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## Roberto Clemente went to bat for all Latino ballplayers

*His skills on the diamond dazzled the fans;  
his humanitarian work is now living tribute  
to the 'Pride of Puerto Rico—and Pittsburgh'*

When Roberto Clemente, the Pittsburgh Pirates' magnificent right fielder, doubled to left-center field in his final at-bat of the 1972 season, he joined one of the most exclusive clubs in baseball history. At the time, only ten other players had batted out 3,000 career base hits; Clemente claimed his place alongside such legends as Ty Cobb, Stan Musial, Tris Speaker and Honus Wagner. For anyone who followed the game in those days, finding him in such select company was no surprise. He had, after all, won four National League batting titles, been elected to the All-Star team 12 times and received both the National League's Most Valuable Player (MVP) award and the World Series' outstanding player award. Now the only question was whether, at 38, he would decide to play yet another season or retire to his native Puerto Rico, where he could devote himself full-time to developing Sports City, the youth camp he had been dreaming about for years.

Sadly, there would not be another season for Clemente. He was killed on a New Year's Eve mission of mercy, flying relief supplies to earthquake victims in Nicaragua, when his plane went down off the coast of Puerto Rico. Three months later he became the first Latin American player to be voted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

Pirate hero assumed the unusual stance at plate—bat held high, leg cocked—that won him four hitting titles.

In 1992 nearly 40,000 fans joined with members of Clemente's family and ex-teammates at Pittsburgh's Three Rivers Stadium for a pre-game ceremony commemorating the 20th anniversary of his final season. Suddenly, there he was again—this time on the towering video screen in center field. *Clemente at bat, feet spread wide, bat held high, reaching across the plate to drive an outside pitch deep into the gap in right-center field; Clemente on the basepaths, running out from under his batting helmet; Clemente racing to catch an outfield fly ball and then rifling a throw to third base that cuts down a runner trying to advance.* Each scene elicited a tremendous roar from the crowd, as if what the fans were seeing was not a highlights film but rather the incomparable No. 21 himself. Clearly, the "Pride of Puerto Rico" was still the pride of Pittsburgh, as well.

Baseball became popular in the Caribbean after the U.S. Marines occupied Puerto Rico and a number of other islands during the Spanish-American War. By the turn of the century it was flourishing throughout much of Latin America. Clemente was not the first major-leaguer from that part of the world. He'd been preceded by a handful of others, including his own countrymen Rubén Gómez and Vic Power, Cubans Dolph Luque and Minnie Miñoso, Venezuela's Chico Carrasquel, and Bobby Avila of Mexico. But Clemente was the first Latino superstar, and as such he was a hero not only in this country but throughout the hemisphere.

His sensational skills made him special, but that was not the only reason Clemente was revered by his peers. He assigned himself a special role, took on a special burden.

"He was a leader for all Latinos," recalls Luis Aparicio, who broke into the majors a year after Clemente. "He was always an advocate for our rights."

Roberto Walker Clemente was an enormously complex, passionate man whose interests spanned many fields. He wrote poetry. He worked in ceramics and played the organ. He was a friend of Martin Luther King Jr. Above all, he was committed to helping his people, especially the youth of Puerto Rico. In the off-season, he would travel around the island giving baseball clinics as a way of reaching youngsters. "I go out to different towns, different neighborhoods," he explained. "I get kids together and talk about the importance of sports, the importance of being a good citizen, the importance of respecting their mother and father. I like to get together with the fathers and sons and talk to them."

But Clemente was misunderstood in the United States. Intelligent, intense and outspoken, he was a magnet for controversy. His detractors saw him as aloof, sullen, combative, a hypochondriac and a hot dog, while those who knew him best considered him digni-

fied, reflective, frank, sensitive and stylish. At the root of those misunderstandings lay a profound cultural gap.

