I saw him play so often. I watched the grace of his movements and the artistry of his reflexes from who knows how many press boxes. None of us really appreciated how pure an athlete he was until he was gone. What follows is a personal retracing of the steps that took Roberto Clemente from the narrow, crowded streets of his native Carolina to the local ball parks in San Juan and on to the major leagues. But it is more. It is a remembrance formed as I stood at the water’s edge in Puerto Rico and stared at daybreak into the waves that killed him. It is all the people I met in Puerto Rico who knew him and loved him. It is the way an entire island in the sun and a Pennsylvania city in the smog took his death.

The record book will tell you that Roberto Clemente collected 3,000 hits during his major-league career. It will say that he came to bat 9,454 times, that he drove in 1,305 runs, and played 2,433 games over an eighteen-year span.

But it won’t tell you about Carolina, Puerto Rico; and the old square; and the narrow, twisting streets; and the roots that produced him. It won’t tell you about the Julio Coronado School and a remarkable woman named María Isabella Casares, whom he called “Teacher” until the day he died and who helped to shape his life in times of despair and depression. It won’t tell you about a man named Pedron Zarrilla who found him on a country softball team and put him in the uniform of the Santurce club and who nursed him from promising young athlete to major-league superstar.

And most of all, those cold numbers won’t begin to delineate the man Roberto Clemente was. To even begin to understand what this magnificent athlete was all about, you have to work backward. The search begins at the site of its ending.

The car moves easily through the predawn streets of San Juan. A heavy all-night rain has now begun to drive, and there is that post-rain sweetness in the air that holds the promise of a new, fresh, clear dawn. This is a journey to the site of one of Puerto Rico’s deepest tragedies. This last says a lot. Tragedy is no stranger to the sensitive emotional people who make this island the human place it is.
Shortly before the first rays of sunlight, the car turns down a bumpy secondary road and moves past small shantytowns, where the sounds of the children stirring for the long walk toward school begin to drift out on the morning air. Then there is another turn, between a brace of trees and onto the hardpacked dirt and sand, and although the light has not yet quite begun to break, you can sense the nearness of the ocean.

You can hear its waves pounding harshly against the jagged rocks. You can smell its saltiness. The car noses to a stop, and the driver says, "From here you must walk. There is no other way." The place is called Puente Maldonado and the dawn does not slip into this angry place. It explodes in a million lights and colors as the large fireball of the sun begins to nose above the horizon.

"This is the nearest place," the driver tells me. "This is where they came by the thousands on that New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. Out there," he says, gesturing with his right hand, "out there, perhaps a mile and a half from where we stand. That's where we think the plane went down."

The final hours of Roberto Clemente were like this. Just a month or so before, he had agreed to take a junior-league baseball team to Nicaragua and manage it in an all-star game in Managua. He had met people and made friends there. He was not a man who made friends casually. He had always said that the people you wanted to give your friendship to were the people for whom you had to be willing to give something in return—no matter what the price.

Two weeks after he returned from that trip, Managua, Nicaragua exploded into flames. The earth trembled and people died. It was the worst earthquake anywhere in the Western Hemisphere in a long, long time.

Culture Note
The earthquake in Nicaragua on December 23, 1972, nearly destroyed the entire capital city. As many as 7,000 people died and 15,000 were injured. This was the most destructive earthquake ever recorded in Central America.
Back in Puerto Rico, a television personality named Luis Vigereaux heard the news and was moved to try to help the victims. He needed someone to whom the people would listen, someone who could say what had to be said and get the work done that had to be done and help the people who had to be helped.

"I knew," Luis Vigereaux said, "Roberto was such a person, perhaps the only such person who would be willing to help."

And so the mercy project, which would eventually claim Roberto's life, began. He appeared on television. But he needed a staging area. The city agreed to give him Sixto Escobar Stadium.

"Bring what you can," he told them. "Bring medicine...bring clothes...bring food...bring shoes...bring yourself and help us load. We need so much. Whatever you bring, we will use."

