

An unforgettable Phillie, on and off the field

By Rich Westcott
Times Guest Columnist

The recent passing of former Phillies superstar Dick Allen has created a high level of sadness among many of those who knew him or saw him play. But it has also brought back a collection of memories and stories about a person who holds a very special place in the annals of Philadelphia baseball.

Allen certainly ranks among the top players in Phillies history. We won't get into all of his statistics here except to say that they are better than many existing members of the Baseball Hall of Fame, a place where Allen surely belongs.

Sadly, that outrageous neglect hit an unforgivably low level when the election that should have placed Allen among the incoming inductees was cancelled by a deplorable decision made by Hall executives. How ironic that the meeting would've been held the same day that Dick died.

Bill White, a former star player, briefly a teammate of Allen's, and later the National League president, verified what should have been Dick's election when he recently told me: "Of all the players I ever played with or against, and that included Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, Mickey Mantle, and Ernie Banks, Dick hit the ball harder than anybody. Even his ground balls were hit hard. He was an awesome, awesome player."

That was apparent right from the start of his career. I saw that potential in the first Phillies game I ever covered while working for the Daily Times on opening day of the 1964 season. In the first game of his first full season, Allen slammed two hits, scored one run and drove in another, and the Phillies beat the New York Mets, 5-3. Dick would go on to be named the National League's Rookie of the Year.

Over the years, manager Gene Mauch and many others with the Phillies often had nasty skirmishes with the team's first Black superstar. But Mauch once said, "I never enjoyed a player more than I enjoyed Richie Allen in 1964."

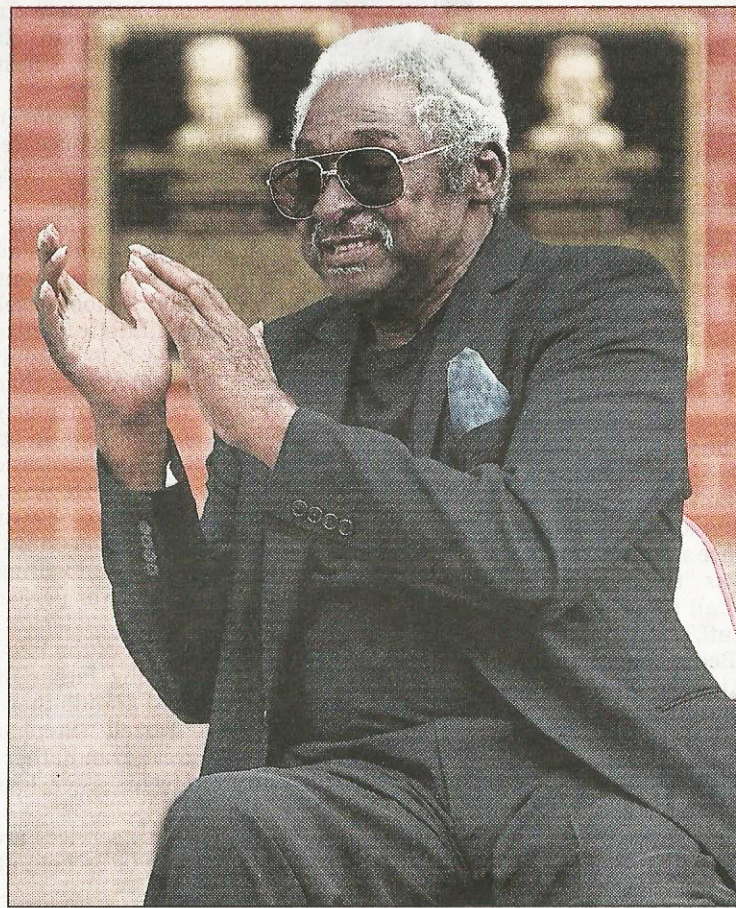
During his 15-year career, Allen, first called Richie, then Rich, and finally Dick, hit .292 with 1,119 RBI and 351 home runs, some of which were absolutely colossal blasts. Once, he slammed a ball that cleared the advertising sign atop the left field roof at Connie Mack Stadium. Phillies public relations director Larry Shenk and Evening Bulletin sports columnist Sandy Grady decided to find out how far the ball had traveled.

They walked down 21st Street, and eventually found a boy who had retrieved the ball behind the houses along Somerset Street. Told where the ball had landed, Shenk and Grady found a way to measure how far it had flown. It had traveled 529 feet in the air. To the best of all accounts, no ball had ever been hit that far at that ballpark.

That, of course, was just one of Allen's many memorable homers. "I know why they boo Richie sometimes," Pittsburgh Pirates slugger Willie Stargell once claimed. "When he hits a home run, there's no souvenir."

During his career, Allen performed many memorable feats, both on and off the field. On the down side, he made some behavioral mistakes for which he was booed, criticized and in some cases physically assaulted, and which eventually led to his departure from Philadelphia. That came in a trade that was supposed to bring Curt Flood to the Phillies, but didn't happen because Flood refused to come, instead initiating the free agent clause.

"I made some mistakes, which I now regret," Allen told me a few years ago. "I was like a Jesse



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Former Phillie Dick Allen reacts after a ceremony at the unveiling of his retired number prior to a baseball game between the Phillies and the Washington Nationals on Thursday, Sept. 3, 2020, in Philadelphia.

James without a gun. I can't do anything about it now. But I'd like to think I had a swell career both in Philadelphia and elsewhere."

It was a career that began in his native Wampum, Pa. There, Allen, whose brothers Hank and Ron also played major league baseball, led his high school team to two PIAA Class C state basketball championships.

Signed shortly afterward by the Phillies, despite numerous college basketball scholarship offers, Allen, who began his pro career as a second baseman, was at one point mindlessly assigned by the Phil-

lies to their Little Rock, Arkansas farm team. There and in other parts of the country, where racism and rioting were running uncontrollably, Allen, the only African American on the team, was often abused by the idiots in the surrounding area.

Over the years, I'd gotten to know Allen personally, and had some very pleasurable times with him. He was always a funny and friendly guy with lots of good stories and strong love for his family and acquaintances.

Once, he jokingly said to me: "You're Rich not Dick, right? Yes,

and I'm Dick not Rich. I never liked to be called Rich or Richie. That's what they called me when I was a little kid."

One of my finest Dick Allen stories came when he served as an ambassador for the Phillies. My wife, Lois, then a teacher at a special education school, was seeking a speaker for the high school students. I managed to get Allen to volunteer for the job.

Having learned of his arrival, kids from the entire school, including even ones in the lower grades, jammed into the assembly room. Dick gave a roundly applauded talk, then patiently answered all the students' questions, no matter if they were good or bad ones. "He dealt with the group in the most direct and kindest way you could imagine," Lois said. "The students were just thrilled to be with him."

Some years later, when the movement led by Allen's good friend, former Phillies groundskeeper Mark Carfagno, had begun campaigning throughout the area for Dick's induction into the Hall of Fame, I was one of the speakers at an event at Interboro High School. I can tell you that it wasn't very easy being limited to only a 10-minute talk on the outstanding career of this very special player.

But, as several billboards recently placed around the city say, "Dick Allen belongs in the Hall of Fame - now." To this I will add, not only was he a super player, and one who was great to watch and to interview, but from a personal standpoint, he was a great guy to know, and he will be sorely missed.

Rich Westcott, a longtime sports writer and editor, is the author of 27 books, including eight on the Phillies. His forthcoming book covering the top individual performances in the team's history, will be entitled "Amazing Phillies Feats."