Second Grade Lesson
From the Diamond to the Diving Board:
How Jackie Robinson and Sammy Lee Changed Sports
created by Sohyun An

Georgia Social Studies Standards
SS2H1 Describe the lives and contributions of historical figures in Georgia history.
c. Jackie Robinson (sportsmanship and civil rights)

After learning about Georgia native Jackie Robinson, students can expand their understanding of sportsmanship and civil rights by studying Dr. Sammy Lee (1920-2016). Dr. Lee was an extraordinary American diver, the first Asian American man to win an Olympic gold medal, and a dedicated military medical officer. Like Jackie Robinson, Sammy Lee faced, fought, and overcame racial discrimination. Both men used their platforms to advocate for a fairer, more inclusive society.





Background Information

Sammy Lee was born in California in 1920 to immigrant parents from Korea. He grew up in a racially segregated society, facing racial discrimination from an early age. Despite his talent for diving, he had trouble finding a place to practice because the public pool was segregated during the era. Asian Americans and other people of Color could swim in the pool only one day a week. Lee did not let this stop him. He found a coach who trained him over a sand pit.

In high school, Lee became a diving champion; he served as student body president and graduated first in his class. Yet he could not attend the prom because the place where the prom was held did not allow people of Color. Meanwhile, Lee earned a scholarship to study medicine at Occidental College. Due to the outbreak of World War II, an urgent need for doctors arose. He enrolled in an accelerated program and received his medical degree from the University of Southern California Medical School in 1947. Then, he served as a Major in the U.S. Army Medical Corps. Throughout his education and service to his country, Lee would squeeze in diving practice when he could.

In 1948, Lee made history at the London Olympics by winning gold in the 10-meter platform event. In the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, he once again won gold in the 10-meter platform. In 1954 Lee traveled throughout Asia as a goodwill ambassador for the U.S. Lee spoke about his diving achievements and talked about how discrimination and racism were being addressed in the United States. Yet, still he and his family faced racial discrimination. They were not able to buy a home in a certain neighborhood due to racism.

While practicing as a physician specializing in ear, nose, and throat medicine, he remained active in diving. He coached the 1960 U.S. Olympic team as well as several diving champions. In 1968 Lee was elected to the International Swimming Hall of Fame. He was a flag bearer for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics and became a member of the United States Olympic Hall of Fame in 1990. Throughout his life, he remained an advocate for diversity and inclusion in sports and society. Lee died on December 2, 2016.

Suggested Teaching Activity

Step 1: Review Jackie Robinson's Story (10 Minutes)

Begin by reviewing what students learned about Jackie Robinson. Ask students:

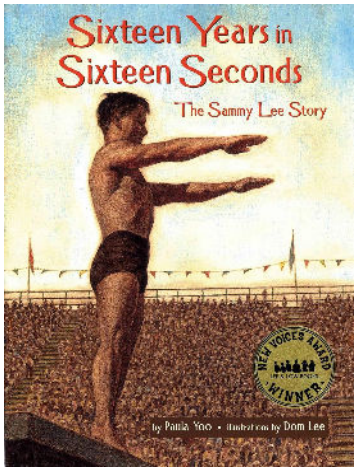
- Who was Jackie Robinson?
- What challenges did he face?
- How did he show courage and sportsmanship?
- How did Jackie Robinson help make society fairer?

Create a simple anchor chart titled "Jackie Robinson: Breaking Barriers" and record student responses. Explain that students will learn about another athlete who also faced discrimination and worked to make sports more inclusive.

Step 2: Introduce Sammy Lee (5 Minutes)

Show students a photograph of Dr. Sammy Lee and explain that he was an Olympic diver, doctor, and military officer. Tell students:

"Just like Jackie Robinson, Sammy Lee loved sports and worked very hard to achieve his dreams. However, because of racism, he was often treated unfairly. Today, we will learn how Sammy Lee overcame challenges and helped create a more inclusive society."



Introduce key vocabulary:

- Diver – an athlete who jumps into water from a diving board or platform.
- Discrimination – unfair treatment of people because of who they are.
- Inclusion – making sure everyone feels welcomed and has opportunities to participate.

Step 3: Interactive Read-Aloud (15–20 Minutes)

Read aloud *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds* by Paula Yoo, illustrated by Dom Lee.

Pause throughout the reading to ask students to think about and discuss questions with a partner, such as:

- Why was Sammy Lee not allowed to use the swimming pool every day?
- How do you think Sammy felt when he was treated unfairly?
- What did Sammy do when he faced obstacles?
- What character traits helped Sammy succeed?

Encourage students to listen for examples of perseverance, courage, and sportsmanship.

Step 4: Compare Jackie Robinson and Sammy Lee (15 Minutes)

After the read-aloud, create a class Venn diagram comparing Jackie Robinson and Sammy Lee. Guide students with questions such as:

- What challenges did Jackie Robinson face?
- What challenges did Sammy Lee face?
- How were their experiences similar?
- How were they different?
- How did both athletes help create positive change?

Step 5: Discussion and Reflection (10 Minutes)

Engage students in a whole-class discussion using the following questions:

1. What challenges did Sammy Lee face in pursuing his passion for diving and why?
2. How did Sammy Lee overcome racial discrimination?
3. How did Sammy Lee use his success to help others?
4. What lessons can we learn from Sammy Lee's story?
5. How is Sammy Lee's story similar to Jackie Robinson's story?

Emphasize that both athletes demonstrated courage, perseverance, sportsmanship, and a commitment to making society more just and inclusive.

Step 6: Exit Ticket or Extension Activity (10 Minutes)

Have students complete one of the following sentence stems:

- Sammy Lee inspires me because _____.
- Jackie Robinson and Sammy Lee are similar because _____.
- One lesson I learned from these athletes is _____.

As an extension, students can draw a picture of Jackie Robinson and Sammy Lee breaking barriers and write a sentence explaining how each athlete helped make sports fairer for everyone.

Images used:

1. Jackie Robinson poses for LIFE's Allan Grant during filming of The Jackie Robinson Story, 1950. Allan Grant The LIFE Picture Collection/Shutterstock
2. 1952 Press Photo. PJ Capilla, S Lee & G Haase win Olympic diving event. Associated Press.
3. Yoo, Paula. Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds: The Sammy Lee Story. New York: Lee & Low Books, 2005.