

# The Measure of a Man

by Todd Tuell



National League President Warren Giles presents batting champion Roberto Clemente of the Pittsburgh Pirates with a silver bat award.

Since it was introduced to the people of Puerto Rico more than 100 years ago, baseball has become the most popular sport on the island. The seeds of interest in the game were first sewn in the 1890s by Puerto Ricans who brought the sport home after learning to play while visiting the United States. Baseball's growth was strengthened when American soldiers were stationed in Puerto Rico after it became a U.S. territory following the Spanish-American War. The soldiers played games against local clubs. Over the next century, baseball grew until the little island had its own professional league. The six-team league is often referred to as the winter league because many major leaguers spend their off-seasons there developing their skills.

This small country (about the size of Connecticut) takes great pride in its baseball tradition that you can see both in the support from fans and in the enthusiasm and camaraderie of the players selected to represent Puerto Rico in international competition, especially the World Baseball Classic that is played every four years. Puerto Rico has produced many major league players including Hall of Famers Orlando Cepeda, Roberto Alomar, and Iván Rodríguez. However, any discussion of baseball greats of the island must begin with Roberto Clemente, the "Babe Ruth" of Puerto Rico.

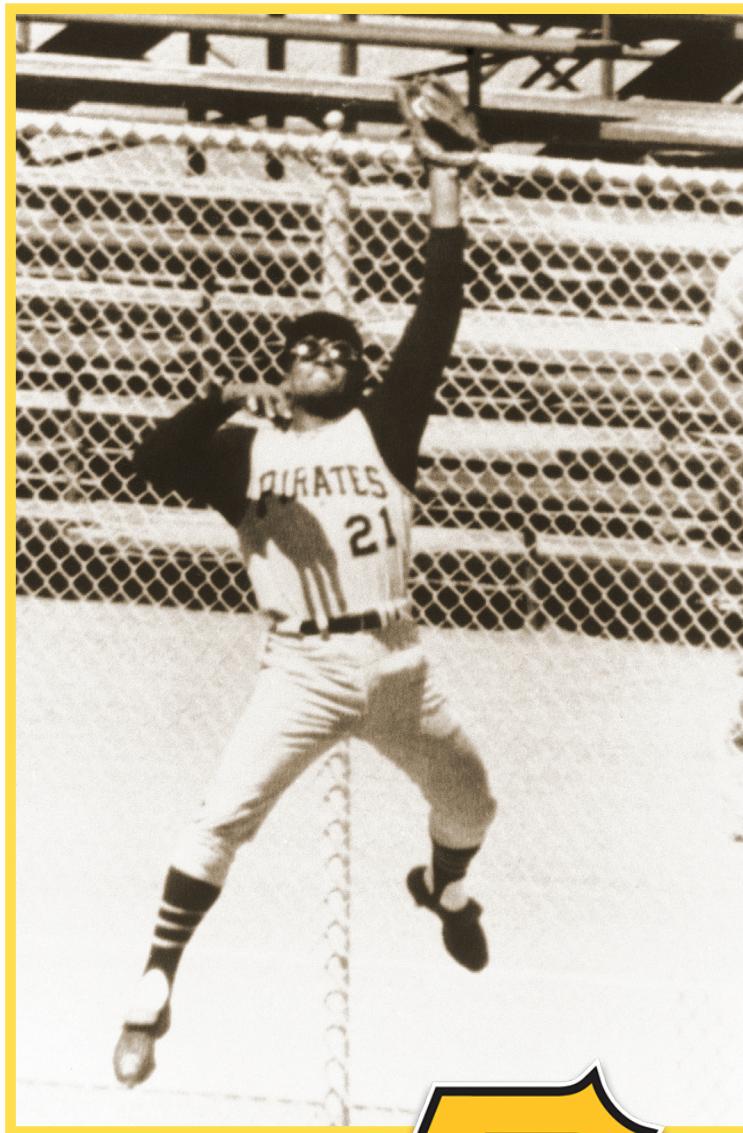
Roberto Clemente Walker was born in 1934, the youngest of seven children. Because his family was so poor, Roberto grew up working alongside his brothers and father, harvesting sugarcane and loading it into trucks. At a very young age, however, Roberto showed great athletic talent. He played just a few years in local leagues before gaining the attention of scouts. By his 20th birthday, he had signed a contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers. To develop his talents, the team sent Clemente to Montreal to play for their minor league club. The move from his warm, island home to Canada brought Roberto not only a climate shock, but also a culture shock. The language barrier was especially difficult at first, but he got help from other Spanish-speaking teammates to ease the transition.

