

Handouts for K-W-L on Roberto Clemente

Instructor: Cut the readings on dotted lines. Make enough copies so that students have one reading each or can share one reading per small group.

Narrator: On October 17, 1971, the underdog Pittsburgh Pirates defeated the Baltimore Orioles in game seven to win the World Series. Many players had contributed to the victory, but everyone agreed who was most responsible — their veteran right fielder from Puerto Rico, Number 21, Roberto Clemente.

Narrator: But it wasn't just his play on the field that day that his admirers would remember. It was what he did afterwards.

[Clemente interview in Spanish]

Juan Gonzales, writer: The Latinos who were listening to that were watching the English-language TV to have someone suddenly speak to you in Spanish, reinforced a pride in your own language and culture, and in who Roberto was.

Les Banos, friend: I cried when he did this, because this was him. He loved his family, he loved his country, he loved the United States but his love was for Puerto Rico.

Excerpt from PBS film: *American Experience: Roberto Clemente*

Announcer (archival): At Fort Myers, training begins for the Pittsburgh Pirates ...

Samuel O. Regalado, historian: They're training in the south, and it's in the south that Roberto Clemente like other Latin American blacks are introduced to the overt racism they had heard about back in their homeland but now actually see in front of them, and it's really a concept that is very difficult for them to grasp.

David Maraniss, biographer: The whole team stayed at the Bradford Hotel downtown except for Clemente and three other black and Latino players who had to find their own lodging on the other side of the tracks, literally. In every aspect of his life there he felt segregation strongly for really the first time in his life.

Samuel O. Regalado, historian: You had this combination of young ballplayer, anxious to succeed, has to a certain extent delusions of grandeur, and then there's the reality of his position as a person and in the south during the period of the 1950s, it didn't matter whether or not you're a professional baseball player, you're "just" black.

Excerpt from PBS film: *American Experience: Roberto Clemente*

Robert Ruck, historian: You were black or you were white in Pittsburgh. You weren't Latin. You weren't Puerto Rican. On the other hand I suspect that both black and white Pittsburghers had a hard time understanding Clemente. They had little experience with people from Latin America, with Latin American culture, with that sense of Latin pride. The black community saw him and physically he was black to them, but not culturally.

Orlando Cepeda, San Francisco Giants: He told me that, that it was very lonely for him because of communication — he couldn't communicate, and that's why — we have two strikes: being black, and being Latin.

Narrator: For much of the Pittsburgh press, it seemed a Latino player's background was something to be mocked, or ignored.

Juan Gonzales, writer: There was an attempt to really sort of deny the Latino heritage of these ballplayers. I was, uh, just a kid then, but I remember he was always called Bobby Clemente. They Americanized the names and always the sports writers and the ball players ridiculed their attempts to speak English.

Excerpt from PBS film: *American Experience: Roberto Clemente*

Narrator: Number 21 realized that to fans and fellow players alike, he had become something more than a right fielder. He had become a role model.

Les Banos, friend: He was very careful always, his appearance. Because he felt the first impression was very important, especially from him. Because he felt he was not representing Roberto Clemente alone, he always told me, I'm representing the people of Puerto Rico.

Excerpt from PBS film: *American Experience: Roberto Clemente*

Narrator: In the mid-1960s, Clemente found himself engaged by events beyond the ballpark, as America entered a time of unprecedented change. As Clemente watched and read about the protesters pouring into the nation's streets, he identified closely with the widening movement for civil rights.

David Maraniss, biographer: Clemente was interested in more than sports. He was very political. And one of the people he admired most in the world was Martin Luther King. The one time we know that Dr. King went down to Puerto Rico, Clemente sought him out and spent most of a day with him, took him to his farm.

Robert Ruck, historian: Because he's in the black community and because he's traveling around it's clear at that time that this is a guy that's interested in what's going on around him and has opinions about that. He's not only an observer, he's somebody who's passionately connected to what's going on. He's talking about those things. He's arguing about those things.

Excerpt from PBS film: *American Experience: Roberto Clemente*

Narrator: Celebrity did little to dull his sensitivity to injustice; if anything, it only sharpened it. Once, out shopping with Vera in a New York department store, the couple was ignored until someone recognized the famous ballplayer. When the salespeople suddenly lavished them with attention, Clemente would have none of it.

Vera Clemente, Wife [in Spanish, subtitled]: Roberto told the clerk, “I asked you to show us the best furniture. Why did you take so long? We’re not going to buy anything now.”

Narrator: By the end of the decade, increased Latino immigration and a galvanized civil rights movement was transforming the country. Baseball was changing too, with the Pirates leading the way. In 1971, Clemente found himself leader of a team unlike any in baseball history.

Excerpt from PBS film: *American Experience: Roberto Clemente*

Clemente led the Pirates all the way back, winning the series in seven games. He smacked a hit in every game, finishing with a .41 average and the series MVP. Clemente cemented his legend and transcendence in Latin America in the post-game celebration when television reporters asked for comment:

“Before I say anything in English, I would like to say something in Spanish to my mother and father in Puerto Rico.” His words were simple: “*En el dia mas grande de mi vida, para los nenos la benediction mia y que mis padres me echen la benediction.*” [In the most important day of my life, I give blessings to my boys and ask that my parents give their blessing.]

Juan Gonzales, journalist: Roberto was breaking the mold in saying, “Yes, I will talk to you. But first let me talk to my family and, and my community.” I think that was enormously important certainly for those Latino fans here in the United States as well as those in Puerto Rico and Latin America who were also listening to that.

