

Dick Allen was Phila.'s Jackie Robinson

The former Phillies great was the most misunderstood athlete in the city's sports history.

By William C. Kashatus

Dick Allen, who played for the Phillies in the 1960s and the Chicago White Sox in the 1970s, taught me that Black lives matter long before the phrase became popular. He was my childhood hero at a time when the city's sportswriters and Major League Baseball rebuked him as an antihero. He was also a valued friend who trusted me to write about his life.

Allen, who died on Monday at the age of 78, was the most misunderstood athlete in Philadelphia's sports history. A shy, private individual by nature, he unwittingly became a symbol of the growing Black consciousness in the 1960s and paid for it dearly. Yet, for many youngsters — Black and white — who grew up in the city during that racially turbulent time, "Richie," as he was known then, was our very own Jackie Robinson.

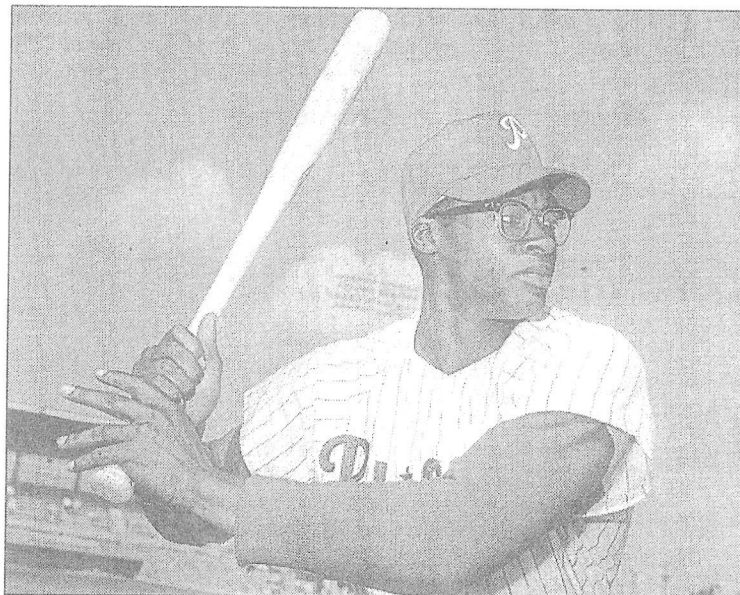
Allen was the Phillies' first African American superstar. In 1964, he was voted the National League Rookie of the Year. Over the next seven years, he batted over .300 three times, averaging almost 30 homers and more than 90 RBI. But fans never forgave him for allegedly instigating the trade of Frank Thomas, a popular white veteran, in 1965. They booed Allen every night, often using the N-word, and threw pennies, bolts, or beer bot-

tles at him. Off the field, they sent him hate mail and dumped garbage on his front lawn. Philadelphia's sportswriters excoriated the beleaguered star as a rebel who manipulated race and expected special privileges. In fact, Richie was a sensitive individual who was hurt by the horrific treatment and internalized it.

No, Richie was not perfect. When his repeated requests for a trade were denied by ownership, he tried to force a deal by arriving late to games, making controversial remarks to the press, and scrawling letters in the dirt around first base to show his displeasure. But unlike Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, and many other baseball immortals, Richie never lowered himself by shouting back at abusive fans, flipping profane gestures, or charging the stands.

My teachers at the small Quaker school I attended admired Allen's example, referring to it as "speaking truth to power," a nonviolent protest against racism. They compared his restraint and human dignity to that of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and taught us to honor their examples. As a result, I developed an early interest in African American history and the civil rights movement; subjects that continue to captivate me as a writer and historian.

When Allen retired from the



Dick Allen's life and example will always be much greater than a bronze plaque in Cooperstown, writes William C. Kashatus. AP, File

game in 1977, he was a seven-time All-Star and the American League's Most Valuable Player in 1972 when he played for the White Sox. During a 15-year career, he batted .292 and hit 351 home runs and 1,119 RBI. In addition, Allen's impressive slugging and on-base statistics rank him as arguably the best offensive player in the majors between 1964 and 1974.

Despite these impressive achievements, Allen, who was eligible for the Hall of Fame in 1982, was discriminated against

by the Baseball Writers' Association of America, who never gave him more than 19% of the vote. More recently, the hall's board of directors created obstacles to prevent the Veterans Committee from electing him during his lifetime, which should have happened in 2014 when he missed by a single vote. Instead, they chose to operate on a tainted view of Allen's character, one that was imposed on him by the white baseball establishment more than half a century ago.

I wish I could have done more

to get Dick elected to the Hall of Fame. That was my objective in 2004 when I wrote about his early career in Philadelphia, and again in 2017 when I wrote a complete biography of him. Those books were based on more than two dozen interviews with Dick, family, friends, and former teammates.

I learned that he was exactly the kind of person I intuited as a youngster: a proud but humble man with a wonderful sense of humor; a good teammate who mentored younger players, including future Hall of Famers Mike Schmidt, Ferguson Jenkins, and Goose Gosage; and a person of integrity who was deeply loyal to his family and to a small circle of friends.

Dick Allen forced Philadelphia to come to terms with the racism that existed in our city in the 1960s. He may not have done it with the same tact as Jackie Robinson, but he did it with tremendous moral courage and self-respect. For that, Dick's life and example will *always* be much greater than a bronze plaque in Cooperstown.

William C. Kashatus is the author of "September Swoon: Richie Allen, the '64 Phillies, and Racial Integration" (Penn State) and "Dick Allen: The Life and Times of a Baseball Immortal" (Schiffer).

✉ bill@historylive.net