

'Baseball' told the real story

My apologies to filmmaker Ken Burns for pre-judging his documentary, "Baseball." This happened a few years ago when I heard that "Baseball" was going to be shown on PBS. I was skeptical and wondered what there was to be said about baseball that would take nine episodes/innings? I found out posthaste as Burns retold American history, through the vehicle of baseball, limelighting little-known facts about African-American baseball in the pre-Jack-

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ie Robinson era.

Like most Americans, I thought Robinson was the first African-American to integrate major league baseball. But watching Ken Burns' "Baseball," I learned that from 1884 to 1887 African-Americans played in the major leagues along side white baseball players. Then in 1887, a "Gentlemen's Agreement" among white club owners caused the disappearance of African-Americans from the major leagues for 60 years.

During the 60 years the "Gentlemen's Agreement" was in effect, African-American baseball players had a league of their own. Their 140-game schedule was exciting and competitive with Baseball Hall of Fame caliber players and outstanding, entertaining teams like: the Indianapolis Clowns, Chicago American Giants, Louisville Cubs, Newark Eagles, Pittsburgh Crawfords and the Kansas City Monarchs. Robinson played for the Monarchs before going to the Dodgers farm team and then to the major leagues.

Jackie Robinson was my No. 1 hero and the Brooklyn Dodgers were my most favorite team. Branch Rickey, president and general manager of the Dodgers, was a public relations man in a class all by himself. On April 15, 1947, Rickey put Robinson in the Dodgers starting lineup as first baseman, an historic act designed

to put an end to the Gentlemen's Agreement," re-opening major league baseball to African-Americans. Rickey also knew that including this formerly excluded one-10th of the population would significantly boost major league baseball revenues.

Most fans, myself included, had no idea what price Robinson paid to play for the Dodgers. Burns' meticulous research revealed the "fine print" in Jackie Robinson's contract which stipulated that for three years Robinson could not respond or react to any abuse he received from his teammates, from other teams and their owners, or from hostile fans. He was not to lose his temper or show anger. So, for three long years, Robinson endured non-stop racial slurs, threats of being shot from the stands, written and phoned threats to him and his family; plus being thrown at by pitchers and spiked by base runners. Robinson fulfilled his contract to the letter while leading the Dodgers in home runs and being named Rookie of the Year.

Ken Burns' documentary covered the whole spectrum of baseball, not just white verses black issues; but exposing those aspects of baseball history were crucial in making the story complete.

After watching all nine innings of Burns' "Baseball," I consider this documentary a real hit — a three balls, two strikes, bottom of the ninth GRAM SLAM!

(Dorothy Word is a retired history teacher from Evansville who lives in Kokomo.)