

Allen forced Philadelphians to confront racism head-on

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Dick Allen forced Philadelphia baseball and its fans to come to terms with the racism that existed in this city in the '60s and '70s. He may not have done it with the self-discipline or tact of Jackie Robinson, but he exemplified the emerging independence of major league baseball players as well as growing black consciousness.

While his unexcused absences, candid opinions and pre-game beer drinking earned him some of the harshest press in Philadelphia's sport history, his tape-measure home runs and exceptional speed gained for him the tremendous admiration of fellow players — both black and white.

Allen became eligible for the Hall of Fame in 1982. But his candidacy has been tainted by the scathing opinions of baseball writers like Bill James, who claims that he "used racism as an explosive to blow his own teams apart." James specifically cites Allen's 1965 fight with veteran Frank Thomas, who was subsequently traded, and the slugger's threat not to play in the 1976 post-season if the Phillies didn't make room on the roster for an aging Tony Taylor, as examples of his manipulative nature. Not surprisingly, James dismisses Allen's eligibility for the Hall of Fame on the ground that he "did more to keep his teams from winning than anybody else who ever played major league baseball." There certainly is another side to the story.

Dick Allen never had it easy in Philadelphia, and it wasn't entirely his own fault. In 1963, the Phillies sent their 21-year-old outfield prospect to Little Rock, making him the first black ballplayer in Arkansas history. That season was a nightmare for him. He received threatening phone calls, had the windshield of his car painted with "nigger, go home" signs, and could not be served in a restaurant unless accompanied by a white player.

Still, Allen managed to do more than survive. The Phillies called him up in September, and he proceeded to hit major league pitching at a .292 clip. The next season, Allen had to deal with the pressure of a summer-long pennant race while playing third base, a new position.

While most Phillies' fans remember 1964 for the team's infamous collapse in the final

that Allen's .318 average, 29 homers and 91A RBIs kept the team in the chase for most of the year — a performance that earned for him the National League's Rookie of the Year Award.

Despite the fact that Allen hit .300 and averaged 30 homers and 90 RBIs for the next five years in Philadelphia, the fans never forgave him for "instigating" the Thomas trade. They booed him every night, threw pennies, bolts or beer bottles at him whenever he played the outfield, and sent him hate mail. The press often treated him differently than it would a white ballplayer who was just as outspoken.

But Dick Allen was a *victim* of racism — not a manipulator of it. Perhaps that explains, in part, his sensitivity as well as his fierce independence. There is, however, more to his story than that.

Most Valuable Players are men who not only compile impressive statistics but also contribute to the team effort. Often they are players who do the most off the field as well as on it to help their team win. In 1972, Allen earned the MVP for his performance with the Chicago White Sox. Manager Chuck Tanner underscored the first baseman's intangible value to the team, crediting him for "taking care of the young kids" and "playing every game as if it was his last day on earth."

Again in 1975, when Allen returned to Philadelphia, he provided the inspiration for a young group of Phillies who were struggling to compete with the likes of Cincinnati's Big Red Machine. "He was a team player," according to manager Danny Ozark.

Today, Dick Allen is the Phillies' most popular fan-development representative. He makes public appearances throughout the Delaware Valley, promoting the positive attributes of baseball among its most vital resource, the schoolchildren. Instead of being bitter, Allen has chosen to forgive and forget.

Does he deserve a place in Cooperstown? A lifetime batting average of .292, 351 career home runs, and 1,119 RBIs say that he does. Those numbers place Allen in the same company as Roberto Clemente, Yogi Berra and Roy Campanella. But, then again, the numbers were never the issue — character was. Perhaps it is high time to reconsider that factor, too.

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Dick Allen in '65.