

# Robinson, Noren Shared Friendship

## In Mid-1940s

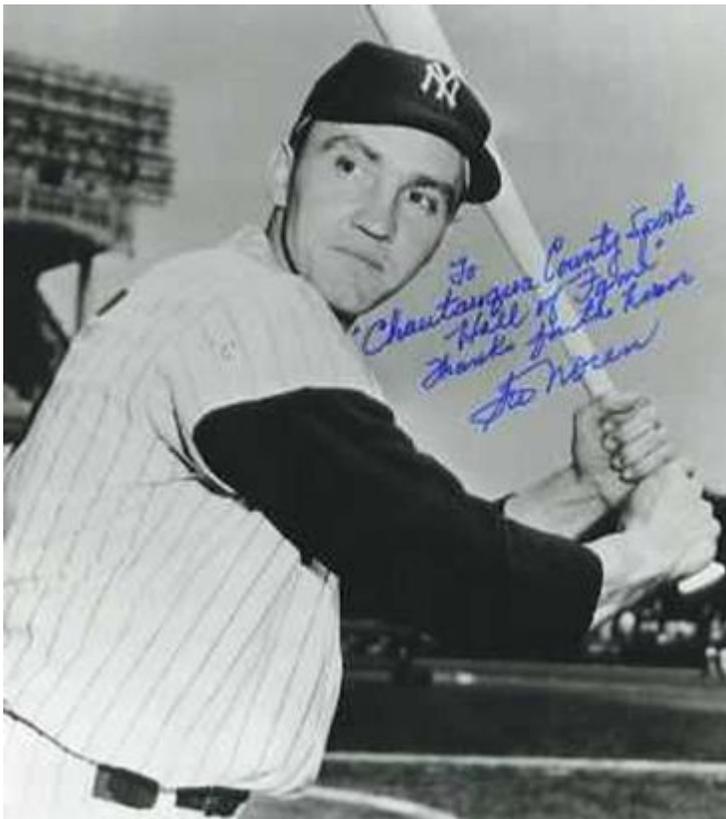
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By Scott Kindberg , Post-Journal

The Public Broadcasting Service's two-part documentary on Jackie Robinson, which concluded Tuesday night, was a four-hour masterpiece. Directed by Ken Burns, Sarah Burns and David McMahon, the film details Robinson's early life and his baseball career, during which he became the first black player in Major League Baseball in 1947. The second part shows Robinson navigating a civil rights era that he helped put in motion.

While the documentary spends most of its time - and rightfully so - on baseball and social issues, it also reminds viewers of Robinson's athletic prowess in football, track and field, and basketball.

Robinson was a four-sport letter winner at UCLA and he was exceptionally talented on the hardwood, leading the Pacific Coast Conference's Southern Division in scoring in 1940 with a 12.4 average and in 1941 with an 11.1 average.



*Irv Noren was inducted into the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame in 1985. File photo*

Five years later, it was basketball that brought Robinson together with Jamestown native Irv Noren, who would go on to play 11 years in the Major Leagues, including five with the New York Yankees.

The son of a bakery owner, Noren, now 91, regaled me with his stories during a phone interview in 2013 during which he remembered Jamestown's Brooklyn Square and its brick streets; building forts and having snowball fights at Allen Park; and skating on his iced-over backyard on Linwood Avenue.

And, of course, there was the bakery.

Located on the corner of Newland and Forest avenues, Noren's Bakery was where Irv would go for a donut or to help his father clean up after a busy day. His payment? A chocolate eclair.

When Noren was 11 or 12, his parents visited friends in California, found they liked it and relocated to San Diego and, later, to Pasadena. Ironically, Noren's dad found a bakery for sale in Pasadena, eventually looked it over and, according to Noren, "bought the dog-gone thing."

"He took a Greyhound (bus) back to Jamestown, sold the house and the bakery and came back out (to California)," said Noren, who now lives in Oceanside, California. "On a handshake."

Jamestown's loss turned out to be Pasadena's gain, and a relationship with Robinson was later born. At Pasadena High School, Noren, by all accounts, was quite an athlete, starring in baseball, football and basketball.

"I was a better basketball player than baseball player in school," he said.

So good, in fact, that he was once the California Interscholastic Federation Player of the Year. Noren, who was inducted into the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame in 1985, eventually parlayed his excellence on the hardwood into success at Pasadena City College and, later, with the racially integrated professional basketball team called the Los Angeles Red Devils. One of Noren's teammates during that 1946-47 season was Robinson, also from Pasadena.

"We were good friends," Noren told me. "He's probably the best athlete I've ever seen."

The Red Devils' team was pretty good, too, finishing their short season, 13-3.

According to a story in The Los Angeles Times, Robinson and Noren were joined on the Red Devils by Eddie Oram, an All-American guard from USC; Art Stoen, a 6-foot-5 center from Stanford; and future major leaguers George Crowe, who played eight seasons with the Boston Braves and Cincinnati Reds, and Everett "Ziggy" Marcell, a nine-year veteran of the Negro League who came from the Harlem Globetrotters.

Robinson played for the Red Devils in the offseason between his minor league year with the Montreal Royals and his rookie year with the Brooklyn Dodgers. According to the L.A. Times, Robinson and Marcell also played pro football with the Los Angeles Bulldogs, making them members of a select group who played three professional sports.

The Red Devils' games were played at the Olympic Auditorium in downtown Los Angeles, which, according to the Black Fives Foundation, was better known as a boxing and wrestling venue. The building still stands, though no longer used as an athletic venue, and is within walking distance from the Staples Center, the home of the Los Angeles Lakers and Los Angeles Clippers of the National Basketball Association.

In posting 13 wins in their 16 games, the Red Devils, according to the Black Fives Foundation, defeated the Sheboygan Redskins of the NBL twice; defeated the New York Renaissance twice; and they split two games with the NBL champion Chicago Gears, who featured future Hall-of-famer George Mikan.

Robinson, who reportedly left the team in January to continue his baseball pursuits, had fond memories of his time with the Red Devils.

"There were some exceptionally good basketball players with name value on the squad," the Black Fives Foundation quoted Robinson as saying. "We had, I think, a really fine team."

And Noren, who grew up eating eclairs on Newland Avenue in Jamestown, was part of that squad.