

# THE WEEK

Like 55k Follow





Get THE WEEK Magazine

- Subscribe
- Give a gift
- Digital subscription


WORLD | U.S. | POLITICS | BUSINESS | TECH | SCIENCE | HEALTH | ARTS | SPORTS | LIFESTYLE | LANGUAGE | CARTOONS | PUZZLES | PHOTOS

VOICES | MARC AMBINDER | TAEGAN GODDARD | ED MORRISSEY | PAUL BRANDUS | STARSHINE ROSHELL | MATT LEWIS | ARIKA OKRENT | GIRLS ON FILM

Let's build a smarter planet.  
Find out how. ▶

Why 'stop and frisk' is worse than NSA surveillance



5 disturbing historical practices you should never, ever try



The very first issues of 17 famous magazines



Meet the Hyperloop

## INTERVIEW: Jackie Robinson's pen pal talks baseball, race, and No. 42

"We were so different. I was white, he was black. I was Jewish, he was Christian. I was a kid, he was an adult."

By [Jon Terbush](#) | July 23, 2013

Like 77 Share

GET 4 FREE ISSUES of THE WEEK [CLICK HERE](#)



Jackie Robinson with the Rabinovitz family (Judi, Ronnie, and David) (Image courtesy of Lionsgate)

*Home Entertainment*)

On April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson broke Major League Baseball's color barrier when he appeared in his first pro game for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Halfway across the country, in the small city of Sheboygan, Wis., a little boy named Ronnie Rabinovitz watched Robinson's career take off and dreamed of one day meeting his hero.

When he was 7 years old, Rabinovitz got that chance, in a meeting that would spark a lifelong friendship carried on through letters, dinners, and baseball games, until Robinson's death in 1972.

With the DVD release this month of the documentary *Letters From Jackie: The Private Thoughts of Jackie Robinson*, I spoke with Rabinovitz, 67, who sells packaging materials in Minneapolis, Minn., and regularly travels the country speaking about Robinson and baseball. Here's a slightly edited transcript.

### **How did you first get to know Jackie Robinson?**

My father loved the Dodgers because they gave Jackie an opportunity to play. Well, unbeknownst to me, he wrote him a letter. Jackie wrote back with an autographed picture, and he said next time the Dodgers are in Milwaukee playing the Braves, he'd love to meet me.

Well, we went to a Dodgers-Braves game and we went down to the locker room and waited for him to come out. I went up to him and I said, "Jackie, I'm Ronnie Rabinovitz, do you remember me?" I was seven. And he says, "Sure I do." My dad is standing over my shoulder saying, "Sure, Jackie, of the thousands of letters you got?" And [Robinson] said, "No, I remember, because your dad wrote me on lawyer stationary." And from that point on we became the very dearest of friends.



A screen shot from the documentary *Letters from Jackie*: Jackie and a young Ronnie

### **How regularly did you speak with each other?**

We would correspond maybe two, three times a year. Maybe four times a year. As I got older, I'd call him — he gave me his unlisted phone number in Stamford, Connecticut. He was in Milwaukee playing the Braves about nine, ten times a year so we would spend time visiting then. He was even with me at my tenth birthday. We always got box seats on the third base side by the Dodgers' dugout. He hit a home run, and as he was rounding third he waved to me like that one was for me.

Afterwards, he had dinner with us. Just amazing to have Jackie Robinson sitting at my birthday dinner singing "Happy Birthday" to me. He also sent me a telegram when I graduated high school.

### **What did he say in the telegram?**

1. [How do prescription drugs get such crazy names?](#)
2. [5 disturbing historical practices you should never, ever try](#)
3. [5 revelations on the 'Keyser Soze' of the Edward Snowden saga](#)
4. [The 10 best TV shows from the first half of 2013](#)
5. [How the wrong definition of 'literally' sneaked into the dictionary](#)
6. [Don't defund ObamaCare. Delay it.](#)
7. [The very first issues of 17 famous](#)

"Congratulations. Sorry to have the late message. Have been out of the city. I'm always proud of your achievements. Continued good luck, Jackie Robinson."

