

Frank Robinson celebrates 50 years of major league baseball

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Frank Robinson hit 586 home runs, won MVP awards in both leagues, made the Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility, became baseball's first Black manager, was chosen AL manager of the year and worked as an executive for Major League Baseball.

And after 50 years, he's not done yet. Robinson played in his first big league game on April 17, 1956, when he had two hits for the Cincinnati Reds against the St. Louis Cardinals. Now the manager of the Washington Nationals, Robinson observed the anniversary Monday during a day off — ironic for someone who has kept so busy the past half century.

He said his first game doesn't seem that long ago. "If it seemed like 50 years, I don't know if I would be here, because that is a long time for anything," he said. "Fifty years ago we were almost riding covered wagons."

Robinson, who will likely manage his 1,000th victory in the next week or so, has managed or played in more than 4,500 games, so they tend to blur together. But when it comes to his big league debut at age 20, Robinson remembers the beautiful weather, the final score and the opposing pitcher — left-hander Wilmer "Vinegar Bend" Mizell, later a U.S. congressman.

He also remembers his first at-bat.

"Second pitch, line drive off the centre-field fence, missed being a home run by a couple of feet. Double," Robinson said. "Next time

up, base hit to left field. Next time up, flied to centre. Fourth time up, intentional walk. Stan Musial hit a two-run homer in the eighth inning and beat us, 4-2."

After the game, a reporter asked the brash Reds rookie to compare pitching in the majors and the minors.

"I said, 'No difference, except these guys have more experience and a better idea of what they're doing. Other than that, no difference,'" Robinson said.

"I promptly went 0-for-23. There was a little difference."

The slump didn't last. Robinson hit .290 with 38 home runs in 1956 and was chosen NL rookie of the year. He had an MVP season in 1961, when he led the Reds to the NL pennant, and played with them for 10 years before being traded to the Baltimore Orioles.

During Robinson's final season in Cincinnati, Tony Perez was a rookie with the Reds beginning his own Hall of Fame career.

"I was trying to stay out of the way and learn," Perez said, "and the way Frank played the game was something to watch. He had a lot of talent, and he played his heart out."

Fans in Cincinnati still bemoan the 1965 trade that sent Robinson to Baltimore, with Milt Pappas, Jack Baldschun and Dick Simpson going to the Reds. For Robinson, the memory of learning about that blockbuster deal is as vivid as his major league debut.

"Dec. 9 at 5:45 p.m. - I was getting ready to go bowling and have a nice steak din-



Frank Robinson reflects on his contribution to baseball.

ner," Robinson said. "They messed it up. I had my worst bowling night."

The trade turned out to be a steal for the Orioles and good for Robinson. He won

the Triple Crown and MVP award in 1966 and led them to the World Series four times.

He describes his seasons in Baltimore as his most successful, though not necessarily his best.

"My first year, you can't top that," he said. "And '61 was a very good year. But the stretch of six years at Baltimore defined my career as a player because we had success as a team. That's what it's really about. Most people don't even realize I played 10 years for Cincinnati."

Jose Cardenal, now an ad-

viser for the Nationals, played against Robinson in the American League and remembers him as a dominating and intimidating.

"He's a legend," Cardenal said. "I was always amazed at how far he used to hit the ball... And he was a tough hombre. When he would get hit by a pitch, he would never complain, but when he got on base, look out. He would go after the second baseman and try to get even."

Robinson's combative nature sometimes rubbed the opposition the wrong way. (See Robinson, Page 19)

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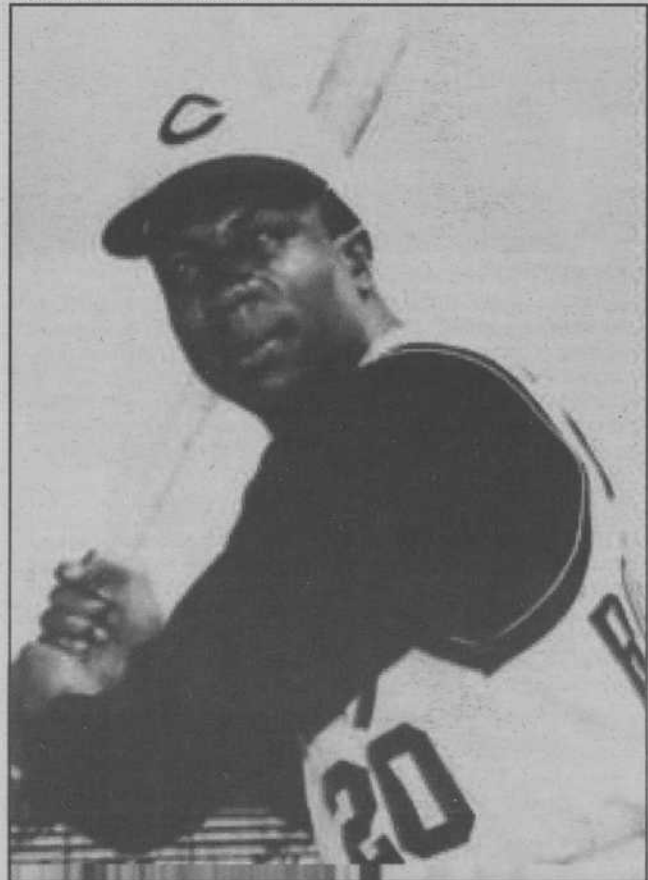
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As a Cincinnati Reds player, he won NL Rookie of the Year.