

Robinson caused hair to rise on neck

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Friday, 17 May 2013 13:53 -



Tot Holmes recalls excitement of watching Jackie play baseball.

During his 81 years of playing, coaching and writing about sports, Tot Holmes remembers two athletes who rise above the rest.

Baseball legend Jackie Robinson and Husker running back Johnny Rodgers.

“There was always the anticipating that something special was going to happen when you watched them play,” said Holmes whose own life is steeped in sports, particularly baseball. “They were the only two athletes I knew that made the hair go up on the back of my neck.”

Tot describes Robinson as his favorite baseball player, leading off bases farther than any player he’s seen and having the ability to hit top running speed immediately.

“He’d drive pitchers to distraction and was the first Dodgers player to steal bases to actually upset the other team,” Tot said.

Robinson also played a part in Tot’s first brush with bigotry, related in a book Holmes authored entitled “Jackie 1947.”

As a young boy growing up in Gothenburg, Tot chose the Brooklyn Dodgers as his favorite team.

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“Living in St. Louis Cardinal country, the ‘western’ team at that time, and as a budding nonconformist, it seemed natural to cheer for Brooklyn (despite the fact I didn’t know where that was), the team battling the sleek St. Louis club,” Tot recalls.

World War II had just ended and the Cardinals had been National League champions three of the last four years.

To his surprise, Tot was suddenly thrown into a cauldron of racial hate.

“You like that team with the n***** on it?” a Gothenburg resident asked. “The next thing, he’ll want to marry your sister.”



Tot said newspapers in the area didn’t mention the filth pouring out at Robinson from the dugouts and grandstands where National League teams played.

Despite the bigotry, Tot bought himself a Jackie Robinson bat he used in games where he played center field and later shortstop.

“I can’t say I swung hard because it was so heavy,” he said. “I held it up just like Robinson did and tried to emulate him during games.”

Somewhat amused and secretly pleased by his son’s decision to support Robinson and the Dodgers, Tot said his father took him to watch the Dodgers play in St. Louis in July of 1947—the first of 30 or more games where Tot saw Robinson play.

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Unbeknownst to Tot, Don arranged to stay at the same hotel the Dodgers used while in St. Louis.

In the lobby, Tot noticed a large group of men in suits—the Dodgers.

Approaching with his autograph book and pen, the 14-year-old asked a man (whom he later discovered to be third baseman Cookie Lavagetto) and asked which Dodgers they were.

At the time, there was no television and blurry newspaper photos made faces difficult to see.

Tot said he scurried around asking for autographs from such greats as Dixie Walker, Pee Wee Reese, Ralph Branca and Lavagetto.

Disappointed he didn't see Robinson, Tot later realized that the player was not allowed to stay in white hotels and was housed in private homes.

While riding in a taxi to Sportman's Park stadium, Tot and his father heard more bigoted vitriol.

"During the entire trip, we were harangued by the driver about the Dodgers bringing a 'god-damned n***** with them..." Tot said.

He said he sat in the dirty, rattling cab and fumed while the driver continued his litany.

That experience was soon forgotten at the ballpark where Tot and Don sat in the front row in the upper deck behind third base.

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There, Tot watched as Vic Lombardi pitched a complete game and Reese tripled to score Bruce Edwards in the top of the ninth of a 2-1 victory.

During the game, fate played a nasty trick.

In the first inning, Robinson fouled a fastball into the stands behind third base.

“We watched it arch into the bright blue Missouri sky, hang a moment and then start downward,” Tot said. “It was coming right at us.

His legs dangling under a railing, he struggled to free himself to stand up but couldn't. The fan next to him stood and caught the ball.

Tot offered the fan “something like \$3.45” for the ball which he said was his entire bankroll but it was declined.

Some years later, Tot did capture a scruffy infield ball and got several Dodger autographs, including one from Robinson.

During a three-game series in Chicago in 1950, Tot visited with Dodger star pitcher Preacher Roe, who was injured and in the bullpen.

As he and his dad left the game, Tot spotted Preacher Roe in an open upstairs window of the Dodger dressing room.

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Tot asked Roe to sign the infield ball he'd picked up. However the pitcher doubted the young man could sling it that far and high.

Roe didn't know that Tot would later successfully try out for the Dodger minor leagues.

"I threw it through the window," Tot said.

When the ball soared back out the window, it contained several autographs—including Robinson's.

The ball isn't Tot's only memorabilia from Robinson.



In April of 1952, at age 21, Tot wrote Robinson and asked whether he should play professional baseball or go to college.

Robinson wrote back:

"I received your letter and I enjoyed hearing from you. I sincerely feel that an education is very important, it may not appear so at present, but I believe you will realize the need for one as you get older. If it is possible for you to continue with your education, you should try to do so. Good luck."

Fate again came calling.

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After three tryouts for the Dodger minor leagues, Tot thought he was told to go home and Dodger officials would call him.

The 20-year-old returned home to Gothenburg and waited until the local baseball season was half over before phoning the Dodgers to find out his status.

“They told me I was supposed to call them when I was ready and they’d get back to me the first of the week,” Tot said.

He told them he was ready and they promised to get back to him and send a contract.

Three days later, Tot was drafted into the service. Two years later, he returned to Gothenburg to work with his father at The Times and started the Little League program.

For many years, Tot and his wife, Pearlie, made their living writing “The Dodger Blue Book,” a yearly book that included Dodger statistics, the “Dodger Dugout” newspaper and feature stories.

They retired from the business in 2005.

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