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Rabbi Expands Tributes to Robinson Beyond the Major Leagues



Andy Atkinson for The New York Times

David Zaslow, a rabbi in Ashland, Ore., enlisted former bar-mitzvah students to help spearhead the project, including Jack Carroll, 18, right, of Ashland High School.

By HUNTER ATKINS
Published: April 16, 2013

It was April 15, 2009, when David Zaslow, a rabbi in Ashland, Ore., plopped on his living room sofa to catch some of the day's baseball highlights. Born in Coney Island and raised as a devout fan of the Brooklyn Dodgers (for his call to prayer, instead of instructing the congregation to look east toward Jerusalem, he prefers to say east toward Ebbets Field), he began to tear up at the unexpected sight of a wondrous celebration. Zaslow saw that every player had worn jerseys without names that day, donning only the No. 42.

On that day 62 years ago, [Jackie Robinson](#) exited the Ebbets Field dugout and became the face of racial change in America. His story of surmounting bigotry to integrate baseball would inspire a world far beyond the confines of the ballpark. The No. 42 on his back would become the indelible symbol of his legacy.

Major League Baseball officially retired the number in 1997 but let players who already wore the number keep it, including the Yankees' Mariano Rivera. In 2009, Commissioner Bud Selig requested that all players wear No. 42 on April 15 every season to honor Robinson.

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Zaslow could not identify the players in their nameless jerseys: "Whether they were black or Hispanic or white, they were all equal now, and I couldn't tell who was who."

As a rabbi in the Jewish Renewal movement — which was founded in the late 1960s to incorporate the "modern sensibilities," according to Zaslow, evoked by the civil rights movement and opposition to the Vietnam War — he looks to Scripture for guidance. But now it was the baseball gods that gave him an epiphany for how to expand Robinson's legacy.

"I do think it was an inspired idea," Zaslow said. "It didn't come from me. It came from Ebbets Field up above. The spiritual Brooklyn Dodgers in the other world descended down and said, 'Do this.'"

Four years since the idea sparked, Zaslow, 65, has initiated Campaign 42, a project that helps ballplayers of all ages across the country [wear No. 42 on their jerseys](#), to coincide with the Jackie Robinson Day celebration in Major League Baseball. Starting last week, nearly 2,600 players ages 4 to 18 wore No. 42 stickers on a sleeve or the front of their jerseys. Not all the teams had games April 15, so most honored Robinson throughout the week.

Zaslow enlisted two former bar mitzvah students to spearhead the project: Jack Carroll, 18, and Jonah Harris, 17, recruited most of the participants from leagues in Oregon, but they also attracted others in Boulder, Colo., and Pittsburgh.

"I thought, why has no one thought of doing this before?" said Jonathan Mayo, a writer for [MLB.com](#) since 1999, who ordered 375 stickers for his son's Little League in Pittsburgh.

The stickers come with a flier explaining Robinson's contribution to American history. Coaches and parents are asked to educate players about America's racial inequality at the time of Robinson's debut.

"Kids are not just handed a sticker and told to wear it," Harris said.

He added: "If a sticker is what gets the conversation started, so be it. But it needs to start somewhere."

Harris, who lives in Portland and plays catcher for Wilson High School, said the campaign motivated him because his two adopted siblings are African-American.

Carroll, who has a Chinese mother and is a left-handed pitcher for Ashland High School, added that Robinson opened up opportunities for all minorities, not just African-Americans.

"To me, it's a big deal because I'm Chinese, and I wouldn't be able to play baseball," Carroll said. "There's a new generation of people who don't know how big of a person Jackie Robinson was and his impact on society and helping out in the community."

Michelle McMahan, the president of Ashland Little League, said she was excited her 9-year-old son and his teammates would learn more about Robinson's story.

"I would guarantee that most of the kids don't know," she said. "They know he's a great ballplayer, but they don't know the risks and what he fought for."

Julie Schoenfeld persuaded her son's travel team, the Boulder (Colo.) County Mustangs, to participate because the campaign promoted a "universal theme of humanity."

Schoenfeld said that Robinson's story offered a way to broach several issues, like antidiscrimination, social justice, bullying and ethnic struggles all over the world. "If it can be taught through sports, it can be more accessible to kids who may otherwise not take an interest in it," she said.

Zaslow began the project — which has a budget of just a few hundred dollars — with an order of 2,000 stickers, but he said that early interest had convinced him that the

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campaign would grow. He has even had requests from doctors, who wore No. 42 stickers on their lab coats.

"I want people to steal it," Zaslow said, hoping others would join him in distributing the stickers. "I want this to go way, way beyond me."

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: April 15, 2013

An earlier version of this article and a picture caption misspelled the surname of a student who recruited leagues in Oregon to participate in the Campaign 42 project. He is Jack Carroll, not Carol.

A version of this article appeared in print on April 16, 2013, on page B11 of the New York edition with the headline: Robinson Tributes Go Beyond Majors.

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