And the people of San Juan came. They walked through the heat and they drove cars and battered little trucks, and the mound of supplies grew and grew. Within two days, the first mercy planes left for Nicaragua.

Meanwhile, a ship had been chartered and loaded. And as it prepared to steam away, unhappy stories began to drift back from Nicaragua. Not all the supplies that had been flown in, it was rumored, were getting through. Puerto Ricans who had flown the planes had no passports, and Nicaragua was in a state of panic.

"We have people there who must be protected. We have black-market types that must not be allowed to get their hands on these supplies," Clemente told Luis Vigereaux. "Someone must make sure—particularly before the ship gets there. I'm going on the next plane."

The plane they had rented was an old DC-7. It was scheduled to take off at 4:00 p.m. on December 31, 1972. Long before take-off time, it was apparent that the plane needed more work.

It had even taxied onto the runway and then turned back. The trouble, a mechanic who was at the airstrip that day conjectured, had to do with both port [left side] engines. He worked on them most of the afternoon.

The departure time was delayed an hour, and then two, and then three. Across town, a man named Rudy Hernandez, who had been a teammate of Roberto's when they were rookies in the Puerto Rican League and who had later pitched for the Washington Senators, was trying to contact Roberto by telephone. He had just received a five-hundred-dollar donation,

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1. *rookies*. First-year players in baseball or another sport
and he wanted to know where to send it. He called Roberto’s wife, Vera, who told him that Roberto was going on a trip and that he might catch him at the airport. She had been there herself only moments before to pick up some friends who were coming in from the States, and she had left because she was fairly sure that the trouble had cleared and Roberto had probably left already.

“I caught him at the airport and I was surprised,” Rudy Hernandez told me. “I said I had this money for Nicaraguan relief and I wanted to know what to do with it. Then I asked him where he was going.”

“Nicaragua,” Clemente told him.

“It’s New Year’s Eve, Roberto. Let it wait.”

“Who else will go?” Roberto told him. “Someone has to do it.”

At 9 p.m., even as the first stirrings of the annual New Year’s Eve celebration were beginning in downtown San Juan, the DC-7 taxied onto the runway, received clearance, rumbled down the narrow concrete strip, and pulled away from the earth. It headed out over the Atlantic and banked toward Nicaragua, and its tiny lights disappeared on the horizon.

Just ninety seconds later, the tower at San Juan International Airport received this message from the pilot: “We are coming back around.”

Just that.

Nothing more.

And then there was a great silence.

“It was almost midnight,” recalls Rudy Hernandez, a former teammate of Roberto’s. “We were having this party in my restaurant, and somebody turned on the radio and the announcer was saying that Roberto’s plane was feared missing.

And then, because my place is on the beach, we saw these giant floodlights crisscrossing the waves, and we heard the sound of the helicopters and the little search planes.”

Drawn by a common sadness, the people of San Juan began to make their way toward the beach, toward Puente Maldonado. A cold rain had begun to fall. It washed their faces and blended with the tears.

They came by the thousands and they watched for three days. Towering waves boiled up and made the search virtually impossible. The U.S. Navy sent a team of expert divers into the area, but the battering of the waves defeated them too. Midway through the week, the pilot’s body was found in the swift-moving currents to the north. On Saturday bits of the cockpit were sighted.

**Note the Facts**

What happened out in the ocean?
And then—nothing else.

"I was born in the Dominican Republic," Rudy Hernandez said, "but I've lived on this island for more than twenty years. I have never seen a time or a sadness like that. The streets were empty, the radios silent, except for the constant bulletins about Roberto. Traffic? Forget it. All of us cried. All of us knew him and even those who didn't, wept that week.

"Manny Sanguillen, the Pittsburgh catcher, was down here playing winter ball, and when Manny heard the news he ran to the beach and he tried to jump into the ocean with skin-diving gear. I told him, man, there's sharks there. You can't help. Leave it to the experts. But he kept going back. All of us were a little crazy that week.

"There will never be another like Roberto."

Who was he...I mean really?

Well, nobody can put together all the pieces of another man's life. But there are so many who want the world to know that it is not as impossible a search as you might think.

