

# Chapter 1

Let me tell you about my friend Roberto Clemente. A proud Puerto Rican man, Roberto rose up out of poverty and prejudice to become maybe the greatest baseball player of all time. But he was more than a great baseball player; he was a great *human being*. He won all that you could win in the baseball world, including World Series championships, Most Valuable Player awards, and batting titles. He was a fine family man, with a lovely wife and three strong sons. And after eighteen dazzling seasons of major league baseball, Roberto Clemente died a hero.

In 1972, an earthquake devastated Nicaragua. With typical passion and courage, Roberto took personal charge of getting help to the desperate people. He was aboard a cargo plane he had chartered to carry supplies to help the victims of the earthquake. It crashed just after takeoff. He was only thirty-eight years old.

Less than three months later, a special election made him the first Latin-born player in the Baseball Hall of Fame. Roberto Clemente was *un verdadero hombre*, a real man.

We always knew he was something special. From the time he could walk, he loved baseball. I remember seeing him on the dusty road when he was a little kid, before he even had a regular bat or ball. He would take an old stick, or a guava tree branch, and he would blast crushed-up tin cans halfway across the cane fields. One after another went flying off his bat, and we all stood around, amazed.

It may seem funny that he didn't even have a real bat or ball, but you have to remember this was back in the 1940s, and this was on the island of Puerto Rico. It was, and still is, a part of the United States, but it was very poor. Nobody had any money, except a few of the rich guys who owned the sugar cane farms, and they all lived in San Juan, the capital.

Out where we lived was called Carolina. It had nothing to do with the states like North and South Carolina; that was just its name. These days, Carolina is part of the hustle and bustle of San Juan, but back then it was a sleepy town, way out on the very farthest outskirts. There were some dusty roads, some wooden houses, and a lot of sugar cane fields. The Clementes were

better off than most families. They had indoor plumbing. That's because Melchor and Luisa, Roberto's parents, worked hard and brought the kids up right. When Roberto was born, his father was already fifty years old.

There were four other kids and some cousins all living in that small house. But that didn't bother them. They all seemed to get along really well. Melchor could be a hard man; there was no doubt about that. He had started out cutting sugar cane for a living, like his father and grandfather before him. The Clementes' ancestors were Taino Indians and black slaves who were brought from Africa by Spain.

Melchor Clemente worked harder than most. He was smart, too, and he worked his way up to foreman of the Victoria Sugar Mill. That meant long hours and hard work. That was more than a full-time job, but not enough for him. In his time off from the mill, he hauled gravel in a beat-up old truck for local builders.

Melchor worked so hard that Roberto didn't see much of him. Mr. Clemente didn't know about baseball. He didn't have time for fun or sports. But Roberto's brothers played, and they were good. His brother Matino was *very* good. Seven years older than Roberto, he played first base, and rapped out line drives like a machine while his little brother cheered from the grandstand. Matino might have been the first Clemente in the

big leagues, but a three-year hitch in the army derailed that dream. Still, Roberto looked up to Matino throughout his whole life, even when Roberto was a star.

That was always a trait of Roberto's, his loyalty. When he was on your side, your family, your team, you could count on him for *anything*. Roberto didn't do things halfway; he was passionate about them. He had a passion for baseball like no one we'd ever seen.

I saw him out in the road one day with a broomstick and a pile of bottle caps. I said, "Momen!" We called him Momen in the neighborhood. I said, "Those bottle caps are awfully small, and so is that broomstick. You'd be lucky to hit one out of ten of them." Momen just gave me that look with those shining eyes and little smile, and *whack*, there went a bottle cap soaring over the road. And *whack whack whack*. One after another, those caps went flying. I swear, he never missed one. You've got to be *good* to hit a bottle cap.

You never saw that kid without a ball. Rubber ball, tennis ball, whatever he had, he'd be throwing it against a wall somewhere, or just throwing it up and catching it. I heard from his momma, Luisa, that he used to drive them crazy at home. Every second he was in the house, he was throwing the ball against a wall. Boom boom boom against the wall. Luisa knew he was special, and she knew he

was smart. “You spend too much time with the baseball,” she used to tell him. “You should study hard and be an engineer!”

