IN THE GAME
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IN THE GAME
The student, as I remember, had what could only be described as a wry smile on his face when he asked the question. He already knew the answer. “Professor Bass, who was the last team to integrate?”

A good question? Well, not for discussion purposes. Not if you want your class to interact with the texts and each other. Too cut and dried for any kind of real pedagogical use, I surmised.

*Who was the last team to integrate?*

A good question? Well, its answer, I have to admit, does have a substantial context in terms of civil rights, immigration, integration, busing, basketball and, yes, the 1918 World Series.

*Who was the last team to integrate?*

I answer the question, failing to mention that it technically should be *what* was the last team to integrate. My answer, as always, is accompanied by the fact that they actually gave Jackie Robinson a tryout before Branch Rickey ever did.

*Who was the last team to integrate?*

The Boston Red Sox. Some twelve years after Robinson stepped up to the major league plate. But. . . .
There is always a “but” to the answer to the question that is always asked during my lecture about Jackie Robinson’s historic breaking of a color line that had existed in major league baseball for well over half a century. That lecture, which uses Jules Tygiel’s exceedingly readable and immensely teachable *Baseball’s Great Experiment* as its main source, is not part of the upper-division seminar that I occasionally offer entitled “Race, Sport, and Society.” Rather, it is part of my post–World War II lecture in the U.S. Survey (Reconstruction to Present) that I teach on a fairly regular rotation. I find that Robinson’s debut and Branch Rickey’s push to make the Brooklyn Dodgers the team that would transform baseball’s color line are among the best ways to teach the visible rise of civil rights movements in the immediate postwar period, and the role of culture in it. It is not *sports* history. It’s history.

There are many, many (many) burdens—well-known burdens—that come along with being a Red Sox fan (and, for clarification, I am not from Boston, but rather Richmond, Massachusetts, a small town outside of Pittsfield that has recently taken ownership of inventing the game from Cooperstown—and no, I am not being defensive). But as a cultural historian who has spent a lot of time writing about race and sports and civil rights, the drain of being a fan can be almost unbearable. The first time the question was posed in my class—*Who was the last team to integrate?*—the student knew why the question would plague me. During office hours, he had seen the 1986 World Series banner that I boldly displayed in my graduate student space at a large university on, yes, Long Island, not too far from Shea Stadium (but far enough for me), and not that much farther from that place in the Bronx where rumors have it that a local team plays baseball rather well. So, with his Yankees hat turned into “rally” position, he eagerly awaited my anguish, not necessarily knowing the degree to which it stirred my own memories of sitting in Fenway during Game 3, 1986, and watching Oil Can Boyd futilely try to change history.

*Who was the last team to integrate?*

The answer is complex. While the Boston Red Sox did not bring Elijah “Pumpsie” Green on board until 1959, technically they tried (well, “*tried*” is likely not the right word—I used to say “tried” but then Howard Bryant’s wonderful book, *Shut Out: A Story of Race and Baseball in Boston*, changed my mind on employing that particular verb to describe the Red Sox’s integration efforts) to integrate before anyone else.

In 1945, Red Sox General Manager Eddie Collins came under fire from Boston city councilor Isadore Muchnick, who wanted Collins to take the lead in the push to integrate baseball. Collins pleaded innocence to charges that Boston had prevented black players from trying out in the past, claiming that for the duration of his tenure with the team, he had “never had a
single request for a tryout by a colored applicant.” However, Muchnick continued his quest, at one point threatening Collins that if an integrated tryout did not occur in Boston, he would block the required unanimous City Council vote for the team to play on Sundays. Further weight landed on Collins’ shoulders when Boston Record columnist Dave Egan, reiterating the charge that black columnists such as Wendell Smith and Sam Lacy had been leading in the black press, began a campaign urging both of Boston’s baseball teams—the Red Sox and the (now Atlanta) Braves—to consider Boston’s historical responsibility to equality and to do the right thing. Between Muchnick’s unyielding pressure and Egan’s hype, the Red Sox agreed to be the first major league baseball team in the twentieth century to hold an integrated tryout.²