He was born in Carolina, Puerto Rico. Today the town has about 125,000 people, but when Roberto was born there in 1934, it was roughly one-sixth its current size.

María Isabella Casares is a schoolteacher. She has taught the children of Carolina for thirty years. Most of her teaching has been done in tenth-grade history classes. Carolina is her home and its children are her children. And among all of those whom she calls her own (who are all the children she taught), Roberto Clemente was something even more special to her.

"His father was an overseer on a sugar plantation. He did not make much money," she explained in an empty classroom at Julio Coronado School. "But then, there are no rich children here. There never have been. Roberto was typical of them. I had known him when he was a small boy because my father had run a grocery store in Carolina, and Roberto's parents used to shop there."

There is this thing that you have to know about María Isabella Casares before we hear more from her. What you have to know is that she is the model of what a teacher should be. Between her and her students even now, as back when Roberto attended her school, there is this common bond of mutual respect. Earlier in the day, I had watched her teach a class in the history of the Abolition Movement in Puerto Rico. I don't speak much Spanish, but even to me it was clear that this is how a class should be, this is the kind of person who should teach, and these are the kinds of students such a teacher will produce.
With this as a background, what she has to say about Roberto Clemente carries much more impact.

"Each year," she said, "I let my students choose the seats they want to sit in. I remember the first time I saw Roberto. He was a very shy boy and he went straight to the back of the room and chose the very last seat. Most of the time he would sit with his eyes down. He was an average student. But there was something very special about him. We would talk after class for hours. He wanted to be an engineer, you know, and perhaps he could have been. But then he began to play softball, and one day he came to me and said, 'Teacher, I have a problem.'

"He told me that Pedro Zarrilla, who was one of our most **prominent** baseball people, had seen him play, and that Pedro wanted him to sign a professional contract with the Santurce Crabbers. He asked me what he should do.

"I have thought about that conversation many times. I believe Roberto could have been almost anything, but God gave him a gift that few have, and he chose to use that gift. I remember that on that day I told him, 'This is your chance, Roberto. We are poor people in this town. This is your chance to do something. But if in your heart you prefer not to try, then Roberto, that will be your problem—and your decision.'"

There was and there always remained a closeness between this boy-soon-to-be-a-man and his favorite teacher.

"Once, a few years ago, I was sick with a very bad back. Roberto, not knowing this, had driven over from Rio Piedras, where his house was, to see me."

"Where is the teacher?" Roberto asked Mrs. Casares' step-daughter that afternoon.

"Teacher is sick, Roberto. She is in bed."

"Teacher," Roberto said, pounding on the bedroom door, "get up and put on your clothes. We are going to the doctor whether you want to or not."

"I got dressed," Mrs. Casares told me, "and he picked me up like a baby and carried me in his arms to the car. He came every day for fifteen days, and most days he had to carry me, but I went to the doctor and he treated me. Afterward, I said to the doctor that I wanted to pay the bill.

"'Mrs. Casares,' he told me, 'please don't start with that Clemente, or he will kill me. He has paid all your bills, and don't you dare tell him I have told you.'

**prominent** (pron' i nt) adjective, standing out, noticeable

**Flashback** A **flashback** is an interruption of the sequence of the story to describe an event that happened earlier. What advice did Roberto's teacher give him about playing baseball?
"Well, Roberto was like that. We had been so close. You know, I think I was there the day he met Vera, the girl he later married. She was one of my students, too. I was working part-time in the pharmacy and he was already a baseball player by then, and one day Vera came into the store.

"Teacher,' Roberto asked me, 'who is that girl?'

"That's one of my students," I told him. 'Now don't you dare bother her. Go out and get someone to introduce you. Behave yourself.'

"He was so proper, you know. That's just what he did, and that's how he met her, and they were married here in Carolina in the big church on the square."

On the night Roberto Clemente's plane disappeared, Mrs. Casares was at home, and a delivery boy from the pharmacy stopped by and told her to turn on the radio and sit down. "I think something has happened to someone who is very close with you. Teacher, and I want to be here in case you need help."

