

THE TIME HAS COME FOR RICHIE ALLEN

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

AS COMMISSIONER Bud Selig and the Hall of Fame's 58 living members contemplate the reinstatement of Pete Rose this off-season, there is another former Phillies' first baseman who mustn't be forgotten by the reconstituted Veterans Committee when they cast their votes for baseball immortality.

Richie Allen, the Phillies' first black superstar, is once again on the ballot. Allen forced Philadelphia baseball and its fans to come to terms with the racism that existed in this city in the 1960s.

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 sports 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 induction into the Hall of Fame in 1982. But his candidacy has been tainted by the scathing opinions of baseball writers like Bill James, who claim that the Phillies superstar "used racism as an explosive to blow his own teams apart." There is certainly another side to the story.

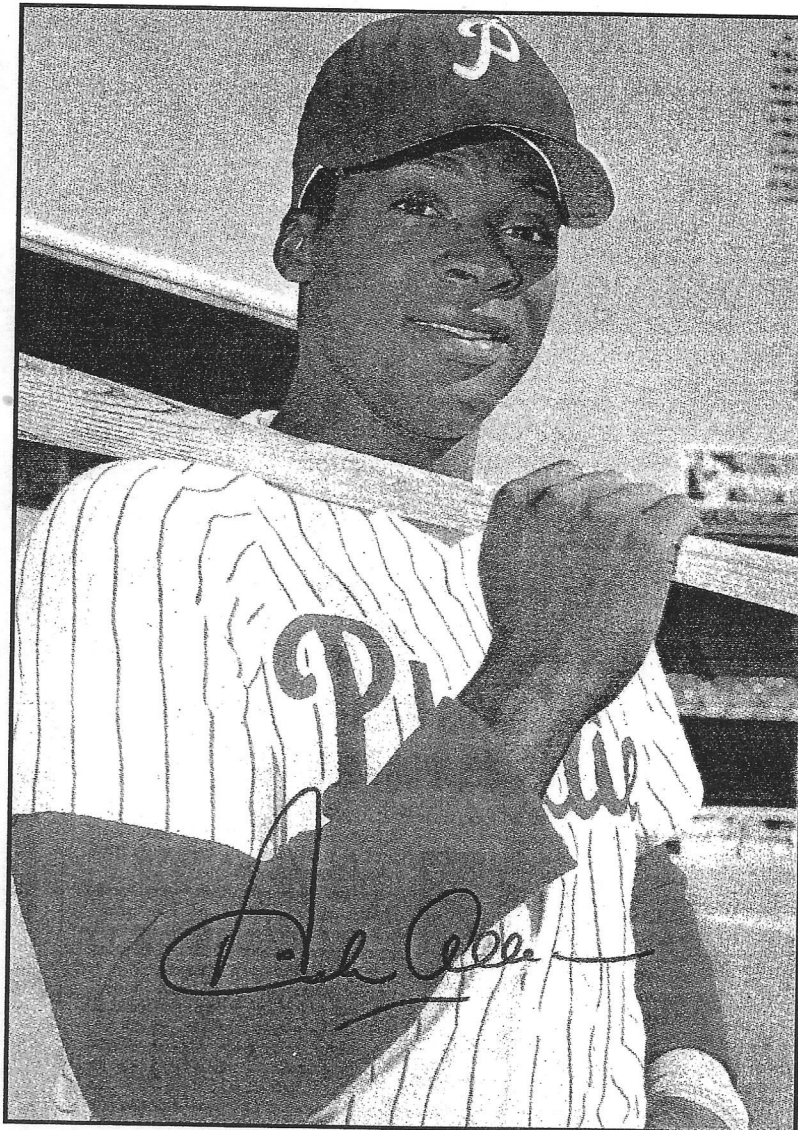
Allen never had it easy in Philadelphia, and it wasn't entirely his own fault.

In 1963, the Phillies sent their 21-year-old prospect to Little Rock, making him the first black ballplayer in Arkansas history. The season was a nightmare for him. He received threatening phone calls, the windshield of his car was painted with "Nigger, Go Home" signs, and he 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 learning to play third base, a new position.

While most Phillies fans remember 1964 for the team's infamous collapse in the final two weeks of the season, some may recall that Allen's .318 average, 29 homers and 91 RBI 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 RBI for the next five years in Philadelphia, the fans



never forgave him for allegedly instigating the trade of Frank Thomas, a popular white veteran, in 1965.

They booed him every night, threw pennies, bolts or beer bottles at him whenever he played the outfield, and sent him hate mail. Sportswriters launched their own character assault, painting the beleaguered star as a malcontent who expected special treatment.

When his repeated requests for a trade were rejected by Phillies, Allen, who did not enjoy the luxury of free

agency, tried to force a deal by resorting to unexcused absences, arriving late to games and scrawling letters in the dirt around first base.

Allen's rebellious behavior only reinforced the negative stereotype that the fans and media had imposed upon him in the first place. Perhaps that explains, in part, Allen's sensitivity as well as his fierce independence. There is, however, more to his story than those early years in Philadelphia.

Most-valuable players are men who not

only compile impressive statistics, but also contribute to a 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, hitting .308 with 37 homers and 113 RBI. Manager Chuck Tanner underscored his first baseman's intangible value to the team, crediting him for "taking care of the young kids" and turning a mediocre squad into a "first division team."

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 took Mike Schmidt under his wing, teaching the introverted young third baseman how to cope with the fickleness of Philadelphia's sportswriters and fans.

Allen's mentoring allowed those young Phillies to clinch a division championship in 1976, his final year in Philadelphia.

TODAY, ALLEN, a community-relations representative for the Phillies, makes appearances throughout the city, promoting the positive attributes of baseball among its most vital resource, the youngsters.

Instead of being bitter, Allen has chosen to forgive and forget.

"At the time, I thought of myself as a victim of racism," he admitted recently. "There were others who had to deal with racism, and handled it better than I did. But I'm at peace with my career now."

Does Dick Allen deserve a place in Cooperstown?

He has a lifetime batting average of .292, 351 career home runs, 1,119 RBI. Those numbers place him in the same company as Yogi Berra, Roy Campanella, Orlando Cepeda, Roberto Clemente and Harmon Killebrew. But, then again, the numbers were never the issue — character was.

Perhaps it is high time to reconsider that factor, too. ★

William C. Kashatus is the author of "September Swoon: Richie Allen, the '64 Phillies and Racial Integration," to be published by Penn State Press later this year.