On April 14, 1945, Marvin Williams, Sam Jethroe, and, indeed, Jackie Robinson arrived at Fenway Park for their tryout, only to find it delayed for two days because of the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. When the tryout finally took place, few are sure what exactly happened. Many versions of what went down that day still circle history, largely because few folks deemed it worthy of their attention. According to Bryant, the relatively confirmed course of events include the fact that the team itself was not there. Manager (and former Red Sox great) Joe Cronin had given the players the day off because the season was beginning the next day in New York. Former Red Sox outfielder Hugh Duffy oversaw the tryout, while Cronin sat and watched. The Boston Record reported that Robinson did well and impressed Cronin, while others claimed that Cronin barely looked at the field. At the conclusion of the tryout, Collins told the trio they would hear from him soon. None did.³

Much more, of course, has been whispered about what occurred in Fenway Park that day. While Robinson, for one, generally refused to discuss it, Boston Globe reporter Clif Keane lent the tryout what Bryant calls “its historical significance.” Keane claims that he heard someone shout from the stands, “Get those niggers off the field.”⁴ While many have been credited with the affront, most conclusions point toward Red Sox owner Tom Yawkey (of Yawkey’s Way, the street outside of Fenway where I have purchased countless hats, shirts, beers, and so on).

As we know, and as Tygiel details, as a member of the Montreal Royals, the Brooklyn Dodgers’ farm team, Jackie Robinson enjoyed a stunning summer season in 1946, making a name for himself in the small venues of America’s favorite pastime. He went on to his major league debut in 1947, and was named Rookie of the Year. Sam Jethroe went to the Boston Braves in 1950, integrating Boston baseball, but not the Red Sox, and replicated Robinson’s feat by taking the Rookie of the Year title. Having declined to sign either player, Red Sox management went back to work against integration. Tom
Yawkey, for example, served on a committee formed by baseball owners to study integration. On August 27, 1946, the committee submitted its notorious conclusions, which were apparently so distasteful that readers were asked to destroy their copies when finished. The tried and tired reasons were presented up front: baseball was being used by activists, Negro Leagues players did not have the skills to be competitive in the majors and did not know the game well enough, the contractual obligations players had to the Negro Leagues had to be observed. The real reason, of course, was made more subtly: Major league baseball profited from segregation. Integration meant, for example, that the Negro Leagues would no longer rent their parks from the majors. And it meant that more African Americans would come to major league games, isolating white fans and thus lowering the value of teams in major urban areas.

Who was the last team to integrate?

The Boston Red Sox. And not only did they decline to sign Robinson, in 1949 they shunned the advice of the general manager of their AA team in Alabama, the Birmingham Barons, that a star on the Birmingham Black Barons could be acquired for a mere $5,000. The team’s scout, Larry Woodall—a Texan—could not fit the kid into his schedule. “I’m not going to waste my time,” he said, “waiting on a bunch of niggers.” Thus, just as the Red Sox passed on Jackie Robinson, the team missed out on Willie Mays.

Say hey, indeed.

By the time the Red Sox called up Pumpsie Green from the minors in 1959, some 128 years after William Lloyd Garrison (who declared my title quote) opened the *Liberator* offices in what is now Government Center in Boston, Mays was a standout on the Giants, Robinson was retired, stars such as Hank Aaron, Ernie Banks, and Frank Robinson were shining for their teams, and journalists Lacy and Smith had confirmed in the black press that the Red Sox were a racist club. Rosters changed dramatically in terms of who played the game in the decades that followed World War II, and while the battle for racial integration moved toward center stage in the United States for a variety of reasons, it was perhaps most dramatically imagined in its initial stages on baseball diamonds. The Red Sox, however, kept their eyes closed to the cornucopia of talent that descended from the legacy of the Negro Leagues.