The Dodgers were too smart for their own good. Instead of awarding Roberto a spot on their big league roster, they limited his playing time during the 1954 season with their Triple A ball club, trying to hide his raw talent from other teams. This left Clemente available in the Rule 5 draft following the season. The Dodgers thought scouts from other teams wouldn't notice him.

Boy, was that a mistake! The Pittsburgh Pirates snatched Roberto up with the very first selection. He went on to play the next 18 years as the Pirates starting right fielder.

Clemente was proud of his Puerto Rican heritage. Although many teammates and sportscasters called him "Bob" or "Bobby," he insisted on being called his given name, Roberto. Counting up the number of letters in his full name—Roberto Clemente Walker—he chose to wear the number 21.

Over his career, Roberto achieved everything a ballplayer could dream of, and he won nearly every award possible. He was truly a complete player, winning the batting title four times and the Gold Glove as the best fielder at his position



Pittsburgh's Roberto Clemente goes high on the fence to take a home run away from Willie Mays in the sixth inning of a game with San Francisco Giants on June 13, 1968. There were two Giants runners on base at the time. Pittsburgh won a slugfest 8-7.

12 times, demonstrating his prowess both at the plate and in the field. Roberto was also an All-Star 12 times, the Most Valuable Player in the National League in 1966, and the World Series MVP in 1971. He ended his career with a .312 batting average and 3,000 hits. Only 10 players had ever reached 3,000 hits before Clemente. More important to Roberto himself was that he was a member of two World Series Championship teams for the city of Pittsburgh. Bowie Kuhn, Major League Baseball's Commissioner at the end of Clemente's career, said of Roberto, "He gave the term 'complete' a new meaning. He made the word 'superstar' seem inadequate. He had about him the touch of royalty."

However, the true measure of this remarkable man cannot be summed up in batting averages and awards. Clemente's legacy was forged in his work off the field. He was a humanitarian with a heart for young people who were growing up poor, like he had. In his off-seasons, Roberto offered baseball clinics and distributed equipment for underprivileged children in Latin America. He also purchased and

sent food and supplies to areas devastated by natural disasters.

In the aftermath of a December 1972 earthquake in Nicaragua, Clemente loaded several aircraft with food, drinking water, and supplies. On New Year's Eve, his plane crashed into the ocean.

Not just baseball, but the whole world lost a great man that day. To honor Roberto Clemente Walker, the Baseball Writers' Association held a special vote less than three months after his death. The writers waived their own rule requiring a minimum five-year waiting period before a player was eligible for consideration for the Baseball Hall of Fame. They voted to induct Clemente into the hall on March 20, 1973.

Although he is gone, Roberto's legacy lives on. In his honor, since 1973 the Roberto Clemente Award has been given annually, as described by former Commissioner Bud Selig, "to the player that best exemplifies the game of baseball, sportsmanship, community involvement and the individual's contribution to his team."

A statue of Roberto Clemente stands outside of PNC Park, the home of the Pittsburgh Pirates.



## Accomplishments & Awards

- National League Batting Champ (1961, 1964, 1965, 1967)
- 12-time Gold Glove Winner (1961-1972)
- 12-time All Star
- 3,000 hits during Major League career
- 1966 National League Most Valuable Player
- 1971 World Series Most Valuable Player
- 2-time World Series Champion (1960, 1971)
- Baseball Hall of Fame inductee (1973)

"I want to be remembered as a ballplayer who gave all he had to give."

— *Roberto Clemente Walker*

"He played a kind of baseball that none of us had ever seen before... As if it were a form of punishment for everyone else on the field."

—*Roger Angell, sports writer*

"Clemente could field the ball in New York and throw out a guy in Pennsylvania."

—*Vin Scully, baseball broadcaster*

"He was the one player that players on other teams didn't want to miss. They'd run out of the clubhouse to watch him take batting practice. He could make a 10-year veteran act like a 10-year-old kid."

—*Steve Blass, Major League pitcher*

"Roberto Clemente played the game of baseball with great passion. That passion could only be matched by his unrelenting commitment to make a difference in the lives of the less fortunate and those in need. People saw Roberto as a great ballplayer and humanitarian. He was also a great father, husband, teammate and friend."

—*Manny Sanguillen, teammate*



Fans of the Puerto Rico team cheer on their team during the World Baseball Classic in 2017.



Team Puerto Rico's Roberto Hernandez leaps onto his teammates after Puerto Rico advanced into the semifinals during the World Baseball Classic played in 2017.



New York Mets' Curtis Granderson smiles at a news conference as he receives the 2016 MLB Roberto Clemente Award.