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50 Years Later, Jackie Robinson Is All Business

*In Death as in Life, Pioneer
Remains a Celebrity Endorser*

By Marc Fisher, staff writer



Robinson is on the cover of the three Wheaties products. It is the first time one person has been on all three boxes.

Jackie Robinson was never one to shy from the commercial side of celebrity. The first black man to play major league baseball was also the first black in a Wheaties ad. Robinson endorsed hats, bread, even Chesterfield cigarettes—despite the fact that he didn't smoke.

So the onslaught of Robinson paraphernalia surrounding this year's 50th anniversary of his debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers is "totally in keeping with Jack's attitude," says Arnold Rampersad, the Princeton University English professor whose new biography of Robinson is due out in July.

"There's no doubt Jack Robinson was a commercial being and an entrepreneur," Rampersad adds.

But nothing Robinson experienced could compare to the torrent of products now pouring onto the market. Sports marketers say that 25 years after his death, Robinson could be this year's top drawing sports figure.

Since February, Robinson has been on the cover not only of Wheaties, but also of Honey Frosted Wheaties and Crispy Wheaties 'n Raisins—the first time one person has been on all three boxes.

"It's the first time we ever had anybody on the box who was dead," says Greg Zimprich, spokesman for General Mills Inc., which makes the cereal. Wheaties is aimed at men in their

twenties to forties, and Zimprich said the audience for the Robinson box "skews a little bit older, but it's been one of our more popular boxes."

McDonald's Corp. put Robinson on its tray liners. Coca-Cola put out Robinson commemorative bottles. The dodger's great comes back to life in TV ads for Apple computers and Nike sneakers. And the U.S. Mint is selling gold coins with Robinson's face on one side and an engraving of him sliding home on the obverse—the first time a US gold coin has featured the likeness of a black person.

There are Robinson baseball computer games, key chains, T-shirts, jerseys, miniature bats, gold and silver ingots, medallions, mugs, plaques, posters, pins and figures shaped from every conceivable material.

Hasbro Inc. is putting out 12-inch plastic Robinson's (\$29.99) and four-inch versions (\$19.99) showing Robinson paired with Hank Aaron or Larry Doby the first black man to play in the American League.

"When we've done the Jackie Robinson figures before, they sold quite well—without the current attention he's getting," says Bill Hartgalss, team leader for Hasbro's Starting Lineup brand. "He's a compelling figure, not just for the older collectors who remem-

ber him, but for kids who are learning about him now."

For fans looking for something a little more than a plastic figurine, Frank Walsh offers Robinson in 24-karat gold. His Authentic Images company in San Diego is making 1,947 copies of a solid gold trading card showing Robinson on Opening Day at Ebbets Field. The cards, available only at Dodger Stadium and direct from the maker, sell for \$150 each.

Rampersad said the Hall of Famer's widow, Rachel Robinson, has been careful to avoid over commercializing this year's celebration. "She has stopped almost as many projects as she has allowed," he said, including proposals for Jackie Robinson cookie jars and plastic clappers.

"Mrs. Robinson is probably the most selective of all my clients," says Darci Ross, president of CMG Worldwide, the agency that handles all merchandising and advertising deals for the Robinson family. "She's very protective of the artwork. If very protective of the artwork: If Jack doesn't look like Jack, she doesn't let it go through."

But Walsh says climbing aboard the Robinson bandwagon was easy: "Almost a year ago, Major League Baseball Properties let everyone in the industry know this year would be a big opportu-



Jackie Robinson was a celebrity endorser while an active player for the Brooklyn Dodgers, including the first black person in a Wheaties advertisement.

nity,” he recalls. “They really set it up so there was an incentive to do some kind of Robinson item. They made it one-stop shopping so you could take care of all the licensing with both Major League Baseball and CMG all at once.”

CMG, which specializes in marketing the images and stories of deceased athletes, has been working with the Robinson family for two years. In each of more than 22 licensing deals pegged to this season’s 50th anniversary celebration, Rachel Robinson gets royalties ranging from 7.5 percent to 15 percent of total sales, Ross said. CMG’s commission is taken from that amount.

At a news conference earlier this year announcing the various Robinson anniversary commemorations, acting baseball commissioner Bud Selig and other baseball officials said that many of the events would help support the Jackie Robinson foundation, whose chairman is National League President Leonard Coleman Jr.

The royalties from sales of Robinson related products however, go directly to Rachel Robinson, Ross said. “How she distributes the royalties is up to her,” the agent said.

A spokesman for the foundation, which awards college scholarships of \$5000 a year to about 40 black students a year, said, “The foundation has nothing to do with any of the licensing deals. We don’t expect to receive any money from any sales except for the commemorative caps,” the one time for which the foundation is a sub-license, said foundation official Michael Jones. “The

foundation also will benefit from sales of the 100,000 gold coins (\$200 each) and 200,000 silver coins (\$35 each) authorized by Congress and President Clinton, as well as from a dinner-dance at New York’s Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, an invitational golf tournament in Los Angeles, and a nationally televised tribute to Robinson at Radio City Music Hall in the fall.

A foundation spokeswoman said Mrs. Robinson would not be available to comment for this article.

In a brief interview earlier this year, she said, “Celebrations and anniversaries are opportunities for more than rejoicing in the past. They are an opportunity to look at where we are today.” Mrs. Robinson said she hopes to focus attention on the paucity of blacks in managerial and executive positions in baseball, and on the need to support black achievement in higher education.

Rampersad, the biographer, said the marketing of Robinson this year is a “natural, if regrettable outgrowth of desire to celebrate “a lion of a man who played his part in a very attractive and heroic way. Martin Luther King Jr. openly admitted that what Jack did was really in anticipation of what King did, in a substantial way.”

Although Rampersad maintained editorial control over his book, he said Rachel Robinson “did want a piece of the action, as most families do in biographies these days.”

“Jack Robinson didn’t have a clue about what was coming in sports—the vulgarity, the incessant playing of music

in stadiums, how expensive it would all be,” Rampersad said. “But he was certainly interested in commerce, there’s no getting around that.”

In 1956, when Robinson earned his highest salary of \$42,500 (about \$250,000 in current dollars), he was making about nine times as much as the average American family. In contrast, the Seattle Mariners’ Ken Griffey Jr.’s \$8.5 million salary this season is about 200 times the average household income.

As much as anyone in his era, Robinson mastered the art of parlaying his sports celebrity into business success. “Business people can dig black power if it coincides with green power,” he wrote in his autobiography Robinson was an executive with the Chock Full ‘o Nuts coffee chain, and later founded a bank in Harlem.

“Here is a great American hero who refuses to be a mythical hero,” Harvard scholar Cornel West writes in a new forward to Robinson’s 1972 autobiography. “He knows that ‘money is America’s God’ and that he is ‘a black man in a white world.’”

Robinson knew, as many young athletes today have yet to learn, that all the endorsements and products in the market do not add up to a sense of belonging or acceptance.

He would eventually be chairman of the board of Freedom National Bank, but Robinson, grandson of a slave, son of a sharecropper, died a proud but alienated and embittered man. “I cannot stand and sing the anthem,” he wrote at the end of his life. “I cannot salute the flag; I know that I am a black man in a white world. In 1972, in 1947, at my birth in 1919, I know that I never had it made.”