Clemente was descended from a class of Puerto Rican campesinos who formed the backbone of the work force on the coffee and sugar plantations. Their values were basic and simple: hard work, honesty, generosity, dignity, respect for one's elders. These were the values instilled in Clemente by his parents. "When I was a boy," he said, "I realized what lovely persons my father and mother were. I learned the right way to live. I never heard any hate in my house. Not for anybody. I never heard my mother say a bad word to my father, or my father to my mother."

This veneration for his parents stayed with Clemente throughout his life. "The respect and caring he had for them was very, very great," says Efrén Bernier, a prominent Puerto Rican lawyer who knew Clemente well. "He never neglected the opportunity to ask for their blessing."

Melchor Clemente was in his mid-50s

when his youngest son, Roberto, was born in 1934. Don Melchor was a foreman at a sugarcane mill in Barrio San Antón, a rural neighborhood in the town of Carolina. He also ran a small store where he sold meat and other provisions to his fellow workers. Roberto's mother, Doña Luisa, arose early in the morning to do the laundry for the family of the mill owner. Her days were taken up with cooking and attending to the needs of her six children.

"The family was not rich," says Clemente's widow, Vera, "but they had more than most poor people in those days because the father was a foreman, and they always helped other people. Roberto's mother was very religious, and she used to feed the children who came to their house all the time."

Clemente's older brother Matino remembers Roberto as an earnest, mature youngster. "If anybody needed help with advice or money, he would give it," says Matino, a retired glass worker who still lives in Carolina. "Once, when he was about 11, there

was an automobile accident. The car caught fire, and he crossed the highway and took the driver out so he wouldn't burn. In school he was a leader. When they needed to build a fence to protect the school, he organized a group of boys, and through various activities, they raised money to help build the fence."

When he was 9 years old, Roberto told his father he wanted a bicycle. Don Melchor arranged for the boy to deliver milk to the neighbors for a penny a day. It took Roberto three years to save enough for the bicycle. In speaking of this episode Clemente said, "Six o'clock every morning, I went for the milk. I wanted to do it. I wanted to have work, to be a good man."

The memory of the adversity he experienced as a youth stayed with Clemente throughout his life. "I grew up with people that really had to struggle to live," he would say. "I am from the poor people; I represent the poor

people. I like workers. I like people that suffer because these people have a different approach to life from the people that have everything and don't know what suffering is."

From early childhood, Clemente was obsessed with baseball, and as he grew he began to regard the game with a fervor akin to a religious calling. "I wanted to be a ballplayer," he said. "And the more I thought about it, the more I became convinced God wanted me to. I was sure I came to this world for some reason."

Juan González, a contemporary of Clemente's who still lives in Barrio San Antón, remembers his friend well. "He was playing ball all the time. We used to throw him bottle caps, and he would practice hitting with a broomstick. He would throw a tennis ball against the wall of his house, and his father would get mad. When we chose sides, everybody wanted him because he was such

a good player. He wore big shoes, and when he slid, he dug a trench with his shoes. His shoes used to break from sliding, and when he was about 12 years old, his father finally told him he was too big to still be playing ball."

All attempts to turn Roberto away from baseball were futile. He worked ceaselessly at honing his skills. He was 18 when he attended a local tryout camp cosponsored by Al Campanis, who at that time was a scout for the then Brooklyn Dodgers, and Pedrín Zorrilla, owner of the Santurce team of the Puerto Rican professional winter league. About 70 players showed up.

"We started with the outfielders," recalls Campanis. "They lined up in center field and we hit fungoes to them, about 270 feet from home plate. The first outfielder threw, the second outfielder threw—below-average arms. The third man—I didn't know his name

yet—threw a dart on one bounce to third base. Threw the hell out of the ball. Then he threw another. I said, 'That's enough.' Then we had the timed races—60 yards. Everybody's running about 7.2, 7.3, which is average major league time. Then Clemente came and ran a 6.4-plus. That's a track man's time! And in a baseball uniform! I asked him to run again, and he was even a little faster. He could fly! I said, 'If the son of a gun can hold a bat in his hands, I'm gonna sign this guy.' He got up to the plate, and he was hitting nothing but ropes. Over the left-field fence, over the right-field fence. Line drives. He was the best free-agent athlete I have ever seen."