Maria Isabella Casares heard the news. She is a brave woman, and months later, standing in front of the empty crypt in the cemetery at Carolina where Roberto Clemente was to have been buried, she said, "He was like a son to me. This is why I want to tell you about him. This is why you must make people—particularly our people, our Puerto Rican children—understand what he was. He was like my son, and he is all our sons in a way. We must make sure that the children never forget how beautiful a man he was."

The next person to touch Roberto Clemente was Pedro Zarrilla, who owned the Santurce club. He was the man who discovered Clemente on the country softball team, and he was the man who signed him for a four-hundred-dollar bonus.

"He was a skinny kid," Pedro Zarrilla recalls, "but even then he had those large powerful hands, which we all noticed right away. He joined us, and he was nervous. But I watched him, and I said to myself, 'this kid can throw and this kid can run, and this kid can hit. We will be patient with him.' The season had been through several games before I finally sent him in to play."

Luis Olmo remembers that game. Luis Olmo had been a major-league outfielder with the Brooklyn Dodgers. He had been a splendid ballplayer. Today he is in the insurance business in San Juan. He sat in his office and recalled very well that first moment when Roberto Clemente stepped up to bat.

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2. crypt - An underground burial place.

**Build Vocabulary**

The reading says that Luis Olmo was a splendid ballplayer. What does splendid mean?

**splendid** (splen 'dید) adjective, excellent, very good
"I was managing the other team. They had a man on base and this skinny kid comes out. Well, we had never seen him, so we didn’t really know how to pitch to him. I decided to throw him a few bad balls and see if he’d bite.

"He hit the first pitch. It was an outside fast ball, and he never should have been able to reach it. But he hit it down the line for a double. He was the best bad-ball hitter I have ever seen, and if you ask major-league pitchers who are pitching today, they will tell you the same thing. After a while it got so that I just told my pitchers to throw the ball down the middle because he was going to hit it no matter where they put it, and at least if he decided not to swing we’d have a strike on him.

"I played in the big leagues. I know what I am saying. He was the greatest we ever had...maybe one of the greatest anyone ever had. Why did he have to die?"

Once Pedron Zarrilla turned him loose, there was no stopping Roberto Clemente. As Clemente’s confidence grew, he began to get better and better. He was the one the crowd came to see out at Sixto Escobar Stadium.

"You know, when Clemente was in the lineup," Pedron Zarrilla says, "there was always this undercurrent of excitement in the ball park. You knew that if he was coming to bat, he would do something spectacular. You knew that if he was on first base, he was going to try to get to second base. You knew that if he was playing right field and there was a man on third base, then that man on third base already knew what a lot of men on third base in the majors were going to find out—you don’t try to get home against Roberto Clemente’s arm.

"I remember the year that Willie Mays came down here to play in the same outfield with him for the winter season. I remember the wonderful things they did and I remember that Roberto still had the best of it.

"Sure I knew we were going to lose him. I knew it was just a matter of time. But I was only grateful that we could have him if only for that little time."

The major-league scouts began to make their moves. Olmo was then scouting, and he tried to sign him for the Giants. But

3. lineup. A list with the order that the baseball players will hit
4. major-league scouts. People who attend baseball games and look for new players for their teams
it was the Dodgers who won the bidding war. The Dodgers had Clemente, but in having him, they had a major problem. He had to be hidden.

325 This part takes a little explaining. Under the complicated draft rules that baseball used at that time, if the Dodgers were not prepared to bring Clemente up to their major-league team within a year (and because they were winning with proven players, they couldn’t), then Clemente could be claimed by another team.

330 They sent him to Montreal with instructions to the manager to use him as little as possible, to hide him as much as possible, and to tell everyone he had a sore back, a sore arm, or any other excuse the manager could give. But how do you hide a diamond when he’s in the middle of a field of broken soda bottles?

335 In the playoffs that year against Syracuse, they had to use Clemente. He hit two doubles and a home run and threw a man out at home the very first try.

The Pittsburgh Pirates had a man who saw it all. They drafted him at the season’s end.

