

Robinson Legacy Is Big Seller

JACKIE ROBINSON'S debut in Major League Baseball, on April 15, 1947, was a historic moment that had sweeping repercussions on race relations and integration in the U.S.

Now comes the commemorative Coke bottle.

As the 50th anniversary of Mr. Robinson's big day approaches, his likeness is showing up in all kinds of places. The U.S. mint is making gold and silver coins. A Nike commercial features athletes such as the Seattle Mariners' Ken Griffey Jr. thanking him. General Mills is putting his face on Wheaties boxes, McDonald's handed out lapel pins, and other marketers are hawkling baseball bats, figurines, trading cards, key chains and T-shirts.

"This is our biggest program of the year" in sports, says Darci Ross, president of the licensing firm behind the blitz, CMG Worldwide, Inc. whose other clients include retired baseball player Jim Palmer, former football great Johnny Unitas, and the estates of Marilyn Monroe, Babe Ruth and James Dean.

But some see the marketing machine as a bit unseemly, given the significance of Mr. Robinson's life and career. That day at Ebbets Field when he ran out to his position at first base for the Brooklyn Dodgers, breaking baseball's color line, he changed the way many Americans looked at race.

I don't think that Jackie Robinson's legacy is in any need of commercialization because he and his legacy already have such stature," says John Hoberman, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin and author of "Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race." "It's simply a way of bringing him down to the level of today's commercialized athletes, black and white.

Still, CMG insists the image of Mr. Robinson, who died in 1972, actually could have been a lot more commercialized if it weren't for Rachel Robinson, the baseball legend's 74-year-old who retains the rights to his estate. Indianapolis based CMG, says hundreds of marketers have pitched ideas to Mrs. Robinson. So far, she has approved about 30. Mrs. Robinson says she didn't want "a lot of what we call trash and trinkets."

Robinson's estate will receive more than \$1million, but less than \$5million, for the licensing of his name this year. While that's peanuts compared with, say, Albert Belle's five-year, \$55 million contract with the Chicago White Sox, it is certainly better than what Mr. Robinson earned in the late 1950's when his base-running dazzled baseball. His salary peaked at about \$42,500 a

year; more or less in line with that of his front-line white teammates.

In fact, CMG says the Jackie Robinson program is lean compared with other sports promotions, such as its 1995 blitz for Babe Ruth's 100th birthday, which had several hundred licensees, "With Rachel, we're not even going to be near that amount because she's not going to allow it," Ms. Ross says. (Although Mrs. Robinson has approved far fewer deals, hers are expected to command higher prices. Mr. Ruth's estate netted about \$1.5 million from its licensing agreements says a person familiar with the industry.

"We wanted items that would properly commemorate Jack." Says Mrs. Robinson, who has final say over which companies are allowed to slap her husband's name and likeness on their products and into their ads. Among products she turned down neckties, cookie jars, a clapping toy with molded-plastic hands and a credit card.

She looked favorably on promotions that stressed Mr. Robinson's ties to the game. In addition to approving bats and baseballs, she approved the creation of a Jackie Robinson logo designed by CMG and Major League Baseball. Every player will wear the logo on his uniform this season, which is dedicated to Mr. Robinson.

The red, white and blue logo, which bears a copy of Mr. Robinson's signature, is also being licensed for T-shirts, posters, trading cards and other items. In most cases, CMG says licensees will pay a royalty of 10% of the wholesale price of the product to use the logo. However, under an agreement with Major League Baseball, companies that license both Mr. Robinson's logo and the logo to a major-league team will pay a reduced royalty of 7.5% for each bringing the total rate to 15%. The idea is to encourage licensees to use both logos together.

Since her husband died, Mrs. Robinson has spent much of her time helping run the New York-based Jackie Robinson Foundation, founded by his family in 1973 to provide scholarships to minority students. This year, in connection with the anniversary, she has been busy with speaking engagements, a book tour and approving licensing deals.

"I submit everything to her," says Ms. Ross of CMG. "I deal with her on a one to one basis. She pretty much gives me her yes or no right then and there. One sure way to get a thumbs-down on a proposed Jackie Robinson product: "If it doesn't look like him, I know she's not going to like it," Ms. Ross says.



Mrs. Robinson is also mindful of overexposure of her husband's image, says Ms. Ross. "She's very careful about having too many of the same item." When it comes to figurines, T-shirts and posters, "she's at her max," says Ms. Ross.

Accolade Inc. a San Jose, Calif. entertainment-software publisher, is paying an undisclosed amount for the rights to use Mr. Robinson's likeness in a video game featuring several all-time baseball greats. "Certainly one would include Jackie Robinson on that team for his fame as a player and a person," says Berry Kane, Accolade's corporate counsel. "What players like when they play video games is realism. And they like using real-life heroes rather than fictional characters."

"In our eyes, Jackie Robinson is one of the clearest visions for what our brand stands for," says Paul Wright, marketing manager for Wheaties. Mr. Robinson, who appeared in several Wheaties ads in the late 1940's, is showing up on cereal boxes this spring.

"We were with him back then, and now that it's his 50th anniversary, we want to be with him again," says Mr. Wright, who declines to disclose the terms of his company's licensing deal. General Mills says it is donating part of its proceeds to the Jackie Robinson Foundation, the Negro Leagues Museum in Kansas City, MO. and to former players of the Negro Leagues, in which Mr. Robinson played before joining the Dodgers.

Mrs. Robinson will be on the box too. She is using the side of the package to pitch her book of family photos, "Jackie Robinson: An Intimate Portrait," available for \$9.95, plus a proof of purchase from Wheaties.