

Brooks Robinson, Oriole legend, buoyed by faith, family, friends

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When Lee May cracked a two-bouncer inside the third-base line in game one of the 1970 World Series, Brooks Robinson's response was nothing short of legendary.

Wheeling three paces to his right, Baltimore's third baseman fielded the ball in foul territory, took two more steps and threw against his momentum. The throw bounced once on its way to first baseman Boog Powell and beat May.

It was one of many in a spectacular defensive performance by Robinson that helped the Orioles defeat the Cincinnati Reds in five games, as the World Series MVP lived up to his nickname of the "Human Vacuum Cleaner."

"It's just a reflex action more than anything else," Robinson recalled, still downplaying his prowess.

Forty years after perhaps the best fielding display in baseball history, Robinson's hair is gray and he no longer sports a lanky physique.

He remains, however, the only non-pitcher to win 16 Gold Gloves, given in recognition of defensive play. No one ever spent more consecutive seasons with a big league club than the 23 he logged with the Orioles from 1955-77.

Equally enduring is the Hall of Famer's character.

One of Baltimore's favorite adopted sons, he stands out as a class act from a bygone era, one whose life seems to embody the all-American values portrayed in a Norman Rockwell painting of the third baseman signing autographs at Memorial Stadium.

"A lot of times we have a Tiger Woods who's not really who we thought he was," said

Jim Palmer, a Hall of Famer pitcher who played with Robinson. “Well, that’s not the case with Brooks.”

As Baltimore fans reminisce about 1970 and the star at the hot corner, Robinson remains humble and unassuming. The 72-year-old grandfather is committed to his family and his community, his Catholic faith sustaining him in the face of health concerns.

‘A very devout man’

Raised a Methodist in Little Rock, Ark., Robinson never figured he would become a Catholic. But, after marrying Connie, his Catholic wife of nearly 50 years, the baseball standout was drawn to the church. With three sons and a daughter, Robinson thought it important for the entire family to attend church together.

“When the kids got older, they were inquisitive and wanted to know, ‘How come dad doesn’t go to church with us?’ “ Robinson said. “It made a lot of sense to join the Catholic Church.”

He began studying the faith with Monsignor Martin A. Schwalenberg Jr., the Orioles’ chaplain and one of Robinson’s tennis partners. He was received into the Catholic faith in the late 1960s at the Church of the Nativity in Timonium.

“I couldn’t be happier being a Catholic,” he said. “It’s worked out well for me and it’s been a good impression on my kids.”

Mary Lou LaMartina, a parishioner of St. Agnes in Catonsville and an administrative assistant at The Cardinal Gibbons School in Baltimore, organized the first Brooks Robinson fan club with friends as an 8th grader at St. Agnes School. Ronald LaMartina, her brother, was Robinson’s confirmation sponsor.

“He’s a very devout man,” said LaMartina, who refers to Robinson as a “big brother.”

Prayers of others

When Robinson underwent 39 radiation treatments for prostate cancer last year, he

turned to his faith. Before abdominal surgery unrelated to the prostate cancer, Robinson made a December visit to Catonsville's Mount de Sales Academy. He was joined by his wife, LaMartina and a few others.

Dominican Sister Philip Joseph Davis, the school's director of academy advancement, prayed over Robinson with a relic of St. Padre Pio. Robinson later prayed with Father Timothy Fell, St. Agnes' administrator, who gave him a relic of St. Katharine of Siena.

Robinson credits the prayers of family and friends for getting him through his health challenges.

"I'm doing fine," Robinson said. "It's just been an outpouring of love which I've never seen before. I've compiled a lot of (religious) medals that people sent me. I really think that was a big part of it and my wife certainly thinks that too."

LaMartina enrolled Robinson in the Father Solanus Casey Guild, which honors a Capuchin Franciscan priest now under consideration for sainthood. LaMartina recalls that after Robinson's father-in-law had been diagnosed with cancer, he visited Father Solanus in Detroit. The priest prayed over him and the cancer disappeared, LaMartina said.

"So, why not go to Father Solanus for Brooks?" LaMartina said. "Between Padre Pio, Father Solanus and St. Katharine of Siena, you can't go wrong."

Good nature

Robinson's relationship with God has deepened in recent years.

"I think more about my Catholic faith now than I ever did," Robinson said. "It seems like the older you get, the more you think about Jesus Christ and how you're living."

The parishioner of the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland practices a quiet kind of faith, according to those who know him.

"It's a very private relationship and a very good one, obviously," said Rick Dempsey, former Orioles catcher. "You can just tell that his whole life revolves around his

beliefs and his religion and he's been raised the right way."

Dempsey noted that the night he came off the disabled list in 1977, Robinson retired to make room on the roster.

"Brooksie went right into the (broadcast) booth that night in Boston," Dempsey remembered with a laugh. "I struck out my first three at bats, and he said, 'They retired me for that?' "

Dempsey said Robinson supported him and remains the ultimate role model. He hopes that a Baltimore statue of Robinson, long a topic of discussion, becomes a reality.

"I can't think of any player who has had more of an impact on the community than Brooks Robinson," Dempsey said. "He's the most personable, approachable player in the history of this game. Brooksie deserves everything he gets."

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