Campanis couldn't sign his discovery because Clemente was underage. The Puerto Rican winter league operated under different rules, and so Roberto signed with the Santurce club. He saw limited action in his first season, but the next year he batted .288, played alongside Willie Mays in the outfield and was approached by nine major league clubs. Clemente hadn't forgotten his initial contract with Campanis, however, and in February 1954 he signed with the Dodgers for a \$5,000 salary and a \$10,000 bonus.

Clemente spent the '54 season with the Dodgers' farm club in Montreal. Under the rules of the time, a player who was signed for a bonus of more than \$4,000 and not kept on the major league roster was eligible to be drafted by another team, and at the end of the season the Pirates snatched him up. In 1955, with one year of minor league play under his belt and only an elemental knowledge of English at his command, the 21-year-old Clemente became the Pittsburgh Pirates' right fielder.

Over the next 18 seasons, he relentlessly carved out a place for himself in the pantheon of baseball's immortals. During the latter part of his career, the only other players mentioned in the same breath were Willie Mays and

Hank Aaron. His fielding was sensational and nobody had a better arm. "He threw me out at home once," recalls Clemente's friend and countryman Orlando Cepeda. "I was on second, and I was running on the pitch. Tim McCarver hit a line drive to right field. I rounded third, and when I looked up, the catcher was waiting for me with the ball. I couldn't believe it! It was impossible! The very next inning, he did the same thing to Lou Brock."

Clemente's batting style was unique. Standing far off the plate, he waited on the ball and then, opening up his left foot toward third base, leaned his upper body over the plate and used his enormous hand and arm strength to drive the ball. His best hitting was often to the opposite field. He ran the bases with the same reckless abandon he displayed in right field. His trademark was his hustle. "He played just about every game like his life depended on it," says his longtime teammate and fellow Hall of Famer Willie Stargell.

Clemente's impact on the game notwithstanding, his early years were difficult, marked by an often painful adjustment to life in a new land with a



new culture. "I didn't even know where Pittsburgh was," he later confessed. Above all, there was the language barrier. "He hadn't mastered English," says Joe L. Brown, who went to work for the Pirates as a front-office assistant the same year Clemente arrived and went on to become the team's general manager. "He found it difficult to make his feelings clear. He was an emotional person, a very sensitive person, and he was not understood."

This made for strained relations with many of the sportswriters. They frequently misquoted him. They transcribed his speech phonetically and at times even went so far as to substitute "me" for "I," thereby making his English seem worse than it was. One early story in the *Pittsburgh Press* quoted him as saying, "I like run all time. I go 100 metres 11 seconds. Goot? I wance run 400 metres 52 seconds. Better? One theeng I like Merica, new autos. Buy myself new auto. Whee!" Clemente was humiliated by such attempts to burlesque him, and he mistrusted writers for the rest of his career.

Language was a problem in his dealings with Pirate manager Danny Murtaugh, too. "Murtaugh, he treated everybody the same," says former Pirate second baseman Bill Mazeroski. "He hollered at everybody. Roberto wasn't the type of guy you just took off and embarrassed in front of the team. He'd crawl in a shell, and the more Murtaugh hollered at him, the more moody he got."

Those difficulties were surely a factor in Clemente's slow start, but in 1960 he blossomed and, not coincidentally, the Pirates won the National League pennant. Roberto hit .314 (third in the league), with 16 home runs and 94 runs batted in. In the World Series, he led the team with nine hits as the Pirates beat the favored New York Yankees on Mazeroski's famous ninth-inning home run in Game 7. Afterward, in the pandemonium of the Pittsburgh clubhouse, Roberto went around congratulating his teammates, making a special point of talking to manager Murtaugh.