**Why do you think he stayed in touch with you when he was getting so many fan letters from around the country?**

I don't know the answer to that. We were so different. I was white, he was black. I was Jewish, he was Christian. I was a kid, he was an adult. I was from a small town in the Midwest, he was from out East. And yet there was this bond of friendship and love. Maybe Jackie's letters were like a baton toss, a black man of dignity was reaching out to touch a single boy who cared, and that boy passed that baton of brotherhood on to other children in the world. He once said, "A life is not important except for the impact it has on other lives." I don't know if he ever truly realized what a tremendous impact he had on mine.

**Jackie broke the color barrier in baseball before the Civil Rights movement had fully gained steam, before Martin Luther King Jr. What role did he play in allowing that movement to take shape?**

When you think about it, Jackie was alone. He was a true pioneer. Martin Luther King was a teenager. The Civil Rights movement hadn't started yet. So it was Jackie alone, and he took some tremendous, tremendous abuse. I think that's what contributed to his death so young at 53. He couldn't sleep with his team, he couldn't eat with his team. It was real tough. What he did for our culture is more powerful than just changing the face of sports and breaking down the color barrier. He changed all our lives. Martin Luther King once said, "Without Jackie, I couldn't have done what I did." He made it possible.

**With all that hatred directed at Robinson, how did people respond to your interactions with him?**

I had one particular friend I met in second grade. We were playing on the playground one day and he came up to me and said, "I can't play with you anymore." I said "Why?" and he said, "Because you're Jewish." I went home that night and thought about that. I cried, I was so devastated. I thought, "This is what Jackie's going through too."

That night my father went to [the kid's] home and talked to his parents. I don't know what was said, but the next day we were able to play together again. It was just ignorance. They had never met an African American, they had never met a Jewish person. And I took him to meet Jackie Robinson, and he became his hero too.



[magazines](#)

8. [Why Hillary Clinton is going after voter ID laws](#)
9. [7 grammar rules you really should pay attention to](#)
10. [7 highlights from this amazing 1997 'Kids' Guide to the Internet'](#)

## CAPTURED: A PHOTO BLOG



The very first issues of 17 famous magazines

[SEE ALL PHOTO BLOG POSTS](#)

## FOLLOW US



Email Address

[SUBMIT](#)

[SAMPLE NEWSLETTER](#) / [PRIVACY POLICY](#)

## GUILTY CLICKS

- ▶ WATCH: Late-night comedians riff on Dr. Sanjay Gupta's embrace of pot
- ▶ 5 disturbing historical practices you should never, ever try
- ▶ WATCH: Katy Perry's gratingly emoji-packed 'Roar' video
- ▶ The daily gossip: Justin Bieber serenaded his grandmother in the nude, and more
- ▶ My man has a secret crush. Help!

## Stories from Slate

- ▶ A lovely English garden full of deadly poisonous plants
- ▶ Pixar casts Amy Poehler, gets everyone excited
- ▶ "Slut pills" would work best for women who don't have lots of sex
- ▶ A Midwestern ghost town in the Amazon jungle
- ▶ Football needs a star anti-rape advocate

[SEE MORE STORIES ON SLATE](#)

Jackie Robinson and the 1954 Dodgers (Hulton Archive/Getty Images)



**Did you realize at that young age the significance of him being the first black player in baseball?**

At first, no. I loved him because he was helping my Dodgers win pennants. But as I grew up, as I got older, I realized how much more than just baseball he was, how much he did for this country. They say Babe Ruth changed baseball. Jackie Robinson changed America — and he did it alone.

**This year, only 8.5 percent of all players on opening day rosters defined themselves as African American. The league is looking into the decline of African American players in the game and trying to address that issue. Is that something you're familiar with?**

It's very disturbing to me to see this. It's almost like, well what did he do this for? I used to drive around neighborhoods, you saw kids playing ball on every corner. You don't see that as much anymore. They're inside on the computer, on television, playing basketball. It's such a great game and it's very sad to me that there aren't more African Americans. I think Major League Baseball is doing a good job trying to change that, but there's a lot of work to do.

**Robinson told you before almost anyone else that he knew he was going to retire, correct?**

He used to play second base or third base. This particular day he was playing left field, and a ball went by him and rolled all the way to the fence and he missed it. We had dinner that night and he said, "You know Ronnie, if I had to do it all over again I probably wouldn't have played all the sports I did." And he said "I'm going to tell you a secret that no one else knows except my own family: I think next year is going to be my last in baseball."

