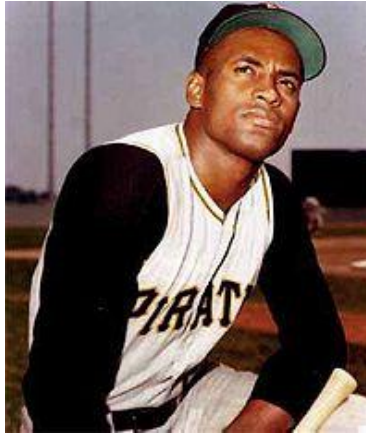


Roberto Clemente



Roberto Clemente, a native of Puerto Rico, was the first Latino player inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. He played eighteen seasons for the Pittsburgh Pirates, earning 3000 career hits. Clemente won many awards during his career, including National League Most Valuable Player in 1966, Most Valuable Player of the World Series in 1971, and twelve Gold Gloves. He also made twelve All-Star Game appearances. Clemente died in a plane crash on New Year's Eve, 1972, as he tried to bring emergency supplies to earthquake-devastated Nicaragua.

Roberto Clemente Walker was born on August 18, 1934, in a small town near San Juan, Puerto Rico. He was one of seven children of his mother. His father was an overseer in the sugar cane business, and his mother did various menial jobs to make money for the family. Even Roberto worked hard to earn whatever he could for his family. He also worked hard to get what he wanted. When he once saw a bicycle he liked, young Roberto carried containers of milk for a penny in the morning and a penny in the evening for many months, finally saving \$20 to buy a bicycle.

Like many Puerto Rican boys, Roberto loved baseball, and he played it whenever he could. "I would forget to eat because of baseball," Roberto later recalled. "And one time my mother started to burn my bat as a punishment. But I got it out of the fire and saved it." Roberto's athleticism was recognized by many others early in his life. As a teenager, he played for the Santurce Cangrejeros (Crabbers) of the Puerto Rican League.

The Brooklyn Dodgers scouted Clemente and signed him in 1954. Dodger scout Al Campanis later said: "Clemente was the greatest natural athlete I have ever seen as an amateur free agent." Clemente played the next season for the Dodgers' minor league team in Montreal. Unprotected by the Dodgers at the end of the season, Clemente was drafted by the Pittsburgh Pirates that winter. He started as an outfielder for the Pirates for most of the 1955 season, but his offensive statistics were not impressive. He hit only .255 and, proving himself a free-swinger, walked only eighteen times. But he gained a reputation as an outstanding defensive outfielder. He made spectacular catches and had a great throwing arm.

Clemente soon improved as a hitter. He made the All-Star Team in 1960. The next year, he won the National League batting title with a .351 average. Despite his success, Clemente faced racial hostility as a Latin-American player of dark skin color. Sportswriters caricatured his broken English in their newspaper reports. Teammates, opponents, fans, television and radio announcers, and even the Pirates' management tried to Americanize him by calling him "Bob" or "Bobby." When anyone called him these names, he corrected that person immediately, saying his name was "Roberto."

Sportswriters questioned the seriousness of Clemente's many injuries as a player. He did not help his own cause by appearing arrogant at times. He once proclaimed that "nobody does anything better than me in baseball." One reporter recalled: "He was anything but perfect. He was vain, occasionally arrogant, often intolerant, unforgiving, and there were moments when I thought for sure he'd cornered the market on self-pity." The same writer, however, said that Clemente possessed "an undeniable charisma."

In 1966 Clemente batted .317 and smacked twenty-nine homeruns. He won the National League Most Valuable Player Award that year. The Pirates won the World Series for the second time in Clemente's career in 1971. He hit .414 and was named the Most Valuable Player in the Series. By that time he had also won four batting titles. In 1972, at the age of thirty-eight, Clemente collected his historic 3000th hit in the last game of the regular season.

On December 23, 1972, the nation of Nicaragua experienced a devastating earthquake. Near the capital city of Managua, 7,000 people died and 250,000 were left homeless. Clemente had friends in Nicaragua and sympathized with the suffering of fellow Latin Americans. He raised money to purchase food, medicine, and clothing for the victims of the earthquake. Clemente sponsored several flights carrying these relief supplies to the country. But he soon learned that corrupt Nicaraguan government agents of dictator General Anastasio Somoza were stealing the supplies.

Clemente then decided to board one of the relief flights. He hoped that his presence would ensure that the supplies got to the victims. On December 31, 1972, the plane took off from Puerto Rico and crashed just off-shore, killing Clemente and the other four men on board. It was later found that the plane had a history of mechanical problems and that the crew was not properly trained.

Latin America and the baseball world were shocked by the news of Clemente's death. His teammate, catcher Manny Sanguillen, refused to believe that Clemente was dead. Sanguillen dove into the waters off Puerto Rico, looking for Clemente. His body was never found.

The Baseball Hall of Fame usually waits five years after the end of a player's career before considering him for induction. But the Hall waived this requirement in Clemente's case; the only other player for whom this was ever done was Lou Gehrig, who also died during his playing career (of the disease that would bear his name). In 1973, Clemente became a member of the baseball Hall of Fame.

Today Clemente is remembered both as a great baseball player and a pioneer for his fellow Latin Americans. As teammate Orlando Cepeda said: "Roberto Clemente is the Jackie Robinson of all Latino ballplayers." In the wake of his death, Major League Baseball named its award for off-the-field altruism after Clemente. The manner of his death has also made Clemente a legendary figure in sports. As a friend of Clemente said: "He had to die like that for all the world to know what kind of a man he was."

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Questions:

1. What characteristics did Clemente exhibit as a boy in Puerto Rico?
2. What challenges did Clemente face as a Latin American player?
3. Name awards that Clemente won during his playing career.
4. How did Clemente die?
5. What is Clemente's legacy?

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Answers:

1. What characteristics did Clemente exhibit as a boy in Puerto Rico?

Answer: He was a hard worker and had great athletic ability.

2. What challenges did Clemente face as a Latin American player?

Answer: He faced racial hostility as a Latin-American player of dark skin color. Sportswriters caricatured his broken English in their newspaper reports.

3. Name awards that Clemente won during his playing career.

Answer: National League Most Valuable Player in 1966, Most Valuable Player of the World Series in 1971, twelve Gold Gloves, twelve All-Star Game appearances, four batting titles

4. How did Clemente die?

Answer: He died in a plane crash, bringing relief supplies to earthquake-devastated Nicaragua.

5. What is Clemente's legacy?

Answer: Clemente is remembered both as a great baseball player and a pioneer for his fellow Latin Americans. In the wake of his death, Major League Baseball named its award for off-the-field altruism after Clemente. The manner of his death has also made Clemente a legendary figure in sports.

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