

Remembering Big: The Juan ‘Chi Chi’ Rodriguez Story

By Ron Sirak

From when I was 5 until I was 22, Roberto Clemente was the right fielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates. He was one of my childhood heroes and still is. The largest piece of art in my home is a painting of Clemente making a running catch, his number “21” splashed across his back, a number many feel should be retired for all of Major League Baseball to honor Clemente’s pioneering role for Latin players.

Clemente came to Pittsburgh in 1955 and ruled the city until New Year’s Eve 1972 when he died at age 38 in a plane crash while taking relief aid to earthquake victims in Nicaragua. A proud black man from Puerto Rico, Clemente captured the hearts of white Eastern European, Irish and Italian immigrants in Western Pennsylvania with his talent, work ethic, passion and generous spirit. My father, a Pittsburgh-area steel mill worker who was not exactly progressive on issues of race, was one of those Clemente won over.

In 1960, Clemente led the Pirates to a World Series triumph over the heavily favored New York Yankees. It was also in 1960 when another great athlete from Puerto Rico popped on my radar screen: Juan ‘Chi Chi’ Rodriguez, a 25-year-old former sugar cane worker and caddie whose pro golf career was delayed by military service.

Like Clemente, Rodriguez came from humble roots. Like Roberto, Chi Chi had more than talent, he had flair and passion. Like his fellow Puerto Rican, Rodriguez had style that was as big as his substance. He was an artist with golf clubs. And, like Clemente, he had compassion for those in need, especially children.

Also, like Roberto, Chi Chi had to overcome prejudice to succeed. Some people thought they were too flashy, but that flair was a part of their culture, an expression of their heritage. There is an irony in the fact that two poor kids from Puerto Rico woke up their sports to social

obligations while also bringing new fans – and new talent – to their games. They were truly pioneers.

The road travelled by Rodriguez and the obstacles he had to overcome are explored in the new documentary “Remembering Big: The Juan ‘Chi Chi’ Rodriguez Story,” which premiered Sept. 21 at the Boston Film Festival. The film by Marisol Gonzalez and Alina Mogollon Volk relies heavily of interviews with Rodriguez, who died in 2024 at 88. He comes across as wise, insightful, funny, caring and somehow both humble and proud simultaneously.

While the film details how eight wins on the PGA Tour and 22 more on the PGA Tour Champions circuit for players over 50 earned Chi Chi a spot in the World Golf Hall of Fame – like Clemente, he was the first player from the Caribbean to be inducted in his sport’s Hall of Fame – it also focuses heavily on Rodriguez’s generosity and concern for children. Like Clemente, Chi Chi had first-hand knowledge of what it is like to grow up poor.

In 1979, Rodriguez visited a juvenile detention center in Florida. What resulted was the Chi Chi Rodriguez Youth Foundation which has as its goal to instill self-esteem in young people who were victims of abuse or had minor brushes with the law. In that regard, Rodriguez became one of the first professional athletes to create a charitable foundation.

The similarities between Clemente and Rodriguez are enormous. Clemente has impressive statistics (3,000 hits, 12 Gold Gloves, four batting titles) but he was way more than numbers. He was fiercely proud of his heritage and, in the early days, when writers would quote him in dialect (“I heet the bayzbul) it annoyed him greatly. That chip was always on his shoulder. Both Clemente and Rodriguez never forgot how they were slighted but managed to do so without being bitter.

Charity work was also part of the essence of Clemente. “The biggest thing I want to do is for the kids,” he said in 1967. Toward that end he created a sports center in Puerto Rico for disadvantaged youth. In 1973,

Major League Baseball created the Roberto Clemente Award for a player of outstanding skills who is personally involved in community work. Since 2002, baseball celebrates Roberto Clemente Day on September 15 each year.

When he first came onto the PGA Tour, Chi Chi, who wore colorful clothes and celebrated a made putt by taking off his wide-brim hat (the traditional baseball cap was not for him) and putting it over the hole. When some players complained that he was damaging the hole – a ridiculous accusation – Rodriguez developed his swashbuckling routine in which he would pretend his putter was a sword and he'd take it out of a pretend scabbard and do a sword fight dance.

The documentary “Remembering Big: The Juan ‘Chi Chi’ Rodriguez Story” is an artful and powerful reminder that Chi Chi was a subtle disruptor. He brought new fans to golf by shaking up the game with his colorful antics. And he brought new compassion to the game by reminding those who had made it to extend a helping hand down to those in need.

The very title of the film illustrates the spirit of Rodriguez. Asked once if he at times embellished his reputation with his stories, Chi Chi said: “I don’t exaggerate; I remember big.” And then he laughs, that every-present twinkle in his eye.

At a time in the turbulent ‘60s when America needed a wake-up call, at a time when America needed to be reminded of its founding principle – that all people are created equal and that those in need deserve help – first Clemente and then Rodriguez came along to sound a reminder that playing with passion goes hand-in-hand with a life guided by compassion.

“Remembering Big: The Juan ‘Chi Chi’ Rodriguez Story” comes at a time when a reminder is needed that empathy, compassion and concern for those in need is at the heart of being a human being. This is a movie with an important message and serves as a reminder of the crucial role

Chi Chi Rodriguez played not just in golf but in American culture as a whole.