

Phillies, fans lucky to have class act like Ruiz

By William C. Kashatus

The Phillies' Carlos Ruiz, who was traded to the Los Angeles Dodgers last week, did not have a howitzer for an arm like Hall of Fame catcher Johnny Bench. Nor did he have an explosive bat like Mike Piazza, another stellar backstop who recently joined Bench in Cooperstown. But "Chooch" played with a heart much larger than his 5-foot-9 frame.

Ruiz was a team player, an unsung hero in a game that has become dominated by self-absorbed athletes who seem to care more about individual performance and accolades. Strapping on his gear night after night, season after season, Ruiz ignored the nagging aches and pains that are a professional hazard for catchers and gave his all for the Phillies.

Ruiz never had it easy. Raised in David, Panama, he lost his father, a police officer, in a jeep accident when he was just 7 years old. As the eldest of three sons, he became, at age 10, a breadwinner for his family, going to work as a laborer in the local coffee bean fields. But he never abandoned his dream to become a major league baseball player.

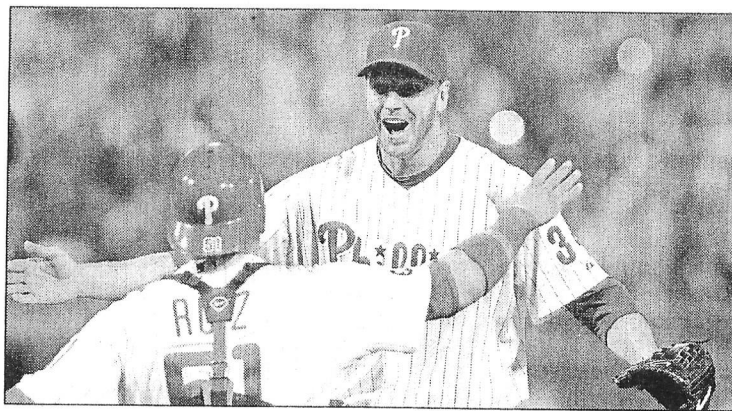
At age 19, Ruiz, a second baseman, showed enough promise to be signed by the Phillies for the bargain-basement bonus of \$8,000. Assigned to their baseball academy at La Vega, in the Dominican Republic, the short, stocky infielder with limited range was converted to catcher.

The transition was difficult. But for the next eight years, as he managed to advance through the Phillies' farm system, Ruiz worked harder than others with much greater ability. The only sign of frustration he showed was muttering the profanity *Chucha* (the Spanish equivalent of the f-bomb) when he wasn't performing to his own expectations. It happened so often that a teammate gave him the obscenity as a nickname, something that embarrassed Ruiz, a devout Catholic.

During the off-season Ruiz returned to Panama, where he worked various menial jobs to support his mother and two brothers. That is, until age 27, when the Phillies promoted him to the majors.

In Philadelphia, the reserved ballplayer blossomed into an All-Star catcher, compiling a .994 fielding average in 11 seasons. He also improved his hitting.

Originally a bottom-of-the-order hitter, Ruiz found ways to



Roy Halladay and Carlos Ruiz celebrate the no-hitter in Game One of the National League Division Series at Citizens Bank Park Oct. 6, 2010.

RON CORTES / Staff Photographer

get on base consistently and eventually developed the power to hit in the middle of the lineup. When the Phillies needed a big hit in the postseason, Ruiz delivered, batting .353 in World Series play.

Through it all, the Panamanian catcher placed the team above himself and worked just as hard as he did in the minors. That quality was respected by the fans, who misinterpreted his nickname to mean "Choo-Choo train," like *The Little Engine That Could*, and Americanized it to "Chooch."

Once, when asked about his approach to handling pitchers,

Ruiz replied: "When I'm catching it's not two people out there — a pitcher and a catcher. It's one person. It's my fault if something goes wrong. If it's happening to him, it's happening to me." It was that kind of selflessness that earned Ruiz the respect and affection of the Phillies' three aces during the team's most recent era of glory.

Cole Hamels, Roy Halladay, and Cliff Lee might have captured the national spotlight, but none of them would have been as successful without Ruiz. Not only was he exceptional at calling pitches, but Chooch possessed special insight into the

psyches of each hurler and formed strong relationships with them, enabling him to get the most out of their performances. That's why Halladay, after winning his second Cy Young Award in 2010, had a replica of the award made for his catcher.

More recently, Ruiz, as a veteran player on a young team that is rebuilding, became a valuable mentor to the many Latin American players on the roster. He also kept the clubhouse loose with his humorous imitations of teammates and opponents alike.

When it was time to say goodbye last week, Chooch penned a note on the clubhouse wall that read: "I will miss all of you guys. Good luck the rest of the season. Love you all, Chooch! Gracias."

It was a classy gesture by a beloved ballplayer who exemplified a team-first mentality, grace under pressure, and an unconditional respect for the game — virtues that are rare among today's pro athletes.

In Chooch, the Phillies and their fans had something pretty special.

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