Rather than consider the impact that the refusal to integrate has had on the team’s record, in Boston it was the “Curse of the Bambino” that had allegedly plagued Fenway Park, preventing the ultimate victory from ever gracing the likes of some of the game’s greatest individual players—Ted Williams, Jimmy Collins, Duffy Lewis, Tris Speaker, Jim Rice, Carl Yastrzemski, Carlton Fisk, Jimmie Foxx, Bobby Doerr, Dom DiMaggio, and so on. Of course, the history of the Curse is completely convoluted. The short
story? In 1920, less than two years after a World Series victory, Red Sox owner Harry Frazee needed cash to finance his girlfriend’s play, so he sold Babe Ruth’s contract to the Yankees. The real-er story? According to Yankees chronicler Glenn Stout, the “tidy package known as ‘the Curse of the Bambino’” is grossly misrepresented, piling undue blame on Frazee, who was actually an astute businessman, and removing it from the “shenanigans elsewhere in the American League” that actually cost Boston the Babe.6

Regardless, the conclusion of the legend of the Curse is that the Yankees have gone on to an unmentionable number of championship seasons and the Red Sox—well, it took a while. But the legend of the Curse, which dutifully followed the Red Sox into the twenty-first century (it is apparently, as one insightful—ugh—Yankee fan in the stands pointed out on a poster in 1999, Y2K compliant), serves as a sort of Boston sports fan’s version of claiming that the Confederate flag stands for “states rights,” largely masking the impact that history might have had on the team. Few sports fans claim to have a better understanding of history than those in Boston. Yet Red Sox fans, as Howard Bryant summarizes, are “often frustrated by history but rarely by the people . . . who made the history.”7 We know, but do not often discuss, that many black stars over the course of the past several decades have ensured, contractually, that they never have to play for the home team in Boston. And those who sit in the visitors’ dugout at Fenway Park claim a special satisfaction in victory. “I used to love to play the Red Sox, just to beat them,” admitted former Yankee Willie Randolph. “ . . . As a black player, the Red Sox brought out that little something in all of us.”8

As Bryant succinctly understands, “the Red Sox more than other franchises have always found themselves linked with the larger Boston story of abolition, opportunity, politics, and clannish insularity.”9 Bottom line? It ain’t easy being a Red Sox fan. Yet hope springs eternal, and one now has hope that under the watchful eye of Robinison’s retired #42, which resides next to the retired numbers of great Red Sox players on the right field façade in Fenway, things are different. In February 2002, a new ownership group took over the Red Sox, and with it what president and CEO Larry Lucchino calls the team’s “undeniable legacy of racial intolerance.” For the first time, the team directly confronted its history, beginning a series of outreach programs into black Boston. The team started, equipped, and sponsored, for example, a 16-team Boston church league that fields 500 teenage players. According to principal owner John Henry, the effort has been a deliberate and terribly self-conscious one: “I think we have to make a statement not just in baseball but in our community that diversity is an issue that hasn’t been fully addressed in the past and certainly has to be fully addressed,” he says. “I think it’s important what your actions are. That will
really define the franchise going forward.” In a conversation with Henry, Howard Bryant found his perspective to be a refreshing one. “What John Henry wanted to know wasn’t if the Red Sox live in racism’s shadow, for he knows his new franchise most certainly does,” Bryant recalls. “With that recognition, he stood already quantum leaps ahead of his predecessors, who often seemed to believe that forceful, impassioned denial could somehow alter the facts.”

