MARTÍN ESPADA

Clemente's Overzealous Romp

Roberto Clemente and Baseball as Theater

On July 25th, 1956, Roberto Clemente did a terrible, wonderful thing.

In his sophomore year with the Pittsburgh Pirates, Clemente came to bat with the bases loaded, nobody out, and his team trailing the Chicago Cubs 8–5 in the bottom of the ninth at Forbes Field. He faced pitcher Jim Brosnan.

As the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reports:

> Brosnan made one pitch, high and inside. Clemente drove it against the light standard in left field. Jim King had backed up to make the catch but it was over his head. The ball bounced off the slanted side of the fencing and rolled along the cinder path to center field. Here came Hank Foiles, Bill Virdon and then Dick Cole, heading home and making it easily. Then came Clemente into third. Bobby Bragan had his hands upstretched to hold up his outfielder. The relay was coming in from Solly Drake. But around third came Clemente and down the home path. He made it just in front of the relay from Ernie Banks. He slid, missed the plate, then reached back to rest his hand on the rubber with the ninth run in a 9–8 victory as the crowd of 12,431 went goofy with excitement.

Yet, according to Bruce Markusen in his biography, *Roberto Clemente: The Great One,* what happened that day was "an incident" that "underscored his naivete on the basepaths":

> Clemente both heard and saw Bragan's stop sign, but deliberately ran through it. "I say to Bobby: 'Get out of my way, and I score,' Clemente explained to the Associated Press. 'Just like that. I think we have nothing to lose, as we got the score tied without my run, and I score, the game—she is over and we don't have to play no more tonight.'" The Pirates didn't have to play any more, as Clemente slid into home plate ahead of the tag. The unusual inside-the-park grand slam home run against Brosnan gave the Pirates a 9–8 win over the Cubs. As Brosnan wrote in the October 24, 1960, edition of *Life* magazine, Clemente's feat "excited the fans, startled the manager, shocked me and disgusted my club."

> Although Clemente had committed a fundamental error—trying to score a run on a potentially close play with no one out—Bragan handled the mistake appropriately. Given Clemente's hustle on the play and its ultimate success, Bragan excused the mistake. The manager added that there would be no $25 fine, usually a standard punishment for a player who had missed a sign.
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> Clemente's overzealous romp against the Cubs typified the recklessness of his early baserunning.

"Unusual" is not the word to describe the play that ended the Pirates-Cubs game on July 25, 1956. Markusen seems to be unaware of the fact that this was the *only* walk-off, inside-the-park grand slam in baseball history.

As baseball aficionados, we celebrate home runs. We celebrate walk-off home runs. We celebrate inside-the-park home runs. We celebrate grand-slam home runs. However, we do not celebrate the only walk-off, inside-the-park grand slam in baseball history.

Today, such an accomplishment would be reported ad nauseum on ESPN, MLB, and every other sports media outlet in the country. There would be replays, reenactments, panel discussions, commentaries, debates, and statistical breakdowns. Within minutes, we would know that this was the only home run of its kind in history.

Fifty-seven years ago, however, this baseball miracle took place before a sparse crowd in Pittsburgh, including one disgruntled manager/third base coach and one outraged opposing pitcher.

Bobby Bragan's stop sign was understandable. After all, Clemente would have represented the winning run on third with none out in the bottom of the ninth. Bragan was an old-school baseball man, and this was the old-school baseball move.

Bragan was one in a seemingly endless conga line of mediocre big league players who become mediocre big league managers. A lifetime .240 hitter who hit a grand total of fifteen home runs in eight seasons, Bragan was a rookie manager with the Pirates in 1956, leading the team to a 66-88 record and a seventh-place finish in the National League.

Perhaps the manager simply could not conceive of a walk-off, inside-the-park grand slam, given that it had never been accomplished before. Perhaps he underestimated the player hurtling in his direction, seeing him as ordinary: Clemente batted only .255 in 1955, though he would rebound to hit .311 in 1956.

In the end, though, Bragan was wrong and Clemente was right. Clemente had baseball instincts and intelligence beyond the grasp of his

manager. Considering the tendency of Bragan's Pirates to lose far more often than they won, this was a manager and a team that needed to take chances, to play proudly and aggressively, to act as if they could win by believing in themselves.

Making the right baseball move, the safe, conservative choice, failed for Bobby Bragan more often than not that season. How many times have we seen bad teams strand a runner on third with nobody out, as if such frustration and defeat were preordained, the will of giggling baseball gods? Carpe diem: Seize the day. Seize the game. Keep running.

Brosnan's reaction—that he was "shocked" and his team "disgusted"—is key to understanding why Clemente's amazing accomplishment has been diminished and even forgotten. First of all, consider the fact that this quote comes from an article published in 1960—*four years* after Clemente slid past home and slapped the plate with his hand. It is distinctly possible that tiptoeing up behind Jim Brosnan and whispering "Roberto Clemente" in his ear was enough to send him into a babbling fury for the rest of his life.

