

## **Sunday Morning Baseball Preacher Inspiration of Jackie Robinson West**

*“Lean forward, catch the heat, make the throw, complete the play.”*

Rev. Dr. Walter Arthur McCray

The preacher on early Sunday Morning finds himself wishfully looking for a flight from Chicago to Williamsport, PA.

I need to arrive in time for history, and for memories. The Little League World Series Championship game starts at 2:00 p.m. Eastern time. Jackie Robinson West, the Chi-town, hometown baseball boys, will play North Korea for it all. “If I could somehow find a way to the make it to the game . . . Driving would take too long, and most of flights are one or two stops. Just not enough lead time.”

Wishful thinking. Inspirational thinking.

Hallelujah thinking!

Most folks across the nation or world really don’t know the inspirational impact of the Jackie Robinson West team’s rise to overnight stardom. The team has done a great service for Chicago, for their little league region, for their community, for their people, for their nation, and for themselves.

The Chicago White Sox haven’t done it for a while. And the Chicago Cubs . . . well that’s another story. Miracles do happen . . . maybe in my lifetime.

Yet, JRW has done the possible, and even the miraculous. They are winning it all. These talented, courageous, and “Bring it on!” baseball champs have already won.

Their winning has done it for me and my inspiration, and for my dad who went home to baseball heaven back in the early ‘80s.

My Mississippi sharecropper dad from Bolton, and from the delta in the south to Chicago, would have stuck out his strong chest with a grinning pride at the success of Chicago’s Southsiders.

The old man was born in 1891, the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I was born to him when he was 61, and to my mother who passed when I was a 2 year-old lap baby. I and my young siblings grew up with a senior citizen, strong African-American baseball loving man. He schooled me in the bat-and-glove sport that he loved and played. He gave me a few tips too.

My dad was the catcher on his team. One of their pitchers threw smokers. His fast-ball was so strong it would knock my dad on his backside when he caught it. The heat was a problem.

The tip?

Dad told me how he learned to lean forward in his squatting position before the pitch arrived. That way, when he caught the pitcher's smoking heat it would straighten him up. With his back straight, he found himself in just the right position make a perfect throw to cut down the first-base runner trying to steal second.

**Lean forward, catch the heat, make the throw, complete the play.**

Pretty wise.

But what should I expect from the old man. I know he only finished third grade in the one-room school house in Mississippi. Yet he was wise beyond his old years. The Lord, and life, and even baseball schooled him.

That's why he is probably rejoicing over the victories of Jackie Robinson West. (Especially when they pray after their games.) The fledgling young men have learned how **to lean forward, catch the heat, make the throw, complete the play**. They learned the technique on the baseball field, and they are learning it in life.

The JRW little-leaguers are learning the tip in the life of America's racial profiling and open season on black men. They are learning it in the life of Chicago's shooting and gang-violence. They are learning to survive and thrive in their team and personal life.

They are getting the job done. Period.

Yes, these power sluggers, fast runners, diving fielders, heart-throbbing coaches, applauding parents and friends, yes they are all—we are all—learning to survive and thrive against the odds of life.

JRW is doing it for me, and for the memory of my Mississippi dad.

Not to be left out of the game, they are doing it for the many other young black boys who grew up in Chicago's west side. We once played little league baseball back in the 60's.

Our 11, 12, and 13 year-olds did not have fancy equipment. We barely had matching uniforms. We used old gloves and mitts, old baseballs with the threads unraveling, old wooden bats. Our cleats were gym shoes, the kind that actually facilitated "sliding." Our practice field was the brick and glass strewn vacant lot down the street. And yes, we even had players rough enough to slide on the bricks and glass—and they survived!

The parks we played in had one bench on this side and one bench for the other team.

We had a single coach. Often our coach had to serve as the umpire, because the other team did not even have a coach. Yes, they had no coach. The boys on the other team organized, coached, and disciplined themselves to play their best game. Sometimes they beat us.

Our little league team did not have good transportation; often we had none. Yes, we walked a mile or two to the field in a community that was racially or socially different (even threatening!) from our own. But we showed up.

One time I remember walking and showing up all by myself; nobody else came. (My, my, my, was I hooked on that baseball game! One day I and my brother almost came to blows because he misplaced my worn-out glove!)

Yet, we showed up with our bats and gloves, and we played. We played with enthusiasm, and we played with hope.

Maybe one of us could become like Jackie Robinson who broke baseball's color barrier, or like Satchel Paige a famous pitcher in the Negro League. Then again, we tried to emulate Ernie Banks ("Mr. Cub"). Or Billy Williams, or Lou Brock of the St. Louis Cardinals, and former Cub—arguably the worst trade in MLB history. The names of our stars could go on and on.

Maybe some of us black little leaguers could make it big.

Sure we were from the ghetto in Chicago. Sure we had little, and struggled day-by-day to survive. Sure we saw gangs, and drugs, and alcohol, and beer cups by the dozens at Wrigley Field—whenever our coach was fortunate enough to get some free tickets to the game.

Nevertheless, maybe, perhaps wishfully, we could break into professional baseball, and reach our stardom. Envision one of us making the game-winning hit; scoring the winning run; walk away with the baseball crown; appearing on front sport's page of one of Chicago's daily news papers.

Such memories. Such fond memories.

I had almost forgotten them. That is, until Jackie Robinson West snuck up on all of us.

Their championships have struck a chord within, and its roots run deep, long and winding.

Somehow the winning of Jackie Robinson West has revived and inspired the soul of this preacher, of this community man, the youngest son of an elder father, of this once fledgling ball player.

After six decades, I am blessed to still live in the family home that I was brought home to from the west side Chicago hospital of my birth in the early '50's. Today I see and walk the same Wilcox Street each day.

I see the children of the fourth and fifth generations of the black families who broke the color barrier by moving into the once-Italian neighborhood.

Sometimes I like what I see; other times I hate what I feel.

Many of our children and young people have serious problems, and endangering issues they must face on a daily basis. In Chicago's urban setting they face crime, drugs, joblessness, STD's, violence, police brutality, inferior schools, absentee fathers, and more.

Our children, our younger ones, need a lot. They need hope, and encouragement, and discipline; they need mentorship, and spiritual nurture, and a moral compass; they need a secure living environment, and the chance to redeem their lives, and government that serves, and communities that care; they need love. Above all, they need just a little more Jesus.

The children, and the youth, and the adults, and the “would of, could of, should of’s” need the soul of the winning Jackie Robinson West of America’s Little League.

Especially our youth need the empowerment to **lean forward, to catch the heat, to make the throw, and to complete the play.**

They need to win in the game of life. And to do it for themselves, for their ancestors who have passed this way, and for countless others who somehow have become hopeless.

“Thank you,” Jackie Robinson West.

“Thank you,” from this preacher early on Sunday morning; and wishing I could be in Williamsport, PA for history and for memories.

Here in Chicago, I’m with you in spirit and in the soul of success.

Again, you have won already.

And for that, we all say “Thank God.”