A few years later, when he bought them a new house with his baseball money, Luisa would admit she was wrong. Roberto Clemente was born to play baseball.

But I don’t want you to think young Roberto spent all his time playing. Like his father, Roberto was a hard worker. Let me tell you a story. When Roberto was nine years old, he fell in love with a bicycle. Not any particular bicycle, but the *idea* of a bicycle. He could get around so much faster. He could have so much more time to go watch baseball games, so much more time to *play* baseball.

He could hardly contain himself—he was so excited. He waited for his father to come home. His father was late that day, dusty and tired from a long day at the mill. He had not even had dinner yet when Roberto rushed up to him, breathlessly, saying, “Papa, Papa, please buy me a bicycle. I will use it to do more chores, and help out . . .”

“Roberto!” His father cut him off sternly. “What are you thinking? I work two jobs. I can barely keep food on the table and all of you in clothes. Where am I going to get the money for a bicycle for you?”

Roberto turned away quickly, ashamed of himself. It was true. He had brothers and sisters. They all needed basic things just to live and go to

school. He should have known better than to ask for a bicycle.

But he did not stay down for long. He announced proudly that he would buy the bicycle himself. One of his brothers laughed at him. “What are you going to do?” he said. “There’s no job for a nine-year-old.”

But Roberto would not be denied. He found that job. A neighbor of theirs, Senora Martín, wanted someone to get milk for her every day from the store. She had in mind someone older than nine, but Roberto convinced her he could do it. So every morning at six o’clock, Roberto went over and got her milk can. He carried it a half mile to the store and got it filled. It was much heavier on the return trip. I often watched him lugging it along the road. He had to take care not to spill any. But he did the job, every single day, and Senora Martín paid him three cents a day.

Roberto’s mother put the pennies in a big glass jar in the kitchen. It seemed to Roberto that they would never add up to enough for a bicycle, but he was determined. He never dipped into that jar to buy anything else, ever. It took him three years, but Roberto saved up \$27 and bought himself an almost-new red bicycle. That’s just the kind of kid he was.

By the time Roberto was fifteen, he was playing shortstop for an amateur team sponsored by Sello, the rice company. People knew he was

special. You see, he could do it all. He could hit like a demon, he had an arm like a cannon, and he was *fast*. The next year he was already in baseball, playing outfield for the Juncos Mules, the top team in the Carolina district. He was in high school then, and he also ran track and field. He could run a fast 440, but with that arm of his, his best event was throwing the javelin. After seeing him throw that spear, some folks were thinking *Olympics*. He was that good.

But as great as he was at track and field, baseball was always Roberto's passion. It didn't take him long to get noticed.

The two top teams in all of Puerto Rico were the San Juan Senadores (the Senators) and the Santurce Cangrejeros (the Crabbers). They both played in Sixto Escobar Stadium, right on the waterfront in San Juan. For American players, Puerto Rico was "Winter League." Since it's warm here year around, the professional players could keep in shape and make some money between seasons up on the mainland.

The major leagues were just starting to become integrated. In 1947, Jackie Robinson became the first black man to play for a major league team, the Brooklyn Dodgers. Robinson was a true hero. He took insults and had threats made against him wherever he went. But he hung in there, and was one of the greatest players of his time—or any time.

Back then, most of the black professional ballplayers still played in the Negro Leagues, and many of the stars came to play in Puerto Rico in the Winter League. There was this one outfielder named Monte Irvin. Two years after Robinson broke the color line, Irvin finally got his chance in the majors with the New York Giants, but he'd been a star in the Negro League for years. He was a graceful outfielder, a black man with a strong arm and good bat who played for the Senadores. Roberto just idolized him.

Melchor could not buy his son a bicycle, but he could give him a quarter to go to see the Senadores. It cost a dime for the bus and fifteen cents to get into the stadium. Roberto was so crazy about seeing the Crabbers, I even gave him a quarter myself once. He was so excited he ran straight for the bus stop. I called out, "Momen, the game doesn't start for two hours!"

