



Jerry W. Friedman

As a sports fan, late spring is one of my favorite times of the year. It's time for basketball and hockey playoffs, auto racing is in full swing, and baseball season, my favorite sport, has begun. Ah, life is good!

For me, this season has special significance due to the attention bestowed on my boyhood idol, Roberto Clemente. For those of you who may not know, Roberto Clemente was a Hall of Fame baseball player for the Pittsburgh Pirates, my hometown team. He was an amazing athlete who could run, hit, and throw with speed, grace, and power. Sportswriters claimed he played the game with "a touch of royalty."

But Roberto Clemente was more than just an athlete, he was a humanitarian who was known as much for his good works in life as he was for his prowess on the baseball diamond. When a terrible earthquake devastated Nicaragua 30 years ago, Roberto Clemente led the relief effort in his native Puerto Rico. Upon hearing that vital supplies were being intercepted by black marketers and were not reaching the quake victims, he decided to accompany the next shipment to personally oversee the distribution. Roberto Clemente lost his life on New Year's Eve 1972 when his overloaded supply plane crashed into the ocean. Like most sports fans, especially those from Pittsburgh, I was devastated.

On reflection, I feel so fortunate that my hero, my role model during my formative years, was Roberto Clemente, a man whose character, pride, and dignity were truly worth emulating. One of the debates raging in sports circles today is whether athletes have an obligation to carry themselves as role models. Thom Loverro, one of the nation's top sports columnists and a friend of mine, recently interviewed several youth playing basketball in a neighborhood playground

shortly after one of the National Basketball Association's top superstars was arrested on felony charges. Thom's surprising conclusion was that the youth he interviewed demonstrated no affect about the arrest and that they held no higher expectations for the athlete whose name they wore on their jerseys beyond the basketball court.

The Legacy of Roberto: A Touch of Royalty

The athlete's name and reputation simply meant no more than any other stylish logo or trademark.

As someone who, as an adult, valued my boyhood idol enough to travel hundreds of miles to two cities to capture Roberto Clemente's 3,000th career hit on a home movie camera, I was saddened by Thom's findings. Regardless of one's opinion about an athlete's obligation to serve as a role model, to do otherwise is in my opinion an opportunity lost. I know that my life was positively influenced by role models whose accomplishments, values, and behavior I could aspire to.

One of the great things about role models is that they can come in many different forms—you don't need to be a great athlete to serve as a positive influence for others. For me, in addition to Roberto Clemente, my heroes included my parents, teachers, and political and religious leaders. As a product of the 1960s, I was drawn to public service by the allure of John F. Kennedy Jr., Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and others who promoted the notion that being in service to others was a noble endeavor that should attract the "best and the brightest." I am fortunate to have grown up in an era where we rarely read the names of our role models in the crime section of the newspaper. At the risk of sounding like an "old

fogy," I can't help but think that many of today's youth are missing the same opportunity for mentorship that I had.

I also believe human service professionals have a special opportunity to carry themselves as role models for those they serve. Throughout my career, I've had the chance to meet with many former clients of the human

service system who have graduated to a better life. Almost all, at some point, referenced the positive influence of a caseworker, counselor, or mentor as a critical factor in their success. A true privilege and responsibility of being a human service professional is that a unique opportunity to make a difference presents itself every time a client walks through the door. In this context, being ever attentive to the role model potential and personal power of one's influence can be a great tool to help clients achieve positive outcomes.

Just as Roberto Clemente used athletics to achieve a higher purpose, every day thousands of human service professionals are performing beyond the basic requirements of their job and aspiring to greatness. They, too, are approaching their craft with "a touch of royalty." It is indeed a wonderful legacy—whether you're a sports fan or not.