340 And so Roberto Clemente came to Pittsburgh. He was the finest prospect the club had had in a long, long time. But the Pirates of those days were spectacular losers and even Roberto Clemente couldn’t turn them around overnight.

"We were bad, all right," recalls Bob Friend, who later became a great Pirate pitcher. "We lost over a hundred games, and it certainly wasn’t fun to go to the ball park under those conditions. You couldn’t blame the fans for being noisy and impatient. Branch Rickey, our general manager, had promised a winner. He called it his five-year plan. Actually, it took ten."

350 When Clemente joined the club, it was Friend who made it his business to try to make him feel at home. Roberto was, in truth, a moody man, and the previous season hadn’t helped him any.
“I will never forget how fast he became a superstar in this town,” says Bob Friend. “Later he would have troubles because he was either hurt or thought he was hurt, and some people would say that he was loafing. But I know he gave it his best shot and he helped make us winners.”

The first winning year was 1960, when the Pirates won the pennant and went on to beat the Yankees in the seventh game of the World Series. Whitey Ford, who pitched against him twice in that Series, recalls that Roberto actually made himself look bad on an outside pitch to encourage Whitey to come back with it. “I did,” Ford recalls, “and he unloaded. Another thing I remember is the way he ran out a routine ground ball in the last game and when we were a little slow covering, he beat it out. It was something most people forget but it made the Pirates’ victory possible.”

The season was over. Roberto Clemente had hit safely in every World Series game. He had batted over .300. He had been a superstar. But when they announced the Most Valuable Player Award voting, Roberto had finished a distant third.

**Think and Reflect**

How did it make Clemente feel to get so few votes?

“I really don’t think he resented the fact that he didn’t win it,” Bob Friend says. “What hurt—and in this he was right—was how few votes he got. He felt that he simply wasn’t being accepted. He brooded about that a lot. I think his attitude became one of ‘Well, I’m going to show them from now on so that they will never forget.’

“And you know, he sure did.”

Roberto Clemente went home and married Vera. He felt less alone. Now he could go on and prove what it was he had to prove. And he was determined to prove it.

“I know he was driven by thoughts like that,” explains Buck Canel, a newspaper writer who covers all sports for most of the hemisphere’s Spanish language papers. “He would talk with me often about his feelings. You know, Clemente felt strongly about the fact that he was a Puerto Rican and that he was a black man. In each of these things he had pride.

“On the other hand, because of the early language barriers, I am sure that there were times when he thought people were laughing at him when they were not. It is difficult for
a Latin-American ballplayer to understand everything said around him when it is said at high speed, if he doesn’t speak English that well. But, in any event, he wanted very much to prove to the world that he was a superstar and that he could do things that in his heart he felt he had already proven.”

In later years, there would be people who would say that Roberto was a hypochondriac (someone who imagined he was sick or hurt when he was not). They could have been right, but if they were, it made the things he did even more remarkable. Because I can testify that I saw him throw his body into outfield fences, teeth first, to make remarkable plays. If he thought he was hurt at the time, then the act was even more courageous.

His moment finally came. It took eleven years for the Pirates to win a World Series berth again, and when they did in 1971, it was Roberto Clemente who led the way. I will never forget him as he was during that 1971 series with the Orioles, a Series that the Pirates figured to lose, and in which they, in fact, dropped the first two games down in Baltimore.

When they got back to Pittsburgh for the middle slice of the tournament, Roberto Clemente went to work and led this team. He was a superhero during the five games that followed. He was the big man in the Series. He was the MVP. He was everything he had ever dreamed of being on a ball field.

Most important of all, the entire country saw him do it on network television, and never again—even though nobody knew it would end so tragically soon—was anyone ever to doubt his ability.

The following year, Clemente ended the season by collecting his three-thousandth hit. Only ten other men had ever done that in the entire history of baseball.

"It was a funny thing about that hit," Willie Stargell, his closest friend on the Pirates, explains. "He had thought of taking himself out of the lineup and resting for the playoffs, but a couple of us convinced him that there had to be a time when a man had to do something for himself, so he went on and played and got it. I'm thankful that we convinced him, because, you know, as things turned out, that number three thousand was his last hit.

