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# 'More than a ballplayer': After MLK shooting, Roberto Clemente halted MLB Opening Day 1968



By **Kevin B. Blackistone** Columnist March 28 at 2:35 PM

In the shock wave that followed the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. being killed by an assassin's bullet, Roberto Clemente and his Pittsburgh Pirates' teammates found themselves in Houston for their role in baseball's Opening Day. They were scheduled to play the Astros on April 8, 1968, four days after King was felled and one day before he was to be buried.

A few teams across the country postponed games because their stadiums were in the midst of urban rebellions sparked by King's assassination. The Senators postponed their opener at D.C. Stadium (which became RFK Stadium) after it became unapproachable, so close to the epicenter of Washington's uprising and surrounded by troops. Baseball commissioner William Eckert told each club to do what they thought best.

As one of the first Latin major leaguers who couldn't hide his blackness, and didn't want to, Clemente decided what was proper for him.

"Roberto was more than a ballplayer," said Luis Mayoral, a longtime mentor for Latin players in the big

leagues who I've known for years, in a conversation this week. "Before becoming a pro, he seriously considered attending the University of Puerto Rico. He had intellect. The man I knew was aware of the social cancer affecting Puerto Rico . . . many of them based on race."

So while the neighborhoods around the Astrodome did not erupt, Clemente told his teammates he wouldn't play.

Clemente had become an admirer of King after meeting him following a speech he witnessed during one of King's few visits to Clemente's Puerto Rico.

"The speech . . . was on Friday, Feb. 16, 1962," Mayoral recalled, at what is now the Inter American University in San Germán. Mayoral told me [he still has copies](#) of King's address.

Afterward, King met Clemente at the ballplayer's farm, Mayoral said, ". . . in the outskirts of [Clemente's] home town, Carolina."

Mayoral didn't remember what Clemente told him he discussed with King, but one spring training years later, Mayoral said Clemente told him, "Martin Luther King is a man I admired for many years. I know what he stood for. I liked the ways he went about his business, *muy tranquilo* [very calm], and I always thought that his accomplishments would not only benefit the USA, but the world."

In "Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball's Last Hero," former Washington Post writer David Maraniss quoted Clemente's feelings about King further: "[King] put the people, the ghetto people, the people who didn't have nothing to say in those days, they started saying what they would have liked to say for many years that nobody listened to. Now with this man, these people come down to the place where they were supposed to be but people didn't want them, and sit down there as if they were white and call attention to the whole world. Now that wasn't only the black people but the minority people. The people who didn't have anything, and they had nothing to say in those days because they didn't have any power, they started saying things and they started picketing, and that's the reason I say he changed the whole world."

With the commissioner leaving teams to their own devices, some queried their few black players whether to

play as scheduled or postpone.

“When Martin Luther King died, they come and ask the Negro players if we should play,” Clemente told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. “I say, ‘If you have to ask Negro players, then we do not have a great country.’ ”

Clemente’s singular resolution was embraced by his teammates, 10 of whom were also black and made up the largest contingent of black players on one roster in the game at the time.

It was a decision reached not without potential trouble. Some owners [protested to the commissioner to penalize players](#) who refused to play in the wake of King’s assassination. After all, the Pirates’ decision to follow Clemente’s lead meant the Astros couldn’t play, either — not for one day, but two.

In “One Nation Under Baseball: How the 1960s Collided with the National Pastime,” authors John Florio and Ouisie Shapiro pointed out that Clemente and white Pirates pitcher Dave Wickersham asked general manager Joe L. Brown to postpone the game on April 9 that fell upon King’s funeral. Clemente and Wickersham then wrote a statement to the public on behalf of the club that explained, in part: “We are doing this because we white and black players respect what Dr. King has done for mankind.”

In St. Louis, Cardinals pitcher Bob Gibson felt the same about playing before King was buried. In his book, “Stranger to the Game,” Gibson wrote that he and some of his teammates gathered in the apartment of first baseman Orlando Cepeda and reached the same conclusion as the Pirates. They wouldn’t play as scheduled on Opening Day and informed Cardinals management.

But with the Astros’ home openers already shut down by Clemente, Eckert’s office announced before hearing from the Cardinals that the entire slate of Opening Day games would be moved to April 10, the day after King’s internment.

“We’ve been waiting seven weeks. A day won’t matter,” Gibson told the Associated Press.

“He never spoke to me directly as to the stoppage,” Mayoral told me. “But we in Puerto Rico knew since it happened what he had accomplished.”

Clemente died on New Year's Eve 1972 on a plane in Puerto Rico loaded with aid for victims of an earthquake in Nicaragua. The plane crashed into the sea on takeoff. Clemente's body was never found.

But his enduring spirit for social justice was nurtured in 1962 by Martin Luther King Jr., whom Clemente honored 50 years ago when he spurred a shutdown of America's pastime during its highest holy day.

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