Then he quietly dressed and left. "I came out of the clubhouse and saw all those thousands of fans in the streets," he said. "It was something you cannot describe. I did not feel like a player at the time. I felt like one of those persons, and I walked the streets among them."

During the off-season, Clemente learned that the writers had chosen his teammate Dick Groat as the National League's MVP. Clemente placed eighth in the balloting, having received not a single first-place vote. The lack of recognition of his role in the Pirates' success angered Clemente. He told reporters, "I never say Groat should not win it. I feel I should not be close to tenth."

The next season, playing like a man possessed, Clemente won his first batting title with a .351 average. As a growing star, he now attracted the attention of the national media, and he used that forum to condemn baseball's attitudes toward Latin Americans. "Roberto Clemente was to Latinos what Jackie Robinson was to black baseball players," says Luis Mayoral, a close friend of Clemente's who works in the Texas Rangers' front office. "He spoke up for Latinos; he was the first one who dared to speak out."

Clemente did not mince words. "Latin American Negro ballplayers are treated today much like all Negroes were treated in baseball in the early days of the broken color barrier," he told *Sport* magazine. "They are subjected to prejudices and stamped with generalizations. Because they speak Spanish among themselves, they are set off as a minority within a minority, and they bear the brunt of the sport's remaining racial prejudices. . . . 'They're all lazy, look for the easy way, the short cut,' is one charge. 'They have no guts,' is another. There are more."

He might have added, "They're hypochondriacs," a charge that was especially galling to Clemente, whose numerous injuries and other health problems were legendary. "The local press felt he was a malingerer," says

Joe Brown. "It wasn't true, but even some of the players, the manager and the coaches didn't want to recognize that his injuries were real." To Clemente, this was further evidence of a cultural bias. "When Mickey Mantle says his leg is hurt, it is OK," he complained. "If a Latin or a black is sick, they say it is in his head. Felipe Alou once went to his team doctor and the doctor said, 'You have nothing wrong.' The next day he went to a private doctor and the doctor told him, 'You have a broken foot.'"

Clemente took Latino players under his wing. "He always tried to help out the younger ones," says the Panamanian-born Manny Sanguillen, Clemente's closest friend among his teammates. When the Dominican outfielder Mateo Alou, Felipe's brother, came to Pittsburgh after six mediocre seasons with San Francisco, the new Pirate manager, Harry Walker, noticed that the talented left-handed hitter was trying to pull every pitch to right field. As a result, pitchers kept the ball outside, and Alou was helpless. Walker tried without success to change Alou's approach. Finally, he asked Clemente for help. Clemente began by translating Walker's advice for Alou, and thereafter, whenever his outfield mate took batting practice, Clemente would station himself at third base and shout in Spanish, "Punch the ball at me, forget about pulling it to right; hit to left, to left." It worked so well that Alou, with a .342 batting average, took the batting crown from Clemente.

Clemente couldn't complain. He played well enough that year to capture the league's MVP award. Finally he was beginning to receive the respect he craved. But it was more than a personal quest—it was a crusade for all Latino ballplayers. "The Latin American player doesn't get the recognition he deserves," he told a wire-service reporter. "We have self-satisfaction, yes, but after the season is over, nobody cares about us."

And it was not just recognition of their skills that Clemente sought for

himself and his brothers. As *Time* magazine noted, "Clemente has three batting titles to his credit—but nobody has ever asked him to do a shaving-cream commercial." Being passed over for endorsements and speaking engagements rankled Clemente. "It is harder for a Puerto Rican or Latin ballplayer," he said. "People do not want to give them any work off the field. So no one knows them. I would make a lot more money in baseball if I were a white American."