"When I think of Roberto now, I think of the kind of man he was. There was nothing phony about him. He had his own ideas about how life should be lived, and if you didn't see it that way, then he let you know in so many ways, without words, that it was best you each go your separate ways.

5. MVP: Most Valuable Player
“He was a man who chose his friends carefully. His was a friendship worth having. I don’t think many people took the time and the trouble to try to understand him, and I’ll admit it wasn’t easy. But he was worth it.

“The way he died, you know. I mean on that plane carrying supplies to Nicaraguans who’d been dying in that earthquake, well, I wasn’t surprised he’d go out and do something like that. I wasn’t surprised he’d go. I just never thought what happened could happen to him.

“But I know this. He lived a full life. And if he knew at that moment what the Lord had decided, well, I really believe he would have said, ‘I’m ready.’”

He was thirty-eight years old when he died. He touched the hearts of Puerto Rico in a way that few people ever could.

He touched a lot of other hearts, too. He touched hearts that beat inside people of all colors of skin.

He was one of the proudest of The Proud People. ♦

Many people enjoy reading about famous sports figures. Why do you think this is so?
READING CHECK
Circle the letter of the correct answer.

1. Why did Clemente believe he had to go to Nicaragua on New Year’s Eve?
   A. A Central American had to go.
   B. He is a famous baseball player.
   C. He didn’t know who else would go, and someone had to do it.

2. What did the people do when they heard the news about Roberto?
   A. They starting walking to the beach.
   B. They became interested in baseball.
   C. They moved to Puerto Rico.

3. Were the Pittsburg Pirates a good baseball team when Clemente first joined them?
   A. Yes, they won the championship.
   B. No, they were losers.
   C. They turned around overnight.

4. What award did Clemente win in his second World Series?
   A. The Gold Bat
   B. MVP
   C. VPM

5. How many hits did Roberto Clemente have in his baseball career?
   A. 30
   B. 300
   C. 3,000

VOCABULARY CHECK
Circle the letter of the correct answer.

1. Why is the story of Roberto Clemente bittersweet?
   A. He was a wonderful baseball player and person, but he died tragically.
   B. He was born in Puerto Rico, but he moved to the United States.
   C. He had a good teacher as a child, and he was married.

2. The waves pounded harshly against the rocks. Would this be a safe place to swim?
   A. No
   B. Yes
   C. Only for children

3. The airplane rumbled down the runway. How would you describe the sound of the plane?
   A. Very quiet
   B. High-pitched screaming
   C. Low and noisy

4. Pedro Zarilla was a prominent baseball person. What does prominent mean?
   A. Well-known
   B. Talented
   C. Wealthy

5. The writer says that Roberto was not phony. That means he was
   A. A liar.
   B. Genuine.
   C. A good pitcher.

ANALYZE LITERATURE: Setting
The author says that many Puerto Ricans came out to the beach when Roberto Clemente was declared missing. Write a few sentences describing what you think that scene looked like. You can use the description from the story and add details from your imagination.
USE READING SKILLS: Understand Literary Elements
Characterization

1. What was Roberto Clemente's last action before he died?

2. What does this say about him as a person?

BUILDING LANGUAGE SKILLS: Syntax

The way words are arranged in a sentence is called syntax. Put these sentences about Roberto Clemente in the correct order. Use every word given and add the correct punctuation.

1. was Roberto student an average Clemente

2. Roberto was Puerto from Clemente Carolina Rico

3. almost earthquake devastated 1972 Nicaragua An in

4. The Series won Pittsburg the World Pirates

5. New airplane Eve in the ocean Year's crashed The on

6. Pedron to a wanted professional Roberto sign Zarrilla contract

SPEAKING AND LISTENING: Persuasion

Willie Stargell and some of the other players on the Pirate's team persuaded Roberto to play in the playoffs to get his three-thousandth hit. What do you think they might have said to convince him? Write a few persuasive sentences and share them with your classmates.