

The American League baseball team in New York, you may have heard of them, has a pitcher on its roster, Mariano Rivera, you may have heard of him, who wears the number 42 on his back. He has done so for 13 years and is arguably the best closer in the history of baseball. In baseball lingo a closer is the pitcher who comes in when there are three or four outs to get thereby preserving the lead for his team and securing the win. It is a mind-bogglingly pressure filled job. Most of us, even if we had the skills, would melt every time the manager handed us the ball.

When a closer comes into the game the score is close, there may be men on base and there is no room to walk batters, hit batters or be careless in any way. This is not the first inning. It is the ninth inning. The game is on the line. The great manager Whitey Herzog said "I want my closer to have all the imagination of a truck full of bricks." What he meant was that a pitcher, who was to close out a game, giving up nothing but usually in trouble, should not have the ability to imagine how dire his situation is. If he knew how bad it was he would choke.

Mariano Rivera has avoided choking for all these years, has faced the best lineups in baseball season after season, post season after post season and stood up to the incredible demands of the job, in New York no less, the home of superfluous pressure. He is, as they say, riding a one way ticket to the Hall of Fame.

But that's not what I'm talking about. He wears the number 42. He is aware that he wears number 42. He is the last major league ballplayer who will ever wear the number 42 on his back because baseball retired that number in 1997 for all teams for all time. It's the only number in the long history of baseball to be so designated. 42 was Jackie Robinson's number, Jackie Robinson entered the Major Leagues in 1947, the first black player to do so. He endured the scorn and hate and physical violence that were waiting for the first black player in the Majors, coming from playing opponents and fans in the stands alike. In baseball, where many things are honored but history is sacred, the number 42 has been retired forever for all teams everywhere. The only players who will ever wear it are the ones who wear it now. There is only one left. That's Mariano.

Jackie Robinson's widow Rachel, who's calm graciousness was the perfect counterpoint to Jack's (she calls him Jack) seething persona was present at Yankee Stadium for ceremonies honoring the historic events of April, 1947. Rachel has a sense of humor. I guess she would have had to have one just to keep sane in those early years when her husband was carrying half a world on his shoulders. She said she was proud that Mariano Rivera is the last wearer of number 42, that he embodied the focus and drive and excellence that Jack had. She also said that it was a struggle for her to be "rooting" for a Yankee, considering the long, long history that her beloved Dodgers have against the hated pinstripers.

I was lucky enough to grow up in New York in the 1950's and 60's. Throughout the 50's there were three major league baseball teams and all of them, for most of the decade, were very good teams too. During those ten seasons one or two of those New York teams were in the World Series every year!

I saw Mickey and Willie and the Duke and Gil and Yogi and Campy and Casey and Leo, saw them play and manage at the games highest level. I saw Jackie too. He was fierce and he was very, very big. For a second baseman he was huge. One of his varsity sports was football. He was a punishing running back for UCLA. Defensive backs who hit him generally rebounded in the direction from whence they came. In so many confrontations on the base paths, in the clubhouses and at the plate he could have taken the puny player harassing him (sometimes his own team mate) and broken him over his knee. Jackie was angry enough and sufficiently justified that he wouldn't have given it a second thought. But he didn't do it. He didn't strike back.

He promised Mr. Rickey (the great Branch Rickey) that he would swallow hard, look the other way and take all the abuse for three years! Three years of the most vile language, hard slides and flashing spikes. Three years of specifically directed, personal meanness from people who weren't fit to carry his bags. Imagine that. Imagine yourself face to face with a physically inferior, foul mouthed punk who is calling you and your mother everything he can think of. Would you hold back? Could you hold back? I don't think I would have lasted two innings. Justifiable homicide would have been the jury's verdict but my baseball career would have been over.

But for Jackie Robinson, his promise to Mr. Rickey and the certain knowledge that he was on this planet to do something far more important than play second base, sustained him (barely) in his dignified pacifism. This is a startling thing for a proud man, a physical man to do. Restraining the urge to physically defend yourself and your family is the hardest thing for a man like that to do. To do it for years is beyond the ken of normal human endurance. I'm sure it had a hand in his early death. I am equally sure he knew that it would.

All of which is to say that the next time you see Mariano Rivera walk to the mound to ice a game in the ninth inning forget about the game for a minute and notice the number on his back. Take a minute and think of what it is to be a hero, an honest to goodness hero. Take a minute and tip your cap to the original number 42.