Finally, toward the end of his career, he acknowledged some progress in changing attitudes. "My greatest satisfaction comes from helping to erase the old opinion about Latin Americans and blacks. People never questioned our ability, but they considered us inferior to their station of life. Simply because many of us were poor we were thought to be low-class. Even our integrity was questioned."

Clemente continued to excel on the field, but it was not until the 1971 World Series against the Baltimore Orioles that he finally achieved superstar status. Seizing the opportunity to display his skills on national television, he turned the Series into a personal showcase. In the first two games—both won by the Orioles—he had four hits and displayed his fabled arm with breathtaking throws. The Pirates won the next three games, led by Clemente. In Game 6 he tripled and homered, but Baltimore won. In Game 7, he clinched the outstanding player award with another home run as the Pirates won the Series. Even so sophisticated a student of the game as the *New Yorker's* Roger Angell seemed awed. Clemente, he marveled, was playing "a kind of baseball that none of us had ever seen before—throwing and running and hitting at something close to the level of absolute perfection."

In the clubhouse, Clemente was called before the TV cameras. "First, I would like to say something in Spanish to my mother and father in Puerto Rico," he began. Then, "*En el día más grande de mi vida, les pido sus bendiciones* (On the greatest day of my life, I ask for your blessing)."

That Clemente should have died on a mission of mercy was not inconsistent with anything in his life. "He had something inborn that made him want to help other people," says Vera Clemente. "One time we were in a taxi in New York," remembers Sanguillen. "The guy took us everywhere, but Roberto knew the way to the ballpark. He said, 'Listen, I know it's only a fifteen- or twenty-five-dollar ride. If you need money that bad, don't try to hurt people. I'll give you twenty-five dollars plus two hundred dollars more.' The guy got out and kissed his hands. That's the type of man Clemente was."

Today, Roberto Clemente is exalted throughout Latin America as much for his humanitarian work as for his baseball accomplishments. Since her husband's death, Vera Clemente has devoted herself to the building and

management of Roberto Clemente Sports City in Carolina. "Roberto was always worried about the children and adolescents," she says. "He wanted to build something where they would have facilities for all sports, with the purpose of uniting families and eliminating juvenile delinquency."

Sports City is built on 304 acres of marshland donated by the government of Puerto Rico. Progress has been slow—landfill alone cost millions, and still, when it rains heavily, the ground tends to revert to its original state—but the sprawling complex now includes baseball fields, batting cages, basketball courts, a swimming pool, a track-and-field stadium and a sports-medicine facility. The most visible and notable feature of Sports City is the Raiders baseball academy, which has produced a significant crop of current major-leaguers, including Ruben Sierra, Jose Guzman, Carlos Baerga, Benito Santiago and Ivan Rodriguez.

The next phase of development includes completion of a baseball stadium, and construction of a gymnasium, an Olympic-size swimming pool and an 18-hole golf course. In keeping with Clemente's original vision, programs in drama, music, dance and folklore supplement the main emphasis on athletics, and the overall blueprint calls

for recreational facilities for the disabled, a museum, a camping area and arts-and-crafts facilities. Sports City now has an annual budget of \$500,000 (operating funds come mainly from fundraising events, ticket sales and the government of Puerto Rico) and 30 full-time staff members. Last year approximately 113,000 children and visitors participated in various programs.

Vera Clemente is executive director of Sports City. Roberto jr., 28, is an informal member of the board of directors. On a sunny afternoon not long ago, he dropped by to watch a choose-up game of baseball. "This group of kids—we went into the projects and brought them here in school buses," he explained. "We had to go in and talk to the gang leaders, so they would let the kids come out of the neighborhood. It's really sad, but we'll do whatever it takes to get them out of the streets and trouble—to educate them in what life is all about. It's very important for us because these kids are our future, and even if they don't play ball for a career, they can be part of society in a good way." He was interrupted by the sounds of children having fun—shouts, cheers and laughter. He paused and reflected for a moment. "I believe my father would approve of what we're doing here."