
Roberto Clemente

Born: August 18, 1934

Carolina, Puerto Rico

Died: December 31, 1972

Near Carolina, Puerto Rico

Also known as: Roberto Clemente Walker (full name); Arriba; the Great One

Early Life

When Roberto Clemente Walker was born on August 18, 1934, his small town of Carolina, Puerto Rico, was dominated by one industry: sugar. Residents toiled to harvest the cane; few other opportunities existed. However, Roberto's parents were industrious and lived reasonably well according to the standards of the time and place. His father, Melchor, became a foreman for the local sugar company, and his mother, Luisa, worked at the plantation house. Melchor also sold meat and later purchased trucks that enabled him to enter the construction trade on a part-time basis. The couple's children proved to be hard workers, too.

The Clementes valued education; they wanted Roberto, their youngest child, to be an engineer. A good student, Roberto nevertheless was destined for other spheres of activity. He frequently engaged in poor person's baseball practice: hitting tin cans with a stick. Roberto also habitually bounced rubber balls off the walls and clutched them tightly to strengthen his arm.

The Road to Excellence

High school passed quickly for Roberto. In addition to baseball, he pursued track and javelin throwing to the extent that he was considered to be a potential Olympic competitor. Many judged Roberto to be a natural athlete. Others claim that he purposefully used diverse sports to develop his baseball skills; javelin throwing may have aided his powerful arm. Theories aside, the young man demonstrated a supreme love of baseball while aiming for excellence in every chosen endeavor.

Baseball is a cultural treasure for Puerto

Rico. The Winter Leagues, founded in 1938, drew professionals to the island during the off-season. Many cities also sponsored teams, and spectator enthusiasm fueled fierce competition and recognition of talented players.

Roberto's entry into baseball occurred when local businessman Roberto Marín spotted the fourteen-year-old whacking tin cans. Roberto was recruited for Marín's Sello Rojo Rice softball squad and then was acquired by the Juncos, an AA amateur baseball team.

Marín continued to be Roberto's unofficial publicist. The lad was unbelievable, he told his friend Pedrín Zorilla, a Brooklyn Dodgers scout and owner of the Puerto Rican Professional Baseball League team, the Santurce Crabbers. Soon afterward, Zorilla happened to watch a Juncos exhibition game.



Roberto Clemente, who had 3,000 hits in a career cut short by tragedy. (AP/Wide World Photos)

He inquired about one of the players and was surprised to discover that this was Marín's protégé.

Roberto signed on with the Santurce Crabbers for a \$400 bonus and \$40 a week. Breaking into the 1952-1953 lineup proved to be his biggest obstacle, as many of the players already were major-league stars. However, Roberto watched, learned, and constantly strove to improve his considerable talent. By the 1953-1954 season, he had become a regular, and nine professional ball teams approached him with contract offers that winter. Roberto chose the Brooklyn Dodgers; his \$10,000 bonus was far above that of any other Hispanic professional.

The Emerging Champion

In 1947, the Dodgers integrated Major League Baseball with the hiring of Jackie Robinson. Five African Americans played for Brooklyn in 1953, and the management feared fan reaction if more members of minorities joined the roster. Therefore, Roberto was relegated to the Dodgers' Montreal farm team.

According to baseball regulations of the time, Roberto's high bonus made him eligible for draft in the following year. The Dodgers wanted to keep him, however, so they attempted to hide his talents. During his first week, he hit a truly phenomenal home run. He was benched the next day. His errors resulted in more playing time, his successes yielded inactivity. The result was confusion and frustration. However, Roberto's skills again managed to surface. The Pittsburgh Pirates, a perennial losing team, were searching for young talent upon which to build a respectable club. By virtue of their last-place standing, Pittsburgh was entitled to a first-round draft pick. Roberto Clemente was its choice.

Roberto's first season in Pittsburgh was one of transition. During the preceding winter, he had been involved in an automobile accident that permanently displaced three disks in his back. Although he was a regular player by his second week with the Pirates, he felt a deep loneliness. Roberto barely spoke English, and Pittsburgh did not have a Hispanic community. When the rookie heard racial slurs against opposing play-

ers, he knew that similar comments also were directed at him. Roberto encountered such attitudes throughout his career.

Furthermore, Forbes Field, the Pirates' cavernous ballpark, was not accommodating to home runs. Roberto adapted himself accordingly, becoming a stellar line-drive hitter. His batting average rose from .255 in 1955 to .311 in 1956. The Pirates slowly acquired new, more capable players, and Roberto began to build his reputation as one of the game's strongest and most versatile talents.

Continuing the Story

During the 1960 season, the Pirates beat all odds to emerge as World Series champions. Roberto had been an all-star-team member that year. He batted .314 for the season, .310 in the series. He had helped the Pirates win critical games. However, the most valuable player (MVP) award eluded him, and he felt belittled by the press.

