

= Curt Roberts =

Curtis " Curt " Benjamin Roberts (August 16 , 1929 ? November 14 , 1969) was an American baseball second baseman who played three seasons for the Pittsburgh Pirates in Major League Baseball from 1954 to 1956 . He was signed by the Boston Braves as an amateur free agent before the 1951 season , and obtained by Pittsburgh a year later . After two seasons in the Pirates farm system , Roberts was the first black Major League player for the Pirates . After becoming the starting second baseman for the Pirates in his rookie year , Roberts ' playing time decreased and he was out of the Majors within three seasons . He played for multiple teams in the minor leagues before retiring from professional baseball in 1963 .

A native of Pineland , Texas , but raised in Oakland , California , Roberts was considered short by Major League standards , standing 5 ft 8 in (1 @. @ 73 m) . Roberts was a skilled defensive player who could not hit with enough proficiency to remain in the major leagues . Roberts died when an automobile struck him while he was changing a tire on his car . His former Pirates teammates only learned of his death 20 years later when being interviewed for a newspaper article . Although Roberts ' career was short , it paved the way for other black players to debut for the Pirates , the most notable of whom was future Baseball Hall of Famer Roberto Clemente .

= = Early professional career = =

Roberts was born in Pineland , Texas but grew up in Oakland , California . He attended McClymonds High School in West Oakland , the same high school future professional athletes Frank Robinson , Vada Pinson , Bill Russell and Curt Flood all went to within a few years of each other . Soon after finishing high school at the age of 17 , Roberts began his professional career with the Kansas City Monarchs in the Negro Leagues . He played four seasons (1947 ? 1950) with the Monarchs , where his teammates included Satchel Paige , Hilton Smith , Buck O 'Neil and Elston Howard . Roberts was signed by the Boston Braves in 1951 by the recommendation of scout Andy Cohen , who saw him play in the Mexican League during the 1950 off @-@ season . They sent Roberts to their minor leagues affiliate in the Western League , the Denver Bears where Cohen was the manager . Prior to the 1952 season , the Bears became an affiliate of the Pittsburgh Pirates , and as part of a working agreement between the Braves and the Pirates , Roberts became a member of the Pirates organization for a \$ 10 @, @ 000 sum . Originally a shortstop in the Negro Leagues , he became a second baseman during his tenure with the Bears , and started to build a reputation as an excellent fielder , leading all minor league second basemen in fielding percentage in 1953 . He stayed with the Bears for the next two seasons , playing a combined total of 280 games with 15 home runs and a .285 batting average .

= = Major League career = =

Prior to the 1954 Pittsburgh Pirates season , the local black community in Pittsburgh pressurized the team to integrate their roster , as other teams such as the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Giants had done . To speed up the integration , the black community began to protest against the Pirates and boycotted Pirate home games . The general manager of the Pirates at the time was Branch Rickey , who seven years earlier as general manager of the Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson , the first black Major League Baseball player . After playing two years in the Pirates minor league system , Roberts made his major league debut on April 13 , 1954 at Forbes Field , against the Philadelphia Phillies to become the first black player in Pirates ' history . Prior to the game Rickey gave a speech to Roberts and his wife that was similar to that he gave to Robinson before his first game in 1947 . In the speech , Rickey explained to Roberts that he needed to have a " very even temper " in order to succeed in the Major Leagues as racial abuse from the spectators was a common occurrence . Rickey later said that he selected Roberts to become the Pirates first black player owing to his skills and calm demeanor . In his first major league at bat , Roberts tripled against starting pitcher Robin Roberts . He also had a double in the game . Roberts hit his only

career home run off St. Louis Cardinals starter Joe Presko in an 8 ? 5 win on June 11 . He scored three runs , including the winning run in an August 6 game against the Cincinnati Reds . On September 8 , Roberts ' two errors against the Milwaukee Braves proved costly , as the Braves won their 10th game in a row . Roberts finished the 1954 season as the primary starter at second base , batting .232 with one home run and 36 runs batted in (RBI) in 134 games .

Roberts started the 1955 season in a slump . In his first six games , Roberts only had two hits in 18 at @-@ bats for a batting average of .118 . On April 17 , in one of the few games he started that season , Roberts ' wild throw to third base led to a Brooklyn Dodgers run , the decisive factor in a 3 ? 2 Pirates loss . It was thought that the racial pressure on Roberts was affecting his ability , so to help him , Dodgers second baseman Jackie Robinson wrote a letter to Roberts discussing how to handle his emotions and offering words of encouragement . However , Roberts was soon demoted back to the minor leagues and spent the rest of the 1955 season with the Hollywood Stars in the Pacific Coast League . While with the Stars Roberts broke the Pacific Coast League record for most consecutive games without an error at second base with 40 . He also missed playing time after suffering a concussion when he was hit by a pitch delivered by Bubba Church .