**When was the last time you spoke with Robinson?**

I was with him about six months before he passed away. His health had been failing pretty badly. He had a heart attack, he had diabetes, he was blind in one eye and going blind in the other eye. I remember going into this restaurant in New York and we had to take two steps down into the restaurant. I had to take him by the arm and help him down those two steps. I felt so sad because I envisioned him dancing up and down the base paths and driving those pitchers crazy, and now I was helping him.

Afterwards, I hailed him a cab and I got him settled, and I leaned in and kissed him on the cheek and I told him how much I loved him. That was the last time I saw him. I remember as the cab pulled away, I just stood there. I realized that probably that would be the last time I would see him. I had tears running down my cheeks.

PRINT Like 77 Share

**Jon Terbush** Follow @jonterbush

Jon Terbush is a staff writer for *TheWeek.com* covering politics, sports, and other things he finds interesting. He has previously written for *Talking Points Memo*, *Raw Story*, and *Business Insider*.

[Click here for your 4 FREE issues of The Week](#)

**MORE FROM THE WEB**



**How Big Law became a white-collar rat race**  
*(THE NEW REPUBLIC)*



**It's One Directioners vs. GQ, and no one wins**  
*(DAILYDOT)*



**Stacy Keibler Skin Tight in Sexy**  
*(CELEBRITYTOOB)*



**WATCH: Dan Aykroyd explains how Trading Places ends**



**Sleep'n Round Pajamas and Loungewear |**  
*(DAILY CANDY)*

**Cartoons**



Tiny, tanned economic indicators

The



- ▶ Kerry taps old allies for top positions
- ▶ Budget deficit on track to 5-year low
- ▶ North Carolina tightens voting laws
- ▶ Clinton begins the next phase
- ▶ Establishment pushes back on the Tea Party

SEE MORE STORIES ON POLITICALWIRE



Could a celebrity boycott sink Florida's 'stand your ground' law?



Experts Select The Best Credit Cards of 2013 (NEXT ADVISOR)



Young people are ruining Monopoly



WATCH: Obama: 'Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago'



How much should it cost you to work out?

1 comment



Leave a message...

Oldest Community

Share Settings



Dave Woodruff · 21 days ago

Thank you very much for sharing this wonderful story.

2 ^ | v Reply Share >

Comment feed Subscribe via email



GET 4 FREE ISSUES

CLICK HERE

FROM OUR PARTNERS

Slate

How Scrabble Got the Washington NFL Team's Offensive Nickname Banned from ESPN
Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's Friends Should Not Spend 25 Years in Prison
Sorry, Mashable's 13-Year-Old Correspondent Is Wrong About Facebook

newser

Physicists Need New Accelerator for 'God Particle'
Tsarnaev's Buddies Deny Obstructing Justice
Officer Bra Sizes Revealed to Entire Police Dept.

WEST WING REPORTS

Republicans Still Have a Birther Problem
What Obama's Drug Law Reforms Will (and Won't) Do
Seven Ways the Government May Be Spying On You

SALON

Is Obamacare really being threatened? Here's a handy guide
Chipotle is lowering its beef standards
Transgender rights make Fox News hosts really, really mad!

mental\_floss

How to Win a Duel
The Missing Links: Quintessential '80s
10 Hitchcock Quotes for His Birthday

BuzzFeed

Friends Of Boston Bomber Plead Not Guilty To Obstruction Of Justice
Billionaire Investor Carl Icahn Takes Aim At Apple
GOP Congressman: Obama Will Use "Defund ObamaCare" As "Excuse" To Cut Military, Social Security



SUBSCRIBE / SUBSCRIBER LOGIN / CURRENT ISSUE / GIVE A GIFT / CUSTOMER SERVICE / BACK ISSUES / CLASSROOM SUBSCRIPTIONS / PRIVACY POLICY / TERMS & CONDITIONS / AD INFO / THE WEEK UK / SITE MAP / RSS / CONTACT US

© 2013 THE WEEK PUBLICATIONS, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. THE WEEK® IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OWNED BY FELIX DENNIS. THEWEEK.COM IS A TRADEMARK OWNED BY FELIX DENNIS.