"I know," he called back. "I have to see Irvin go in."

And that's what he'd do. Roberto would get there way early just to watch Monte Irvin stride through the crowd up to the stadium entrance. And then, from the stands, Roberto would study every single thing Irvin did, down to how he wiped his hands and how he spat. But mostly he studied how fast Irvin picked up a batted ball and threw it back in. And, sure enough, years later, a lightning-fast throw back to the infield after a hit

became Roberto's trademark as a big-leaguer.

Even though Roberto was very shy, eventually Monte Irvin noticed his devoted young fan. They became friends, and Irvin made sure Roberto got in, even when he didn't have money. Irvin would give Roberto his suit bag to carry in, and they'd let Roberto in for free. He was a gentleman, that Monte Irvin.

One good thing about Puerto Rico was that we treated those black ballplayers like gentlemen. Back on the mainland, black players got all kinds of grief. In the South, they couldn't even stay in the same hotels or eat in the same restaurants with the white players. It was just ridiculous. But here in San Juan, we treated them right. Out in Old San Juan, or in the restaurants in Condado, they were celebrities. People crowded around to shake their hands. Restaurants gave them meals on the house. That's the kind of respect Roberto grew up seeing ballplayers get. It's no wonder the racism was so hard on him when he went to the mainland.

Now, we all knew that Roberto Clemente was some special kid, and a very special ballplayer. We knew he could make it big, but even we were surprised at how fast it happened. In October 1952, Roberto was barely eighteen years old. Suddenly he's not watching the Senadores; he's *playing* for the Crabbers, right there in Sixto

Escobar Stadium. He's the youngest guy on the team. We thought, *Wow, Momen is moving up fast*. Then, less than a month later, here comes Al Campanis to San Juan. I mean, *the* Al Campanis, the top scout for the Brooklyn Dodgers. It turns out Campanis was friends with Pedrin Zorrilla, the Big Crab himself, owner of the Crabbers team.

Al Campanis set up a tryout at Sixto Escobar for seventy-two players who dreamed of playing in the big leagues in the United States. Roberto was one of them. They had the recruits throwing and running sprints. I heard that when Campanis saw how fast Roberto flashed through the sixty-yard dash, he said, "If the sonofagun can hold a bat in his hands, I'm gonna sign this guy." That was before Roberto had even picked up a bat. Then Roberto stepped up to the plate and sprayed line drives to every part of the stadium, against top pitching. Campanis' jaw dropped. He sent the other seventy-one players home and continued to be amazed by Roberto's skills. He would say later that Clemente was the best free-agent athlete he had ever seen.

But it was not quite a done deal. It all happened so fast that Roberto's head was spinning. His whole family's heads were spinning. They decided to wait a year before doing anything with the American big leagues. In the meantime, he finished his high school degree and continued to play for the Crabbers. But his fame just kept

growing. The word was out about the gazelle-quick outfielder down in San Juan.

Suddenly, a whole slew of major league teams wanted to sign Roberto. The Braves, Dodgers, Cardinals, Giants and Red Sox all said they wanted him. Roberto had a strong desire to go to New York, where he knew there were many Puerto Ricans. Later both the Dodgers and the Giants would move to California, but at this time they were New York teams, along with the legendary Yankees.

The Giants and the Dodgers both tried to get Roberto. As I said earlier, Roberto was an extremely loyal guy. He did not forget that the Big Crab Zorrilla had given him his chance with the Crabbers, and that Al Campanis was the first to spot his potential greatness. Also, Roberto did not forget that it was the Dodgers who had broken the color barrier with Jackie Robinson. He signed with the Dodgers for a \$10,000 bonus and a \$5,000 first-year salary. It was less than other teams offered, and a lot less than white players were getting at the time, but it was a huge sum for the Clemente family.

And it was New York, and it was the Dodgers.

Little did Roberto know that the Brooklyn Dodgers were not going to show him anywhere near the loyalty and respect that he had showed them.