

# DON'T PUT RICHIE ON RYAN'S SHOULDERS

By **WILLIAM C. KASHATUS**

**W**HEN PHILLIES' first baseman Ryan Howard was voted the 2005 National League Rookie of the Year by the baseball writers, comparisons to Richie Allen became inevitable.

Allen, the Phils' first African-American superstar, was voted Rookie of the Year in 1964, the year of the infamous collapse when, with a 6½-game lead and 12 left to play, the Phils dropped 10 straight to blow the pennant.

Allen had to deal with the pressure of a summerlong pennant race while learning to play third base, a new position. Still, he hit .318 with 29 homers and 91 RBI to keep the team in the chase for most of the season. His tape-measure home runs, exceptional speed and fun-loving personality earned him the admiration of teammates, black and white.

Despite the fact that Allen hit .300 and averaged 30 homers and 90 RBI for the next five years in Philadelphia, an antagonistic press and contentious fans blamed him for the team's losing ways and accused him of dividing the team along racial lines.

In the absence of free-agency, Allen manipulated the controversy to force a trade after the '69

season. He would go on to compile a .292 career batting average with 351 home runs and 1,119 RBI, numbers that should have earned him a place in the Hall of Fame years ago.

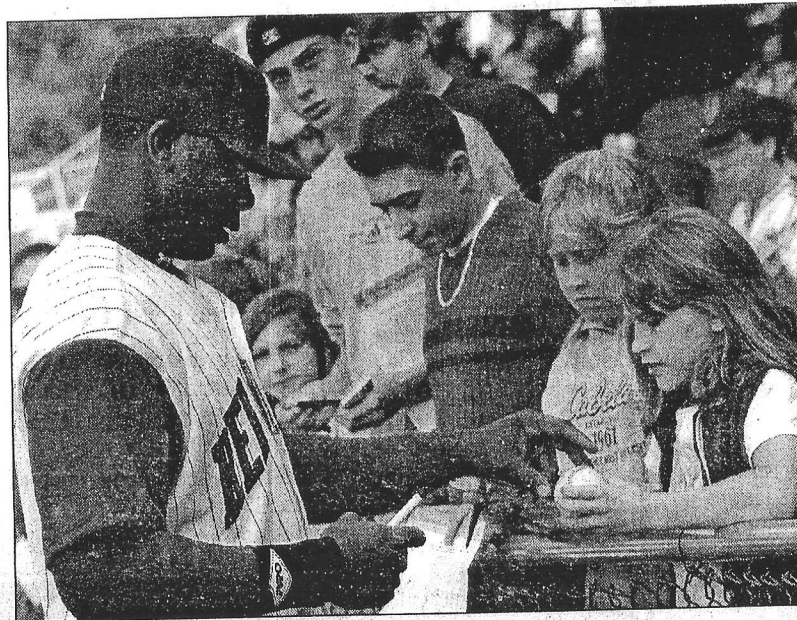
Instead, he remains the most obvious candidate not enshrined at Cooperstown, remembered for his unexcused absences, late arrivals at games and letters scrawled in the dirt at first base.

Forty-two years later, Ryan Howard is evoking memories of Allen because of his potential to be the Phillies' next African-American superstar.

After being called up from Triple A Scranton/Wilkes-Barre last July, Howard hit .288 with 22 home runs and 63 RBI in just 88 games. Twelve of his homers allowed the Phillies to stay apace with the Houston Astros for the National League's wild-card spot until the final game of the season. It was, by all accounts, an exceptional season for a rookie.

Having written about Allen's controversial career in Philadelphia, I'm often asked to compare Ryan Howard with him.

"Is he the Phillies' next black superstar?" "Will racism rear its ugly head again and drive him out of Philadelphia?" "Can you imagine what his numbers would



Ryan Howard giving autographs to fans at Triple A Scranton.

have been had he played the entire season in Philadelphia?"

The questions are damning not only because they raise the issue of race, but also of potential.

Racism is a burden the Phillies should no longer have to bear with the talented group of young black and Hispanic players they have throughout the organization. Howard is among the most exceptional, but so are Jimmy Rollins and Bobby Abreu.

All of these players appeal to the fans, both black and white. My son was just one of dozens of white kids sporting a Ryan Howard jersey at Opening Day last week.

While Philadelphians may continue to struggle with subtle forms of racism, our city has come a lot further than the volatile racial attitudes that existed in the 1960s when Allen played here. Whether such progressiveness is a result of political correctness or the result of genuine re-

spect, I'm grateful for it.

Potential and the unrealistically high expectations that with it can also be a burden for a young player like Howard. Sometimes I think that Phillies fans are so hungry for a hero that anything less than a MVP performance will be a disappointment.

We embrace our heroes with a passion that is fringing and boo them just as intensely. It's part of the emotional investment we make in them and our sports team.

That doesn't make it right.

My wish for Ryan Howard is that he is allowed to be himself. Having followed his career at Reading, Scranton and now with the Phillies, I know that he is a highly talented and hard-working player.

er. But what's just as important is that he's also an intelligent, articulate and caring person.

The kind of hero I cherish from my past and wish for my own sons, regardless of race or potential. ★

William C. Kashatus is author of "September Swoon: Richie Allen, the Phillies and Racial Integration" (Penn State, 2004). He can be contacted at [bill@historylive.net](mailto:bill@historylive.net).