Roberts and teammate Johnny O 'Brien competed for the second base job prior to the 1956 season . Roberts played 31 games at the beginning of the year , hitting .177 with four runs batted in , mostly in a backup role , before losing his job to future Baseball Hall of Famer Bill Mazeroski . On May 1 , Roberts succeeded in getting a game @-@ winning , two @-@ RBI , ninth @-@ inning double off " Vinegar Bend " Mitzell of the St. Louis Cardinals . Two days later , Roberts made his last career RBI , a double in the fourth inning in a 5 ? 1 victory over the Cincinnati Reds .

= = Later career = =

Roberts was traded to the Kansas City Athletics with pitcher Jack McMahan for Spook Jacobs and \$ 5 @,@ 000 cash . He never played a game with the Athletics , who soon sent him to the Columbus Jets of the International League in late June 1956 . Neither Jacobs nor McMahan lasted beyond the 1956 season in the Majors . After being traded to the Athletics , Pittsburgh 's main black newspaper , the Pittsburgh Courier , protested that Roberts never had a real chance in the Majors . However , Pirates general manager Joe L. Brown replied that Roberts was a " fine young man , but a marginal Major Leaguer " . On August 28 , Roberts hit four home runs in one game against the Havana Sugar Kings , becoming only the fifth player in International League history to do so . He had struck only four home runs in 69 previous games with the Jets . Prior to the 1957 season , Roberts was traded to the New York Yankees as the player to be named later in a trade that sent former American League Most Valuable Player Bobby Shantz to the Yankees . In 1957 Roberts played with the New York Yankees minor league affiliate in Denver . At the end of the season , Roberts received several votes in the final tally for Most Valuable Player of the American Association , finishing behind Carl Willey of the Wichita Braves . Roberts never again reached the Majors , becoming a journeyman in the minor leagues and at one point played baseball in Nicaragua .

Roberts played with the Montreal Royals of the International League in 1959 , where he led the league in fielding percentage with .987 and was named the Royals Most Valuable Player . He was also selected to the International League All @-@ Star game that season . In 1960 , Roberts was acquired by the Spokane Indians , a Dodger affiliate after he was made expandable by the Royals when they acquired Chico Carrasquel . He was selected to the Pacific Coast League All @-@ Star squad in 1961 . One week later Roberts suffered a broken leg after colliding with teammate Duke Carmel on the field during a game , practically ending his career . He played two more seasons in the minors , but his playing ability was diminished by the injury and Roberts retired from baseball after the 1963 season .

= = Post @-@ baseball and death = =

Roberts was married with six children . When his baseball career ended , he worked as a security

guard for the University of California , Berkeley . He died at the age of 40 in Oakland , California when he was hit by a drunk driver while changing a flat tire on his car . A major piece written by Pittsburgh Post @-@ Gazette journalist Ed Bouchette discussed Roberts ' career and struggles , calling him a " forgotten pioneer " . Prior to the piece , most of Roberts ' old teammates were unaware that Roberts had died nearly 20 years earlier . His son Curt Roberts Jr. supposedly was working on a book about his father 's life in 1987 .

= = Playing style and statistics = =

Roberts was considered by critics to be an excellent fielder . By 1960 , Roberts was considered to be one of the best second baseman in the minor leagues , primary because he was a " slick fielder " . Former teammate Nellie King called Roberts the best handler of " chopper [s] " (a slang for a ground out) he had ever seen . According to King , the main reason why Roberts had a short career in the Majors is that the Pirates " didn 't gave him enough time " to develop his skills .

Roberts could not hit with enough proficiency to remain in the Major Leagues . He had a reputation of not " hitting the big @-@ league curve " . In his three seasons with the Pirates , Roberts had a career .223 batting average (128 @-@ for @-@ 575) with one home run , four runs batted in , 54 runs scored , and an on @-@ base percentage of .299 . In his 164 appearances at second base , he handled 856 out of 883 total chances successfully for a fielding percentage of .969 , a little lower than the league average during his era .

= = Legacy = =

Despite Roberts ' short major league career , he paved the way for other black players to debut for the Pirates , the most notable of whom was future Baseball Hall of Famer Roberto Clemente . He befriended Clemente , teaching him how to handle the racial abuse and the huge pressure that Roberts had suffered with the Pirates . That helped Clemente ease his transition from the Dodgers minor league system , in which they had a decent number of black and Hispanic players , to the main roster of the Pittsburgh Pirates , in which only he , Roberts and third baseman Gene Baker were black . Journalist Tom Singer of MLB.com mentioned that Roberts ' legacy arose mainly from his unsuccessful career with the Pirates . Singer claimed because Roberts was a " flop " , it showed that the public perception of black players having to be a " superstar " to be a member of a Major League club was incorrect , thus making the integration process more " humanized " and easier for black players . With the eight previous players who broke the color barrier for their respective teams , four were later elected to the Hall of Fame , and the other four were stars in their own right .

In 1997 , 28 years after his death , the Pittsburgh Pirates honored Roberts as part of the festivities for Jackie Robinson Day . Roberts was honored again in 2006 for the opening of the Pirates Highmark Legacy Square Negro League exhibit in PNC Park . The families of several Negro League players , including Roberts attended the ceremony . A park in his hometown of Pineland , Texas was dedicated in his honor in 2007 .