

This Day in History... September 30, 1972

Roberto Clemente's 3,000th Hit

On September 30, 1972, Roberto Clemente scored his 3,000th hit on the very last regular season at-bat of his career.

Roberto Clemente was born on August 18, 1934, in Barrio San Antón, Carolina, Puerto Rico. The youngest of seven children, he grew up helping his father in the sugar fields and loading and unloading trucks.

Clemente was a skilled athlete from a young age. He performed well in track and field and was an Olympic hopeful before he decided to become a baseball player. He was discovered during his first year in high school and recruited to play softball for the Sello Rojo team. Clemente was recruited into Puerto Rico's amateur league when he was 16 and began playing professionally two years later with the Puerto Rican Professional Baseball League.

Then in 1954, Clemente was signed to the Brooklyn Dodgers Triple-A team in Montreal. He performed well throughout that season and during that year's draft, he was the first rookie pick, joining the Pittsburgh Pirates. He'd remain with that team for the rest of his career.

Clemente played with an intensity that earned him respect from both players and fans. He was skilled both in the outfield and at the plate. With his strong arm, he was able to make dramatic throws from his position in right field. He was a four-time batting champion and his average topped the .300 mark 13 times. Clemente was an All-Star 12 times, the 1966 National League Most Valuable Player, and a Gold Glove Award winner 12 years in a row. He also played in two World Series championships and was the first Latin American player to help win a World Series as a starter. He was selected as the Most Valuable Player of the 1971 World Series.



Clemente stamp from the Legends of Baseball Sheet

Throughout the 1972 season, Clemente had struggled with injuries, playing in 102 games and hitting .312. As the season wore on, he crept closer to 3,000 hits, but given his age and injuries, some questioned if he could do it. Then in late August, he hit a hot streak, scoring 35 hits in 100 at-bats. By September 30, Clemente was only one hit away. The team had already clinched the title, taking away some of the urgency for him to score that last hit. He also hadn't slept the night before, talking on the phone with family and taking his wife to the airport.

A crowd of just 13,117 was in the stadium that day. When Clemente came to bat the first time, they rose to their feet, anticipating a historic hit, but he struck out. Clemente came up to bat again in the fourth inning. This time he connected and sent the ball sailing to the gap in left-center field. The game was briefly paused while the umpire retrieved the ball for Clemente to save.

The Pirates would win the game thanks to Clemente's 3,000th hit. After the game, Clemente, a private person, simply said, "I dedicate this hit to the fans of Pittsburgh. They have been wonderful. And to the people back home in Puerto Rico." The Pirates gave Clemente the last three games of the season off to rest his feet before the playoffs, which would be his last.

On December 23, 1972, a 6.2 magnitude earthquake hit Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua. Ten thousand people were killed. Seventy-five percent of the city was destroyed, including 90 percent of the homes. Dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle sent out a call for relief. Among those that responded were baseball legend, Roberto Clemente.

Clemente had long been involved in charity work. Having visited Managua just weeks before the quake, it was natural for him to want to help. He organized and sent several aid flights, but none arrived. Rumors circulated that corruption in the Nicaraguan government was keeping aid from reaching the victims. Clemente decided to accompany the last flight. Overloaded with supplies, the plane crashed into the Atlantic on New Year's Eve and Clemente's body was never found. Clemente was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame three months later.



This stamp was issued one day after Clemente's 50th birthday.

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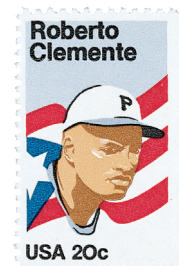
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