

Roberto Clemente, 1934-1972: First Latino in Baseball Hall of Fame

27 August 2006

VOICE ONE:

I'm Steve Ember.

VOICE TWO:



And I'm Faith Lapidus with People in America in VOA Special English. Today, we tell about Roberto Clemente. He was one of the most honored baseball players in history. He became the first Latino baseball player to be included in the Baseball Hall of Fame.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Roberto Clemente

Most sports players are known for how great they play a game, or how many records they break. But Roberto Clemente was loved not only for his ability in sports, but also for the kind of person that he was.

Clemente was one of the first professional Latino baseball players in the United States. He became one of the best. He also worked to change the way baseball, and the country, treated racial minorities in the nineteen fifties and sixties. He stood up against racism and did not permit anyone to be treated differently in his presence.

Today's Latino baseball players say Roberto Clemente opened doors for them to reach their goals in a sport that had not always treated them equally.

VOICE TWO:

Roberto Clemente Walker was born in nineteen thirty-four in Carolina, Puerto Rico. Roberto's family struggled financially. As a young boy, he helped his father, who worked on a sugar farm and also managed a store that sold food.

In school, Roberto was an excellent runner. He also won awards for throwing the javelin. But more than anything, he loved playing baseball. Puerto Rico's warm island climate made it easy for the young boy to play baseball all year. He had many skills. But his strongest quality was his powerful right arm that could throw a ball a great distance.

While in high school, Roberto signed a contract to play baseball for the Santurce Crabbers in the Puerto Rican winter league. At the age of eighteen, Roberto was

already hitting a baseball better than many professional players in the United States.

VOICE ONE:

This ability was recognized the following year. An official from the Brooklyn Dodgers team in New York City came to Puerto Rico looking for new, young players. The official, Al Campanis, was pleased with Roberto's skill. He offered to give him a ten thousand dollar gift to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

But Roberto was unable to join the major league team because he was still in high school. The young baseball player told Mister Campanis that he would join the Brooklyn team as soon as he finished school.

By the time he finished high school, Roberto had received several other offers from major league teams in the United States. One team offered him a thirty thousand dollar gift just to sign a contract agreement. Although Clemente had not signed a contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers, he kept his word to the team. He refused the other offers and signed on to play for Brooklyn.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

The Dodgers put Roberto Clemente on one of their minor league teams where young players often begin. But soon after his first season, the Pittsburgh Pirates took Clemente for their team. Clemente began playing for the Pittsburgh Pirates in nineteen fifty-five. At the time, Clemente was still learning to speak English.

In the nineteen fifties the United States was still very much divided between racial lines. Pittsburgh did not have a Latin American community at the time. Clemente, a black Puerto Rican, was shocked when he experienced racism in America.

VOICE ONE:

In the spring, baseball players attended training camps in the southern state of Florida. Many eating-places in the South at that time did not serve black people. So the black players on the team were forced to ask their white teammates to buy food for them. The black players would then eat on the bus that drove them to the games.

Roberto Clemente had a very strong sense of self-worth. He would not let others treat him unequally. Clemente felt that having to ask his teammates for food was insulting. He later became a strong believer in the messages of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Junior. Clemente's work helping poor people, especially those in Puerto Rico, became a very important part of his life.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

Roberto Clemente stood out among the other players on his team. He was a strong right fielder who quickly became known for his powerful throwing and near-perfect aim. Clemente had an unusual way of hitting the baseball. He stood farther away from the pitcher than most players, and used a heavier bat than most players. He was also known as a very aggressive hitter, swinging hard and fast at almost any ball.

The Pittsburgh Pirates did not do well the first few years Clemente played on the team. But by nineteen sixty, all that changed. That year, he played in the first of his twelve All-Star games. Every year, the best players from the National and American leagues compete in an All-Star game. That same year, Clemente helped his team beat the New York Yankees to win the World Series – the national baseball championship.

VOICE ONE:

Clemente continued to improve. He had suffered for years from pain caused by an automobile accident. Yet even with his health problems Clemente rarely missed a game. By nineteen sixty-one, he was feeling better and it showed. He hit extremely well that year and won his first batting award.

Roberto Clemente was one of the best baseball players at the time. But he did not receive as much interest from the national media as other top players like Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays. Many people believe that was because he played for a team in a smaller city.

However, Clemente's popularity began to grow during the nineteen seventy-one World Series. The Pittsburgh Pirates won the series against the Baltimore Orioles. Clemente was voted the Most Valuable Player of that year's World Series. One sports writer later described Clemente's throwing, running and hitting during the World Series as close to the level of perfection.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

Roberto Clemente was also a loving husband and father. He had married Vera Cristina Zabala in nineteen sixty-four. Together they had three sons. Clemente never forgot his Puerto Rican roots. He made sure all of his sons were born on the island.

During his eighteen years in the major leagues, Clemente won many awards and helped his team win two World Series championships. In nineteen seventy-two Clemente made his three thousandth hit in the last game of the regular season. At that time, no one knew that it would be his final baseball season.

VOICE ONE:

During the winter of that year, Clemente returned to Puerto Rico with this family. He began to work on one of his long-time dreams – opening a sports center for the young people of San Juan.

Then, on December twenty-third, a major earthquake struck Managua, Nicaragua. Thousands of people were killed. Clemente quickly organized an aid effort to help thousands of homeless earthquake victims. But he was angered by reports from the area that the Nicaraguan government was not getting the supplies to the victims.

So Clemente paid for a small plane and a pilot to take supplies to Nicaragua. Clemente and four others were on that plane on December thirty-first, nineteen seventy-two. But the plane crashed into the Atlantic Ocean shortly after take-off. Everyone on the plane was killed. Clemente's body was never found. He was thirty-eight years old.

VOICE TWO:

The Baseball Writers Association of America held a special election. The usual five-year waiting period for entrance into the Baseball Hall of Fame was suspended. Soon after his death, Roberto Clemente became the first Latino player to be included in the Baseball Hall of Fame.

The Pittsburgh Pirates also honored him in nineteen seventy-three. They removed Clemente's number – twenty-one – from their team. That meant no other player on the team could ever wear that number.

Roberto Clemente once said: "Anytime you have an opportunity to make things better and you don't, then you are wasting your time on Earth." Clemente truly lived, and died, by those words. Some experts have called him baseball's greatest hero.

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VOICE ONE:

This program was written by Brianna Blake. It was produced by Lawan Davis. I'm Steve Ember.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Faith Lapidus. You can download transcripts and archives of our shows at voaspecialenglish.com. Join us next week for another PEOPLE IN AMERICA in VOA Special English.