

If you like your inspirational sports stories told straight, no chaser, you could do much worse than “42,” the new biography of the man who broke baseball’s color line, Jackie Robinson (42 was Robinson’s uniform number during his career).

The film covers the two years of Robinson’s dramatic story: his selection as the first black player signed to play in the major leagues in 1945 to his eventual triumph in his first season with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. For fans who know that story (like this writer), the script (by director Brian Helgeland) ticks off all the dramatic elements of Robinson’s odyssey (his first painful trials, his testing in the minor leagues in Montreal, the harsh encounters in the South, his stomaching of vicious abuse and racism, etc.) and does them effectively. The film also forthrightly shows how some of teammates (like Eddie Stanky and Pee Wee Reese) came to respect and defend Robinson as a player and a man. To younger viewers, Jackie’s performance as a stellar player who accepted his breakthrough role with unmatched dignity could be seen as a revelation.

Chadwick Boseman does a solid turn as Robinson. Though he appears a bit older than the real Robinson (who was 27-28 at the time), he communicates the furious control of the ballplayer, his manful poise matched and balanced by his pride. He is also athletic enough to impersonate Robinson, one of the country’s greatest all-around athletes. For an man bottled up almost the whole picture, he gets his one big chance to emote with a solitary, personal explosion of rage (symbolically breaking his bat) under the stands during one game. He pulls the tirade off.

Harrison Ford, bless his heart, finally takes on a character role worthy of him as Branch Rickey, the Dodger General Manager who selected Robinson as the appropriate man for a “great experiment.” With good makeup, serious cigars, and an amply crusty demeanor, he gives off the right Rickey vibes, a practical man wedded to a moral right. A number of featured roles are also well written and well handled, particularly a very attractive Nicole Beharie as Rachel Robinson, almost as much of a hero in this saga as Jackie himself. The film’s re-creation of the mid-1940’s in America may be a bit too well scrubbed, but it still looks great.

One adjective which could rightly describe both the Jackie Robinson of this movie and the production itself: foursquare.

*(The film runs 128 min. and is rated PG-13).*

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