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Vic Power dies

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Vic Power dies
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On Tuesday Victor Pellot died at age 78. This may not mean all that much to many baseball fans, but if that sentence is modified to read, "On Tuesday Vic Power died at age 78," it would have considerably more meaning. Vic Power was a first baseman who came to North America from Puerto Rico in 1950 to play baseball. He started in Class D ball in Ontario and a year later was signed by the Yankee organization. In 1952 he was assigned to the Yankee farm team in Kansas City where he hit .331 and drove in over a hundred runs. The next year he hit .349. He then was traded by the Yankees to the Philadelphia Athletics.

The Yankees decided not to bring Power to the majors and make him the first black Yankee because they found him too flamboyant and aggressive. They also were troubled by the fact he seemed to have too much interest in white women as he was often seen with a blond. The blond turned out to be his wife who often wore a blond wig. The Yankees also had a race problem in the attitudes of front office people towards blacks and in manager Casey Stengel who frequently disparaged black players. Yankee President, Dan Topping, was asked why the Yankees didn't promote Power to the majors, and his answer was that Power was a poor fielder. Power eventually won the first seven gold gloves awarded at first base in the American League and was a four-time All-Star.

I saw Vic Power late in his career when he was with the Minnesota Twins in the early 1960s. I had seen some excellent first basemen pass through Minneapolis when I was a boy, including Orlando Cepeda and Bill White, but I had never seen anyone as smooth, as sure handed, and with the range that Power had at first. He played well off the bag and deep, at times appearing to take throws at first while still moving toward the bag. He reached balls that most first basemen watched go into right field. He took everything one-handed and was criticized strongly for being a hot dog. It was a violation of the "right way" of doing things, just as his personal style was a violation of the "right way." He responded to critics of his fielding by saying that if he was supposed to field with both hands, then he needed gloves for both hands. Watching Vic Power's wizardry at first base, it would have been easy to conclude that he could

field the position with no hands. He played first base as if he were a star in a baseball ballet.

Power finally broke into the majors in 1954 with Philadelphia, nearly a decade after beginning his professional baseball career in Puerto Rico. Orlando Cepeda believes that had Power progressed to the majors earlier he might well have been a Hall of Fame candidate. His relatively weak power numbers would lead many to disagree, but he did have speed, leading the league in triples in one season, and holding the distinction of stealing home twice in one game.

Power's death reminds us of his great skills as a player and his status as one of the more colorful personalities of the game at a time when that quality was not particularly welcomed by white America. What it also should remind us is the great struggles incurred by Latin American players, a story well told by Sam Regalado in Viva Baseball! and recently the subject of a fine documentary of the same title. These players were among the pioneers of the era of desegregation who carried the added burden of being Spanish speakers in a country run by and for English speakers. These players were in a profession that took no consideration of the fact that they were asking players to come to the major leagues and at the same time struggle with a language and culture foreign to them.

The struggles faced by African-American players trying to desegregate baseball within a segregated society are well known. Jackie Robinson's trials and tribulations with racist players and fans are well documented, and his contribution as a pioneer in baseball is widely acknowledged. What is often overlooked is that Latin players also faced the humiliation of segregation, while at the same time struggling with basic survival in a foreign land. Many Latin players came to the majors with little or no experience with segregation and found themselves in uncomfortable and humiliating situations.

Vic Power once entered a segregated restaurant in Arkansas and was told by the waitress that they didn't serve Negroes. Power responded that it was not a problem because he didn't eat Negroes. For his humor he was thrown out of the establishment. Although Power could deal with such a situation with humor, many others could not, finding themselves unable to eat or stay in the same hotels with teammates and thus be humiliated in front of their peers.

Survival without the language skills in English led to other kinds of problems. Some players spent their first weeks, and in some cases months, eating nothing but hot dogs as it was the only food words they knew. Negotiating their way to and from the ballpark could be a formidable task. Finding a place to live, being the only member of a team who did not speak English, and living alone in an isolated existence was part of the harsh everyday reality for Latin players.

Like the African-American players, the Latin players also had to deal with stereotypes. Because they could not speak English, Latin players were often written off by coaches, managers, teammates, and fans as stupid and ignorant people. Because they were Latinos they were stereotyped as lazy and/or hot tempered and unpredictable in their behavior. And because they were also black they were subjected to racial slurs and racist comments from fans, as well as threats of violence and death, for daring to enter an all-white environment. In the midst of all this, Latin players had to clearly outperform their white teammates if they were to land and keep a spot on a major league roster.

The death of Vic Power, who had to change even his name for baseball, is a reminder not only of the greatness of the player, but also of the difficulties faced by the Latin American baseball players of the Fifties and Sixties.

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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