...I need 'em to know who I am." Then Black's Reese delivers the most iconic line in the film, which holds true to today, "Maybe tomorrow we'll all wear '42', that way they can't tell us apart." The young child sees this exchange and displays a moment of questioning, as his father continues to jaw at Jackie. This scene's power and humanity is worth the price of admission alone, truly capturing Jackie Robinson's influence of the game of baseball, and over the American people forever.

'42' is, undoubtedly, baseball's cinematic jewel; through its accurate portrayals of the game, of the most culturally segregated time in U.S. history, and of America's most influential pioneers, '42' eclipses its cinematic counterparts in every aspect of what a truly great baseball film is. Brian Helgeland goes beyond a mere recollection of the past, but transports us there, and leaves feeling good to wear #42.