Excerpts from *Welcome to the Terrordome: The Pain, Politics, and Promise of Sports* by Dave Zirin and the PBS film: *American Experience: Roberto Clemente*

In the days after Clemente’s death, an obituary ran in the newspaper of the Black Panthers. The Panthers thanked Clemente for supporting the breakfast programs and health clinics operated by their Philadelphia chapter. ...

The obit ends this way: “It is ironic that the profession in which he achieved ‘legendry’ knew him the least. Roberto Clemente did not, as the Commissioner of Baseball maintained, ‘Have about him a touch of royalty.’ Roberto Clemente was simply a man, a man who strove to achieve his dream of peace and justice for oppressed people throughout the world.”

Excerpt from *A People’s History of Sports in the United States* by Dave Zirin.

Narrator: On December 23, 1972, the Clementes awoke in Puerto Rico to the news of a massive earthquake in Nicaragua. Roberto quickly located a ham radio operator who could provide details of the damage, and asked what help people on the ground could use. The reply was blunt, and for Clemente, heart-wrenching: Food, clothing, medical supplies. Everything. He threw himself into the relief effort, body and soul.

David Maraniss, biographer: It became his passion for the next week or so he was ... that's all he was doing, day and night, was trying to round up aid for the people of Managua.

Narrator: When he heard the news of corruption and looting, of relief supplies stolen, Clemente decided to intervene — personally. He would accompany a planeload of emergency supplies to Nicaragua.

Robert Ruck, historian: The people on the ground in Managua are calling Roberto. Roberto, you have to come. If you come here, it'll get where it needs to go.

Narrator: Clemente wasted no time. At San Juan's International Airport, he chartered the first plane and pilot he could find. After some frantic hours of repairs, the DC-7 was finally cleared for take-off.

Excerpt from PBS film: *American Experience: Roberto Clemente*

On November 14, 1964, he married Vera Cristina Zabala in Carolina, Puerto Rico. They went on to have three sons: Roberto Jr., Luis Roberto, and Roberto Enrique. Proud of their heritage, the couple arranged for all three sons to be born in Puerto Rico.

Comfortable at home and at work, Clemente began to speak out for his dream: a sports city for impoverished Puerto Rican children. He began to look at land, collect investors, and talk rhapsodically of helping the poor. "I'd like to work with kids. If I live long enough," he would say. During the 1966 off-season, Clemente's "adopted American sister" Carol was in Puerto Rico with Clemente and his family. In Puerto Rico, Clemente didn't have to be the intense, perpetually irritated star forever alert to any slight to his skin color or language. Only by seeing him relaxed and among his own people can we understand the mythical dimensions Clemente acquired in death. As Carol described to Maraniss,

"I came back in awe of what a humble man he was. What a regular man he was [away from Pittsburgh]. But just so connected to the people. If children recognized him, or the most humble-looking person somewhere on a mountain hill where we were driving approached him, wherever we were, it ended in a long conversation. I never remember a moment when Roberto didn't take the time to talk to somebody who came up to him. There was never a time when he didn't stop. I never remember him walking away or cutting someone off. And especially if it was someone young..."

Excerpts from *Welcome to the Terrordome: The Pain, Politics, and Promise of Sports* by Dave Zirin and the PBS film: *American Experience: Roberto Clemente*

Thanks to Nixon's elaborate obsession with audio technology, we know that his immediate concern after the [December 23, 1972] earthquake was not the horrific loss of life in Nicaragua but rather that the country would "go communist" in the ensuing chaos. Instead of providing relief, he sent in paratroopers to help the Nicaraguan National Guard keep order. Somoza had issued shoot-to-kill orders against anyone foraging for food, but not before shutting down all the service agencies that were feeding people... Roberto Clemente had many friends in Nicaragua. He was also haunted by the thoughts of the children he had visited over the years.

In twenty-four hours' time he had set up the Roberto Clemente Committee for Nicaragua. Fear for his friends was supplanted by fury when he heard stories of Somoza's troops seizing aid for their own enrichment. One friend returned to Puerto Rico with a story that he stopped Somoza's troops from seizing his supplies by saying that if they didn't let the supplies through, he would tell the great Roberto Clemente what was taking place. Clemente took from this that he himself would have to go to Nicaragua to make sure the aid got where it was supposed to go.

On December 31, 1972 he boarded a ramshackle plane overloaded with relief supplies... The plane went down a thousand yards out to sea and Clemente's body was never recovered...

Excerpt from *A People's History of Sports in the United States* by Dave Zirin.

Thanks to Jackie Robinson, Clemente broke into the big leagues alongside the first post-color-line wave of young, brilliant, African-American ballplayers. But while there was room for black stars in the 1950s, teams had informal quotas to make sure that color was kept to a minimum. They also thought nothing of continuing to hold spring training in the segregated South. And the fact that baseball was moving, albeit slowly, towards acceptance of African-American players did not mean that the same courtesy was extended to Latinos. In 1964, Giants manager Alvin Dark banned the Spanish language from the clubhouse. Dark was openly hostile to Latino players, but his loudly boorish rules were tacitly enforced in clubhouses around the league.

Nevertheless, throughout the '60s, the changes occurring in society gradually bled onto the ballfield. Most players were passive participants in this process, but not Roberto Clemente. His was a voice impatient for change.

Clemente was a populist in the best Latin American tradition. He was a Bolivarian, someone who believed in a united Latin America that could serve the interests of the region's poor. His heroes were Martin Luther King Jr. and Puerto Rican leader Luis Munoz Marin. Marin—a name known to many people in the United States as the San Juan airport they fly into for spring break—was the first democratically elected governor of Puerto Rico.

Excerpts from *Welcome to the Terrordome: The Pain, Politics, and Promise of Sports* by Dave Zirin and the PBS film: *American Experience: Roberto Clemente*