

BASEBALL

Luis Olmo, a Pioneering Puerto Rican Baseball Player, Dies at 97

By RICHARD GOLDSTEIN MAY 2, 2017

Luis Olmo, who became the first Puerto Rican position player in the major leagues when he made his debut with the 1943 Brooklyn Dodgers, helping to create a path for the dozens of Puerto Rican ballplayers who have made a major impact on the game, died on Friday in Santurce, P.R. He was 97 and had been the oldest living former Dodger.

His death was confirmed by a grandson, Yuri Perez.

Olmo, who played mostly in the outfield, arrived at Ebbets Field a year after Hiram Bithorn, a right-handed pitcher, became the first Puerto Rican major leaguer when he joined the Chicago Cubs.

Cubans had appeared in the majors before Bithorn and Olmo arrived. Whatever their nationality, all of the early Latino players possessed a qualification that ownership demanded: They were white.

Latinos began making a significant impact in American baseball only after Jackie Robinson broke the modern major league color barrier with the 1947 Dodgers.

By the 1950s, black Latino players, most notably the future Hall of Famers Roberto Clemente and Orlando Cepeda, along with Vic Power and Ruben Gomez, all Puerto Rican natives, and Minnie Minoso, a Cuban, had established themselves in the majors.

Olmo, a native of Arecibo, on Puerto Rico's northern shore, made his Dodgers debut on July 23, 1943, and batted .303 as a rookie.

He was described by Tim Cohane in an October 1943 issue of *The Sporting News* as "a strongly built youngster who can run like a Western Conference halfback, throw like a DiMaggio and meet the ball solidly and with extra-base power."

Despite his promise, Olmo did not fare well in a non-negotiation over salary with the Dodgers' general manager.

"Before the end of the season, I asked Branch Rickey for a raise for the 1944 season," Olmo recalled in Lou Hernandez's oral history of 1950s Caribbean baseball, *"Memories of Winter Ball"* (2013). "Rickey called in his secretary and told her to get me an airplane ticket to go back home. I changed my mind about the raise."

Olmo, a right-handed batter, drove in 85 runs in 1944, although his average dropped to .258. He batted .313 the next season, drove in 110 runs, had a National League-leading 13 triples, hit 10 homers and stole 15 bases.

The summer of 1945 would be the high point of his major league career.

In spring 1946, Olmo was among some 20 major league players, a number of them Latinos, who signed with the newly formed Mexican League, which was offering salaries far in excess of their major league pay.

The players were barred by Major League Baseball for five years for jumping to an outlaw league, but the suspensions were rescinded after three years.

Olmo returned to the Dodgers in the middle of the 1949 season, hit .305 and homered in their World Series loss to the Yankees.

But with Duke Snider playing center field and Carl Furillo in right, he was expendable. Rickey traded Olmo on Christmas Eve to the Boston Braves. They released him during the 1951 season, and he retired with a .281 career batting average.

Luis Francisco Rodriguez Olmo was born on Aug. 11, 1919, one of the four sons of Jose Rodriguez, a carpenter, and his wife, Anna Olmo.

He played high school baseball, then joined the Caguas team of Puerto Rico in 1938. He played in the minor leagues in the United States for four seasons while being controlled by the independent Richmond Colts of the Piedmont League, then was obtained by the Dodgers' organization. He arrived in Brooklyn after a half-season with the Dodgers' Montreal Royals farm team.

Olmo, who was among the best-known players in the Latin American winter leagues, played and managed in Puerto Rico after his major league career. He also scouted for the Milwaukee Braves, the Philadelphia Phillies and the Chicago White Sox, and was a telephone company official.

He is survived by his wife, the former Emma Paradis; a daughter, Ana Lucy Rodriguez; and four grandchildren. His son, Lusito, died in 2000.

Olmo was among several Dodgers invited back to Brooklyn in May 1983 for a celebration of the Brooklyn Bridge's 100th anniversary.

"I batted .313 in 1945 and I was making \$6,000," he told The New York Times at one commemorative event. "I asked Branch Rickey for \$10,000. He offered me \$6,500. I went to Mexico for \$25,000 and expenses."

He added: "I still remember the Dodger fans, lots of Puerto Ricans even in those days. They would talk to me in Spanish. Almost always nice things, except when you struck out."

Correction: May 3, 2017

An earlier version of this obituary misstated the date of Olmo's first game with the Dodgers. It was July 23, 1943 — not July 18. (A box score for the second game of a July 18 doubleheader on the website Baseball Reference includes Olmo's name, but the game was suspended and completed on Sept. 13, when Olmo entered as a replacement in the late innings.)

Read more obituaries and follow our coverage on Twitter.

A version of this article appears in print on May 4, 2017, on Page B14 of the New York edition with the headline: Luis Olmo Is Dead at 97; Baseball Pioneer Made A Path for Puerto Ricans.

SUBSCRIBE NOW



Subscribe to debate, not division. Get 50%

SUBSCRIBE NOW

Subscriber login