

Brooks Robinson's moral compass was as extraordinary as his glove



Perspective by [Thomas Boswell](#)
Columnist

September 27, 2023 at 5:54 p.m. EDT



Baltimore Orioles third baseman Brooks Robinson was one of the best players, and best people, in baseball history. (Bob Daugherty/AP)



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The worst scoop I ever got, long ago, was that Brooks Robinson was in financial distress. How do you interview a boyhood hero and ask, “Are you broke? And why?”

Robinson, who died Tuesday at 86, was known for his empathy. But I was still surprised that he seemed concerned about me, a rookie in my first full year on the Orioles beat in 1976, who’d have to bear the bad tidings to all his fans. Robinson didn’t even want messengers to get killed.

So, he emphasized, his predicament was his own fault. He hadn’t been tough enough in running his sporting goods store in Baltimore. He’d kept too many nice folks — youth teams and such — on the cuff too long.

After the story, Robinson was swamped with mail — usually \$5 or \$10 in an envelope from Orioles fans. One check was for \$10,000. Brooks sent every dollar back. He probably paid the postage.

Robinson didn’t ask the Orioles for a loan. He didn’t shift blame that he’d earned less than \$1 million in salary, before taxes, in his entire 23-year career. His playing days just missed the bonanza of free agency. In his 10th season he was the American League MVP — and made \$35,000. Yet in 1977, he retired in midseason, when every dollar was dear, because the 97-win team needed a roster spot in a pennant race.

“Every player I’ve ever managed blamed me at the end, not himself,” manager Earl Weaver told me. “They all ripped me and said they weren’t washed up. All except Brooks. He never said one word, and he had more clout in Baltimore than all of them. He never did anything except with class. He made the end easier for everybody.”

Eventually, quietly, Brooks paid everybody back.

Baltimore adored Brooks Robinson for his talent and loved him for his heart

A Baltimore lawyer, Ron Shapiro, became a sports agent, one of the best, because he was so appalled that someone as beloved as Brooks could be in such a spot. Robinson was his first client.

“Brooks wanted to give my dad his 15th Gold Glove, and my dad wouldn’t take it,” Shapiro’s son Mark once said. “He rang our doorbell and ran away, and there was a Rawlings Gold Glove at our front door.”

During the nearly 50 years I knew Robinson, my experience has been the same as, apparently, every other earthling: Nobody has said a bad word about him. After Robinson died, his Hall of Fame buddy Jim Palmer, after some on-air tears, said that for decades, he’d teased Brooks that “Every ball I’m asked to sign already has your autograph on it. Please, learn to write smaller.”

Palmer added that many young players look for one veteran player as a personal and professional model of behavior. Palmer chose Brooks. Cal Ripken Jr. did the same. Now, another generation thinks it is modeling its best self on the Ripleys. They are. But there is a lot of Brooks in Cal.



Robinson reacts after throwing out the ceremonial first pitch in 2022, with support from Orioles Manager Brandon Hyde. (Gail Burton/AP)

If there is indeed an Oriole Way that stretches back to the early ‘60s and now manifests itself in a young Baltimore team with the best record in the American League, then that “Way” is an unpretentious way of acting toward others, a way of giving back to the community, as much as a way of hitting the cutoff man. It’s a way — adopted by some, but, of course, far from all — that is a path toward character.

‘We knew him, and he was the best’: Charm City remembers Brooks Robinson

Robinson, who came to the park dressed like a cabdriver, had an aura which brought out Brooks-like qualities in those who were previously believed not to

possess such virtues. Three times when I covered the O's, Weaver swore never to speak to me again. Once, he froze me out for a whole World Series. Then I wrote a piece about Robinson which moved Earl. He thanked me and, thereafter, my annoying tendency toward journalism was muted just by the Brooks glow.

"People love Brooks because he deserves to be loved," said Weaver, accidentally defining love.

Now, about that fielding thing.

Whenever I went to Senators games, starting in 1955 as a child when Robinson was a rookie, I watched everybody — all the Mantles and Sievers. But over the years, I made one change. When Baltimore came to D.C. and the Orioles were in the field, I only watched Brooks — on every pitch. Every twitch.

Nothing was going to happen that would be as unbelievable as what Robinson did on an every-other-game basis. He made "the best play you have ever seen" dozens of times a season.

Thank heavens that videotape, in color and slow motion, arrived in time for the 1970 World Series. It sure stops a lot of arguments about "he couldn't have been *that* good."



https://youtu.be/e_XHZbhR9qc

Go frame-by-frame as Robinson robbed Lee May of a double over the bag with a backhand lunge then threw him out from 10 feet in foul territory and ask, “What happens in the next frame?” My answer, as Brooks stumbles across the foul line, head at knee level, would be, “He does a somersault.” Instead, the answer is, “He regains his balance with one jab-step plant, leaps, spins in the air, cocking his arm, then just as his foot touches down, giving a bit of leverage, the ball leaves his hand for first base.”

My favorite call, after Brooks grabbed a Johnny Bench line drive two feet in foul territory — less a robbery than a hallucination — was announcer Curt Gowdy blurting, “This guy’s in another world.”

He certainly was in 1970. Now, with 10-time Golden Glover Nolan Arenado’s arrival, Robinson has a fellow alien on Planet Third Base.

Baseball-Reference.com has done what is probably nuts in a sport where playing conditions change with each era: It created a Wins Above Replacement stat for defense. But I like it, for the usual reason: I agree with it.

The site’s best defenders by position are Ozzie Smith (shortstop), Robinson, Iván Rodríguez (catcher), Andruw Jones (center field) and Bill Mazeroski (second base). The surprise is that, in a metric heavily tilted toward shortstops, Robinson has the third-highest WAR of anybody. And his margin of superiority to the man in second place at his position (Adrián Beltré) is twice the margin that anybody else has over the runner-up at his spot.

Arguing defense, where style points for beauty can cloud evaluation, has been futile for a century. Let’s leave it at this — no position player has as many Gold Gloves as Robinson, who also had 2,848 hits and 1,357 RBI.

Yet hardly anyone in baseball mentions Robinson, the first ballot Hall of Fame player, before saying, in all caps, that the game had no better person. We have too few compasses — for character — which are still set accurately. Every time we think of Brooks Robinson, remember: That’s true north.

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