Brosnan responded as if Clemente had not only violated baseball decorum, but descended to a state of savagery, the equivalent of sacrificing a live chicken at home plate during the national anthem. The fact that Clemente broke the rule against running through a sign at third base, by itself, however, does not explain the pitcher's rancor.

Neither does the luck factor. As with most inside-the-park home runs, the ball developed a mind of its own and decided to roll around in center field for a while. Yet Brosnan was mostly to blame: even if Clemente heeded Bragan's signal to halt at third, the pitcher had still yielded a game-tying, three-run triple. He himself was lucky that the judgmental term "blown save" had not yet entered the baseball lexicon.

Nor is mere embarrassment enough to account for the steam pouring from Brosnan's ears. He was surely mortified. He entered the game, threw exactly one pitch, and ended up the loser. (Oddly enough, Pirates pitcher Nellie King entered the game in the top of the ninth, threw exactly one pitch—and ended up the winner.)

It was no coincidence that Brosnan was writing about Clemente for *Life* magazine in October of 1960. Dave Maraniss, in his biography entitled *Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball's Last Hero*, notes that Brosnan was commissioned by the magazine to write a scouting report in advance of the World Series between the Pirates and the Yankees. Here is Brosnan's previous quote in context:

> Clemente features a Latin-American variety of showboating: "Look at *número uno*," he seems to be saying. . . . He once ran right over his manager, who was coaching third base, to complete an inside-the-park grand slam homer, hit off my best hanging slider. *It excited the fans, startled the manager, shocked me, and disgusted my club.* (Emphasis added)

Brosnan's hyperbole says more about Brosnan than Clemente. If Clemente "ran right over his manager" at third base, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* surely would have alerted its readers, perhaps with the headline: *Clemente Runs Over Manager.* Yet bigotry, like strong drink, clouds the mind. Brosnan was an Eisenhower-era Puritan: from that perspective, the only walk-off inside-the-park grand slam in baseball history was a form of self-glorification, a step removed from the bullfighter tossing the bull's bloody ears into the crowd. Winning the ballgame for his chronically losing team was Clemente's Latin American way of calling attention to himself, a childish act characteristic of a childish people.

Says Maraniss: "Clemente's mad dash around the bases, the anecdote Brosnan employed to make his point, might have inspired a different intepretation had it been [fellow Pirates] Don Hoak or Dick Groat or, years later, Peter Rose. It would have been viewed as the indomitable spirit of a tough competitor." The common denominator: Hoak, Groat, and Rose were white.

Roberto Clemente was black, Puerto Rican, and Spanish-speaking in the 1950s. According to Maraniss, Al Abrams of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* covered Clemente in spring training 1955—his rookie season—and wrote: "The dusky Puerto Rican . . . played his position well and ran the bases like a scared rabbit. It seemed that every time we looked up there was Roberto, showing his flashing heels and gleaming white teeth to the loud screams of the bleacher fans." Even his admirers utilized a racially charged vocabulary; thus, Clemente's detractors, like Brosnan, felt perfectly free to couch their criticisms in racial terms.

However, Jim Brosnan's attitude is particularly ironic in light of the fact that he would commit a greater violation of baseball decorum only three years after his encounter with Clemente's allegedly shameful behavior. Brosnan would make a name for himself as a writer with his baseball diary, *The Long Season,* what Maraniss calls, "a pathbreaking cinema verité sports book that provided a revealing glimpse inside his 1959 season with St. Louis and Cincinnati." He was accused, by such guardians of baseball's All-American image as Joe Garagiola, of kicking open the door to the sacred space of the clubhouse.

We live amid a spilling cornucopia of baseball minutiae. It should be common knowledge that Roberto Clemente, one of the game's greatest performers, hit the only walk-off, inside-the-park grand slam in baseball history. This raises a question that goes well beyond baseball: Who writes the history?

Clemente had the misfortune to make history at the expense of Jim Brosnan, baseball's player-writer. His account of the event for *Life* carried weight because of his reputation as a writer. However, Brosnan's sneering attempt to climb inside Clemente's head—"'look at número uno,' he seems to be saying"—demonstrates his inability to *think* on Clemente's level. He could not conceive of the fact that the uncivilized Puerto Rican sliding across home plate—no doubt with maracas rattling in his head—was a player who could break with baseball convention because he had the courage and creativity to do what had never been done. Clemente was becoming Clemente.

No less an authority than Henry James called Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* "an offense to art." Of course, Henry James was no Jim Brosnan.

Speaking of bad reviews, we return to Markusen, who accepts the judgments of Bragan and Brosnan. While rejecting the latter's racial overtones, he offers a weak-kneed defense of the pitcher on the grounds of good intentions, speculating that "Brosnan probably meant no real harm in penning such a remark," as if words like "shock" and "disgust" were not meant to wound a ballplayer perceived as overly sensitive.

Markusen's own vocabulary is damning, from "naivete on the basepaths" to "overzealous romp." Both condescending phrases paint a portrait of Clemente as a man-child. Children show "naivete," especially about the realities and nuances of the rules that govern us. Children "romp," as if unaware that their actions have consequences.