The Red Sox that I fell in love with from my home in the far western reaches of Massachusetts was the same team that Bryant, who grew up in Dorchester, cheered for: Jim Rice, Freddy Lynn, Dewey Evans, El Tiante, Yaz, the Spaceman. I have never left them, loving Marty Barrett as a teenager (I was a girl and he was, like, so cute), and thinking that Mo Vaughan, Tom Gordon, Oil Can Boyd, and Nomar Garciaparra held keys to modern salvation, or at least could bring home a World Series ring. And now that time has arrived: the coveted championship flag was raised in Boston on Opening Day of the 2005 season—the first time Boston had seen it in 86 years. Did Henry’s efforts have an effect? Did the Curse end, as New York and Boston newspapers alike determined, when the Red Sox came back from a 0–3 deficit—the only team ever to do so in baseball history—to win the 2004 pennant, defeating the Yankees in the House that Ruth Built in Game 7? Did it happen, as many believe, on August 31, 2004, when Manny Ramirez pounded a foul ball past the Pesky Pole in Fenway and hit 16-year-old Lee Gavin, who lives with his family in Babe Ruth’s former house in Sudbury, in the mouth and knocked out two of his teeth, making him THE KID WHO BROKE THE CURSE in his high school? Did it happen, as my friend Sarah speculated, when Alex Rodriguez slapped the ball out of Bronson Arroyo’s hand in a feeble attempt to make it to first base in Game 6? Or did we have to wait until 11:38 pm on October 27, 2004, in St. Louis, when Keith Foulke gently tossed the ball to Doug Mientkiewicz and, well, it was done?

As the Red Sox Nation, as we now call ourselves in an interesting construction of inclusiveness that maintains age-old regional borders while acknowledging the global diaspora of fandom, assembled at Fenway Park for the first game of the 2004 World Series, fan paraphernalia—posters, banners, buttons, and shirts—emblazoned with the phrase “WE BELIEVE” solidified how being a Red Sox fan is, indeed, a faith-based occupation. It is one that even goes beyond life on earth, evidenced by those in Boston who placed balloons and pennants on the graves of their grandfathers and grandmothers, uncles and aunts, telling them what had happened—that it had finally happened.

But perhaps more important to consider when wondering when the Curse went away are the cheers of “PAPI-PAPI-PAPI” that filled the stadium
of the faithful of this mismatched band of, in the words of hirsute outfielder Johnny Damon, “idiots.” Throughout the Series, it was clear to the country: David “Papi” Ortiz, named Most Valuable Player of the American League Championship Series, was loved in Boston. Ramirez, named Most Valuable Player of the World Series, was loved in Boston. And with those chants, and with fond memories of George Scott, it is possible that the Curse lifted in a way that members of the Nation were not even aware of.

It can be a problem when our personal and professional lives collide. Liking a movie with characters derived from the minstrel stage. Liking a Mel Gibson movie. Being a Red Sox fan when you have just told your undergraduates that they were the last team to desegregate and you know why Mo Vaughan or Jim Rice often hated playing there. Those of us who think about the power structures and cultural legacies of ideas of race know well the personal liabilities of such knowledge. It magnifies things in your daily routine that many people do not deal with, whether when admitting that “your” team has a history more racist than most or when watching the African American actor in the “buddy” role die first and realizing that you still like the movie.

Discussing sports can, in particular, be a liability, but that is what those who signed onto this project agreed to do. It is territory where many have tried and failed—or perhaps flailed—from a variety of different perspectives. Marge Schott. Jimmy the Greek. Sir Roger Bannister. Al Campanis. Rush Limbaugh.

Ahhhh, Rush. What a week it was. When ESPN announced in July 2003 that Limbaugh would join its NFL Countdown show as “the voice of the fan and to spark debate on the show,” I do not think I was alone in thinking which fan is that? ESPN, for its part, seemed pleased with its choice. “Rush is a great communicator and a fan’s fan,” said ESPN executive vice president Mark Shapiro. “His acute sense of what’s on the minds of his listeners combined with his ability to entertain and serve as a lightning rod for lively discussion makes him the perfect fit for this new role.” Limbaugh, too, appeared enthusiastic about his transition to television—especially sports television. “I am a big fan of the NFL and now I get to do what every football fan would love to do,” he stated at the press conference that announced his new role. “I get to take my observations from the living room couch to the ESPN studios and talk football with the best journalists and players in the business.”

He lasted, as we all know, approximately one month because of those revered observations. “RUSH SACKS SELF,” screamed the New York Post.