Roberto sustained physical—as well as emotional—injuries throughout his career: the car crash, two severe household-related accidents, and a bout with malaria. When he demanded to sit out, he often clashed with the stoical Pirate manager, Danny Murtaugh. On the field, however, Roberto erased all doubts. Announcer Vin Scully said, "Cle-

Major League Records

- Most seasons leading in assists, 5 in 1958, 1960-61, 1966-67 (record shared)
- Most triples in a game, modern era, 3 in 1958 (record shared)
- Most hits in two consecutive games, 10 (1970)
- Hit safely in all fourteen World Series games in 1960 and 1971 (record shared)

Honors and Awards

- 1960-67, 1969-72 National League All-Star Team
- 1961-72 National League Gold Glove Award
- 1966 National League most valuable player
- 1971 World Series most valuable player
Babe Ruth Award
- 1973 Awarded the Congressional Gold Medal
Inducted into National Baseball Hall of Fame
- 1975 Inducted into Black Athletes Hall of Fame
Uniform number 21 retired by Pittsburgh Pirates
- 2002 Awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom
- 2003 Inducted into U.S. Marine Corps Sports Hall of Fame
- 2005 Elected to Major League Baseball's Latino Legends Team
- 2006 Awarded Baseball Commissioner's Historical Achievement Award

Major League Statistics

Season	GP	AB	Hits	2B	3B	HR	Runs	RBI	BA	SA
1955	124	474	121	23	11	5	48	47	.255	.382
1956	147	543	169	30	7	7	66	60	.311	.431
1957	111	451	114	17	7	4	42	30	.253	.348
1958	140	519	150	24	10	6	69	50	.289	.408
1959	105	432	128	17	7	4	60	50	.296	.396
1960	144	570	179	22	6	16	89	94	.314	.458
1961	146	572	201	30	10	23	100	89	.351	.559
1962	144	538	168	28	9	10	95	74	.312	.454
1963	152	600	192	23	8	17	77	76	.320	.470
1964	155	622	211	40	7	12	95	87	.339	.484
1965	152	589	194	21	14	10	91	65	.329	.463
1966	154	638	202	31	11	29	105	119	.317	.536
1967	147	585	209	26	10	23	103	110	.357	.554
1968	132	502	146	18	12	18	74	57	.291	.482
1969	138	507	175	20	12	19	87	91	.345	.544
1970	108	412	145	22	10	14	65	60	.352	.556
1971	132	522	178	29	8	13	82	86	.341	.502
1972	102	378	118	19	7	10	68	60	.312	.479
Totals	2,433	9,454	3,000	440	166	240	1,416	1,305	.317	.475

Notes: GP = games played; AB = at bats; 2B = doubles; 3B = triples; HR = home runs; RBI = runs batted in; BA = batting average; SA = slugging average

mente could field a ball in Pennsylvania and throw out a runner in New York.” He robbed his opponents of home runs, bare-handing high flies and colliding into stadium walls. Many of his triples were simply doubles that he stretched through sheer speed and hustle.

In 1966, Roberto won the league MVP award, an unusual tribute considering that the Pirates placed third. The “Great One,” as Pittsburgh fans called Roberto, gradually turned an insular pride into team spirit. On May 15, 1967, he hit 3 home runs and a double, yet it was not his best game, he said, because the Pirates lost.

Roberto went home to Puerto Rico after each season. There, he met the beautiful Vera Zabala and married her in 1964; they had three sons. Roberto continued to play in, then manage, Puerto Rican Professional Baseball League teams. His charitable acts were legendary. Citizens asked Roberto to run for mayor of San Juan, and in Pittsburgh, he was a mentor to young Hispanic ballplayers.

Summary

Roberto Clemente’s 3,000th hit came on September 30, 1972; it was to be his last. An earthquake ravaged Managua, Nicaragua, three months later. As honorary chair of the Nicaraguan Relief Committee, he decided to go there himself, in a small plane

loaded with food and supplies. Shortly after takeoff, the craft crashed and sank into the Atlantic Ocean, killing everyone aboard.

One of Roberto’s greatest dreams was realized through the tragedy of his death. Thousands of memorial gifts arrived, generating enough money to build the Ciudad Deportiva, where Puerto Rican boys could cultivate their talents under the guidance of professional athletes. The National Baseball Hall of Fame also waived its five-year rule to admit Roberto on August 6, 1973. Roberto was the first Latin American player to be inducted into the hall of fame. Posthumously, Roberto continued to be honored in numerous ways. In 1984,

the United States Postal service issued a Roberto Clemente stamp, and in 2002, Roberto was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Since 1971, Major League Baseball has given the Roberto Clemente Award to players who represent the spirit of charity exemplified by the late Pirates outfielder.

Lynn C. Kronzek

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