

This Day in History... November 19, 1921

Birth of Roy Campanella

Roy "Campy" Campanella was born on November 19, 1921, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Considered one of the greatest catchers in baseball history, he was the first catcher to break organized baseball's color line when he debuted in the majors in 1948.

Campanella was one of four children born to a black mother and an Italian father. They lived in Germantown briefly before moving to Nicetown in North Philadelphia where Campanella and his siblings attended integrated schools. Campanella excelled at sports from an early age and was made captain of every team he joined. He was most fond of playing baseball, though.

In 1937, Campanella began playing in the Negro Leagues at the age of 15. Initially, he played for the Washington Elite Giants on weekends, but dropped out of school on his 16th birthday to play baseball full-time. Campanella went with the team when they moved to Baltimore the following year. After a disagreement with the team owner, Campanella left for a couple seasons, playing with the Monterrey Sultans in the Mexican League and the Sabios de Vargas team in the Venezuelan Professional Baseball League.



Campanella played for the Washington Elite Giants in the Negro League.

In 1946, the Brooklyn Dodgers began planning to break the Major League's color barrier and signed Campanella. He was shifted around in the minor leagues for a few years. Jackie Robinson officially broke the color barrier in 1947, and Campanella followed him with his own major league debut on April 20, 1948. The two were friends and the Robinson's would stay with the Campanella's when they traveled and couldn't find a hotel that would allow them to stay.

Campanella spent his entire major league career with the Dodgers from 1948 to 1957, serving as their regular catcher. A smart and skilled catcher with an accurate, fast throwing arm, Campanella was also impressive at bat. In 1950, he became the first of five Dodgers in history to hit home runs in five straight games. And in the 1953 season, he hit 41 home runs, a record that lasted until 1996. He averaged more than 85 runs batted-in per year over the course of his career.

Campanella played every All-Star Game from 1949 to 1956 and was in the 1949, 1952, 1953, and 1955, and 1956 World Series. He was a three-time National League Most Valuable Player (1951, 1953, and 1955). He hit over .300 each of those seasons with over 30 home runs and over 100 runs batted in. In 1953, he set the team's new record for runs batted in (142) and has held the second most in franchise history since 1962. Campanella also threw out 57% of the players who tried to steal bases, a major league record; and holds five of the seven top caught stealing percentages in a season in the majors.

In addition to playing for the Dodgers, Campanella ran a liquor store in Harlem. On January 28, 1958, Campanella left the store to drive home for the night, but hit an icy patch and crashed his car. The accident broke his neck and paralyzed him from the chest down. While he was eventually able to gain use of his arms and hands, he was confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

Though he could no longer play, Campanella remained part of the Dodgers organization, serving as assistant supervisor of scouting and spring training coach. In 1959, the Dodgers, now located in Los Angeles, held a special exhibition game against the New York Yankees that raised funds to help with Campanella's medical bills. In 1969, he was the second African American player inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Campanella died of heart failure on June 26, 1993. He was selected as #50 on a list of the 100 greatest baseball players and in 2006, the Dodgers created the Roy Campanella Award for players who best exemplify "Campy's" spirit.



From the 2006 Baseball Sluggers issue



Campanella helped the Dodgers win their first World Series in 1955.

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