The childlike Latino is a particularly common and pernicious stereotype, ranging from the illiterate peasant with sombrero in hand to the feral predator roaming the streets in gang colors. At the dawn of the twentieth century and U.S. imperial adventures in Latin America (i.e. the Spanish-American War), political cartoons of the day typically characterized Puerto Rico and Cuba as dark-skinned, ragged orphans clinging to a bewildered Uncle Sam, juggling his colonies. Since children cannot govern themselves, others must govern them, even if this requires conquest and occupation.

While Markusen does not endorse Brosnan's stereotyping, he implicitly confirms the stereotype: Roberto Clemente made history that day because he was a man who thought as a child and had not yet put away

childish things. If he succeeded, by this logic, it was purely by virtue of his natural athletic ability. (Meanwhile, the Bobby Bragans of the world, "thinking" white players with limited physical tools, manage one team after another into a ditch by the side of the road.)

Gary Soto, in his poem "Black Hair," writes of playing baseball as a boy, saying: "I was brilliant with my body." The choice of the word "brilliant" is deliberate, given that this is a word commonly associated with extraordinary agility of the mind.

On that July day in 1956, Roberto Clemente was brilliant in body and mind. He did not simply overpower the ball, hitting it 450 feet and then loping around the bases. Nor did he simply outrun the ball, blindly pumping his arms and legs.

To accomplish his unprecedented feat, Clemente had to make a number of split-second calculations involving the dimensions of the ballpark, the path traveled by the baseball after it struck the light standard, the position of the outfielders, the accuracy of the relay throws, his own speed around the bases, and his manager's gestures to halt, which he ignored because he knew that his instantaneous calculations were correct. He did it all with the precision of a hired assassin.

Though the traditionalists in the baseball universe often grumble about "playing the game right"—which includes stopping at third base when so ordered—the old guard also demonstrates a greater appreciation for intangibles than those who would reduce every movement on the diamond to a statistical acronym.

My father and mother would speak to me of Jackie Robinson or Willie Mays, not in terms of batting average or home runs or Wins Above Replacement, but in terms of *excitement*. Robinson would stutter-step off first base and unnerve pitchers astonished by the speedy style imported from the Negro Leagues; Mays would make a basket catch and his cap would fly off. When the Mets brought National League baseball (or some facsimile) back to New York in 1962, my parents took me to the Polo Grounds, at age five, to see the Mets play the Giants, not to cheer on the Mets, but to witness the art of Willie Mays playing center field.

The most common accusation faced by baseball today is this: *It's boring.* While we may be tempted to dismiss these charges as the ravings of bloodthirsty Philistines, their attention spans stunted by football and video games, the fact remains that there are more walks and strikeouts than ever, which, in turn, has serious implications for baseball as performance. In a *Sports Illustrated* article called "Generation K," Tom Verducci writes:

> In this age of technology, as people expect entertainment everywhere and quickly, strikeouts, especially when viewed with their fraternal twins, walks, are sucking the action out of baseball games. Last season, for instance, 27.8% of plate appearances ended without the ball being put in play, an all-time high. . . . In the last two innings of a baseball game nearly one in every three batters fails to put the ball in play. "Why don't we have more fans?" asks one team executive. "Maybe because the most exciting part of the game is when balls are in play. And we don't have enough balls in play. It's ridiculous."

A walk-off, inside-the-park grand slam is the ultimate refutation of the argument that baseball is boring. The description from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* bears repeating: "the crowd of 12,431 went goofy with excitement." Baseball can use all the excitement it can get, goofy or otherwise. We underestimate excitement in baseball precisely because we cannot quantify it. There is no category called "Most Plays in a Season That Raised the Hair on the Back of Your Neck." We need Clemente's spirit today, the daring and artistry of his "overzealous romp."

Clemente, like Robinson, like Mays, understood baseball as high drama, as a form of intense improvisational theater, with bursts of furious action breaking the stillness. Thus, Clemente's legacy on the field transcends the .317 lifetime average, the 3,000 hits, the four batting titles, the twelve Gold Gloves and the induction into the Hall of Fame. I remember a leaping catch against the right-field wall to save a no-hitter for Bob Moose against the Mets in 1969. I remember his throws on the fly from right field to third base, whirling like a discus hurler at the Olympics. I remember his demolition of the Baltimore Orioles in the 1971 World Series, delivering the coup de grâce with a home run in the seventh game.

What Roberto Clemente accomplished in Pittsburgh on July 25, 1956, stupefied the tobacco-spitting baseball lifers all around him precisely because it transcended baseball, entering the realm of pure theater and then myth. Even his defiance of authority that day—running through the hapless Bobby Bragan's sign—enhances the quality of the legend.

Chris Jaffee of *The Hardball Times* calls it "the coolest homer of them all," and says:

> Added bonus: From what I know, Clemente actually blew through the third base coach's stop sign to dash to the plate. It's good to have confidence sometimes.