

Why Jason Collins Is Not the New Jackie Robinson

As expected, the media has crowned Jason Collins, the first openly gay NBA player, the new Jackie Robinson, and the Human Rights Campaign has called Collins a “hero for our own times.” His actions were deemed worthy of a personal phone call from President Obama, who told Collins that he “couldn’t be prouder.”

Without disparaging Collins personally (I understand he has a great reputation among his teammates), here are some reasons why he is absolutely not the new Jackie Robinson.

When Robinson broke the color barrier in 1947, there were no black equivalents of prominent and influential gays and lesbians, like Ellen DeGeneres and Elton John, Anderson Cooper and Rachel Maddow, Tim Cook (CEO, Apple) and David Geffen, or Barney Frank and Tammy Baldwin, just to mention a few. The comparison is actually laughable.

The media was not swooning over black civil rights the way it is swooning over “gay rights,” nor were leading politicians lining up to voice their support for black equality the way they are currently lining up to support “gay equality.” And when Franklin Delano Roosevelt delivered his fourth inaugural address in 1945, there was no mention of blacks or of civil rights. In contrast, President Obama used his second inaugural address to push aggressively for the redefinition of marriage and other gay activist causes.

Collins is already the darling of the media, with more interview requests than he could possibly accept, and so there is no possible way to compare his so-called “courageous” act with that of Robinson.

Branch Rickey, the general manager of the Dodgers and the man

behind Robinson's entry into Major League Baseball, said to him, "Jackie, we've got no army. There's virtually nobody on our side. No owner, no umpires, very few newspapermen. And I'm afraid that many fans may be hostile. We'll be in a tough position. We can win only if we can convince the world that I am doing this because you're a great ballplayer and a fine gentleman."

Collins may have been a fair basketball player and he may be a fine gentleman, but there is no comparison between the two climates in which Robinson entered the major leagues and Collins made his announcement, nor can their courage be rightly compared.

It is also unfair to compare skin color with sexuality, especially in the locker room, and it's important to remember that no one ever stopped Jason Collins from playing basketball because he was gay, since no one knew he was gay. So, his sexual desires and romantic attractions were his own business, and his career was not hindered.

In contrast, Jackie Robinson didn't have to come out as black. His skin color was known to all, and his baseball career was potentially thwarted by racism. This again highlights a fundamental difference between skin color and sexuality. (Let's not forget that skin color does not relate to a behavior; homosexuality does.)

In the testosterone-driven context of the locker room and with the unique male camaraderie that exists, the fact that a player is openly gay could be a legitimate distraction. Will a straight player feel as free to be himself around that player? In the words of former NFL star and now sports commentator Hines Ward, "I don't think football is ready. There are too many guys in the locker room and, you know, guys play around too much."

Gay activists simply can't have it both ways. Either it's no

big deal for a professional athlete on a team sport to be gay—meaning that nothing will change in the locker room and on the field of play, in which case there's no need for that athlete even to mention his or her sexuality—or else there is a big deal with a player declaring he's attracted and aroused by people of the same sex, in which case it's perfectly acceptable for some of the other team members to feel a little uncomfortable (although today, they will be told they are homophobic and sent to sensitivity training).

I'm fully aware that many white athletes were uncomfortable showering with a black athlete, but that's simply a matter of prejudice and ignorance. For a straight athlete to be uncomfortable engaging in locker-room horseplay with a gay athlete is understandable. And isn't the purpose of team sports the success of the team? Why make an announcement that could potentially be a distraction from the game at hand?

It's also interesting to note that Collins was in a serious relationship with a woman for eight years and broke up with her without explanation just one month before they were to be married. (He also has an identical twin brother, who is straight.) This doesn't mean that Collins wasn't conflicted for years about his sexuality, but it does point to the fact that skin color and sexual-romantic attractions cannot be rightly compared.

WNBA star Sheryl Swoopes provides eloquent testimony to this. She was married to her high school sweetheart from 1995-1999, and they had a son together. In 2005, she announced she was a lesbian, famously saying, "I can't help who I fall in love with. No one can. ... Discovering I'm gay just sort of happened much later in life."

In contrast, Jackie Robinson didn't "discover" he was black, nor did the revelation come to him later in life, which only underscores that gay is not the new black and Jason Collins is not the new Jackie Robinson.

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