In Memoriam: Roy Campanella

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It's funny what sticks in your memory. The odd moment, the inconsequential incident, somehow become equal to the moments of high drama. We all know this quirk of the mind.

Late last Saturday when I heard Harry Cary in Dodger Stadium say that Roy Campanella had died. I could still see his bubble gum card, the smile, the portliness, the unmistakable look of a catcher.

But my strongest memory of Roy Campanella was from January 26, 1958, or rather the next day, when I saw the newspaper picture of his car crushed into a telephone pole, and the bend in the road where the ice sent him to a new life as a quadriplegic. He was in fact near death, and only later did the public become aware of the extent of his injuries.

I remember those news reports with a particular vividness to this day, and I'm really not sure why. Maybe it was the shock of seeing an athlete so dramatically and quickly cut down. Maybe it was my realization at age 17, that anyone could have their life changed in an instant. Whatever it was, it stuck with me.

I thought again about that moment this past week as the stories appeared about the Hall of Fame Catcher, who turned into a Hall of Fame human being.

There was something about Roy Campanella that made you like him. The evident joy in playing the game was part of it. But for me there was one more thing. He was a racial pioneer, different from Jackie Robinson, and in fact only possible after Robinson. He was a pioneer in the sense that he broke the next stereotype.

Robinson had shown that a black player could excel in the majors, Campanella and his teammate, Don Newcombe, laid to rest the notion that blacks could not pitch or catch in the majors because it required too much intelligence. This had been the fall back position for those confronted by Jackie Robinson's explosion of the first myth. I loved watching Campy give the lie to one more racial axiom.

Campanella had a ten year major league career, shortened as much by segregation as by his automobile accident. He didn't play in the major leagues until he was 26. He led the Dodger team that won five National League Pennants between 1949 and 1956, and
finally beat the Yankees in the 1955 World Series. His best year overall was 1953 when he hit .312 and set three records for catchers hitting 41 home runs, driving in a league leading 142 runs, and racking up 807 putouts. His highest batting average was .325 in 1951. Three times, in 1951, '53, and '55, Campanella was Most Valuable Player in the National League. In 1969 he was elected to the Hall of Fame.

Roy Campanella was one of the few Brooklyn Dodgers who made the transition and became a Los Angeles Dodger as well. Indeed one of the Dodger's most dramatic moments in Los Angeles came on May 8, 1959, when it was Roy Campanella night. The largest crowd in baseball history, 98,103, was present to honor Campy, and when the stadium lights were turned off the fans lighted matches all around the Colesium.

Campanella worked for the Dodgers in community service and public relations, and he worked over the years with Dodger catchers as an instructor at spring training.

He was born in Philadelphia in 1921 to an Italian father and an African American mother. In the peculiar world of American racial definitions that meant he was black, and so he would be subjected to the indignities of segregation. His baseball career started in high school when he chose catcher as his position, because he felt catcher was the surest way to make the team. At age 15 he played semi-pro baseball for the Bacharach Giants of Philadelphia, and at age 16 he was signed by the Baltimore Elite Giants of the Negro National League. During the winter he played ball in Latin America.

After signing Jackie Robinson, Branch Rickey was anxious to add other Black players to the Dodger system. He offered Campanella a contract in October, 1945, but Roy turned him down when he mistakenly thought Rickey was trying to sign him to the Brown Dodgers, then signed on with the Dodgers the following spring. His first season in the minors was spent in tandem with Don Newcombe in Nashua, New Hampshire, where they were the only Blacks in New England baseball, and led their team to a pennant. The following year Campy starred in Montreal, and in 1948 he joined the Brooklyn Dodgers at age 26.

Much has been written and said about Campanella over the years but perhaps the most impressive quote is from a member of the KKK, Ty Cobb, who said, "Campanella will be remembered longer than any catcher in baseball history."
On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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