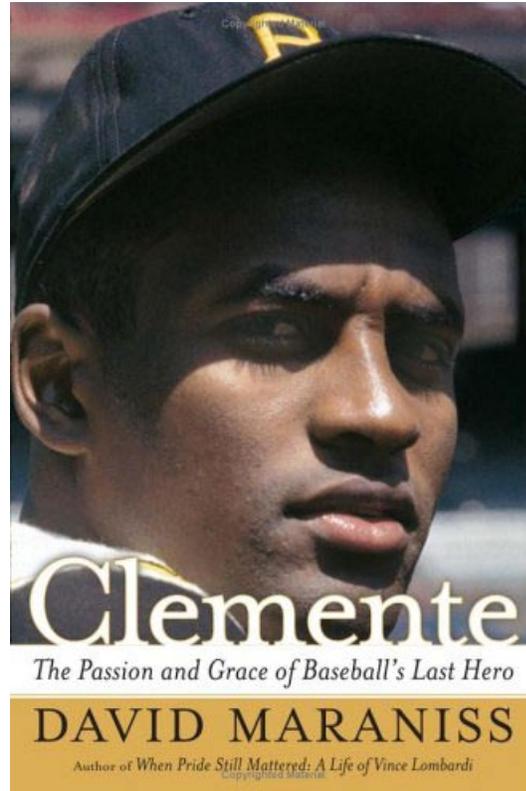


David Maraniss

In 1993, Washington Post reporter David Maraniss won a Pulitzer Prize for his “revealing articles on the life and political record of candidate Bill Clinton.” After writing “First in His Class: A Biography of Bill Clinton,” Maraniss wrote an acclaimed biography of Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi, entitled “When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi,” and then “They Marched Into Sunlight: War and Peace, Vietnam and America, October 1967.” This spring, Maraniss has returned to sports with a new biography: “Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball’s Last Hero” (Simon & Schuster), about the Pittsburgh Pirates outfielder.



Roberto Clemente, of course, was no ordinary ballplayer. Born and raised in Puerto Rico, he was among the first wave of Latin ballplayers to reach the Majors.

His four batting titles, twelve Gold Gloves, one MVP award, and two World Series rings made him a perennial National League all-star in an era that featured such outstanding outfielders as Hank Aaron, Willie Mays, Curt Flood and Lou Brock.

Clemente's life ended in heroic circumstances: flying supplies to aid victims after a horrific earthquake in Nicaragua, Clemente died when the airplane crashed just after take-off. He became the second player to be enshrined at Cooperstown without the normal five-year waiting period after retirement — Lou Gehrig was the first — and the first Latino player to earn Hall of Fame honors.

Using his expert reportorial skills, Maraniss chronicles Clemente's life and career from Puerto Rico to Pittsburgh to Nicaragua. He details the challenges that Clemente faced as a Black Latino ballplayer during the turbulent 1960s, uncovers new information about the plane crash that killed Clemente and evaluates Clemente's legacy among contemporary Latino players. The result is an absorbing biography that gives this long-misunderstood and overlooked legend his due.

Recently, Maraniss came to Southern California to make an appearance at the annual Los Angeles Times Book Festival, part of the western swing of his promotional tour. He spoke with SportsLetter at the small, comfortable lobby of the Loews Beverly Hills Hotel.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: Were there any sports-themed books that influenced you growing up?

David Maraniss: The first two books that influenced me were both Packer books: "Run to Daylight" [by Vince Lombardi and W.C. Heinz] and "Instant Replay" [by Jerry Kramer and Dick Schaap]. I loved Jim Brosnan's "The Long Season" and all of George Plimpton's and David Halberstam's books. And, I know I'm forgetting a lot.

SL: How long did the Clemente book take you to research and write?

DM: My dad died while I was doing it, and I had some other personal things to deal with, but basically three years. In 2000, I signed a two-book contract to do the book about Vietnam and the 1960s and the Clemente book. While I was doing the Vietnam book, every once in a while I'd do a

little on Clemente. But I started it fulltime in about April of 2003.

SL: The Washington Post is very patient, eh?

DM: They really give me a lot of freedom. I've worked there for almost 30 years. I could leave and just do books, but they like to have some relationship with me. I do edit some projects. When 9/11 happened I was on book leave, but I came back immediately.

SL: How did you come to write about Roberto Clemente after Vince Lombardi?

DM: Essentially, because "Lombardi" sold really well, that gave me the opportunity to do "Clemente." Lombardi might be a bigger figure in American life because of [the stature of] pro football, but Clemente is more important to me personally. This book was really closer to my sensibilities. As a progression of writing about things that I care about, Clemente was always high up there.

SL: The Lombardi book was informed by a sense of place because you grew up in Wisconsin. Was it difficult to do that for Pittsburgh and Puerto Rico?

DM: In a funny way, it was trickier to do that for Pittsburgh than Puerto Rico. Pittsburgh is a very insulated, fascinating, defined place, with its own personality unlike the rest of Pennsylvania or anyplace else. It's kind of a Brigadoon almost, out there in the western mountains. It was a whole process of trying to understand a stereotypically blue-collar, white-ethnic place that was, of course, much more complicated than that.

As for Puerto Rico, my brother's a professor of Spanish, and our whole family has a Latin sensibility. About 500 years ago, we were from Spain. So I felt a soulful connection to Clemente and Puerto Rico, and I immediately loved Puerto Rico when I went there to research the book. I had to learn a lot, but that's what I try to do in every case, whether it's writing about Green Bay or Bill Clinton. When I start a book, I try to wipe away whatever earlier impressions I have and start with as clean a slate as I can.

SL: How do you do that?

DM: You pretend you know nothing and you ask the simplest, most basic questions. You have to be stupid and forget a lot and not assume anything.

I certainly want to know what material is out there. I do as much archival research as I can, even with a baseball player. There was some Clemente literature, but not much. Bruce Markusen is a good baseball guy, and I respected what he did. But it wasn't what I was trying to do. [Editor's Note: Markusen wrote "Roberto Clemente: The Great One" (Sagamore Publishing) in 1998 and recently published "The Team that Changed Baseball: Roberto Clemente and the 1971 Pittsburgh Pirates" (Westholme Publishing).]

SL: Do you speak Spanish?

DM: I do, but I'm not fluent. In the interviews I did, I understood most of what was being talked about, but I used an interpreter because of the depth of the answers. I could read some of the Spanish-language archival material, but I wanted to get it right. I had a wonderful translator. I'd get the material, and she would come to my office and work with me.

It was also very important for me to get the exact translation from the materials from Nicaragua because the whole first chapter of the book is about Clemente coming to Nicaragua and managing there right before his death. That's never been written about because no one had ever tried to research it.

SL: How did Clemente fit into black Pittsburgh?

DM: He lived in the area and he hung out around Centre Avenue, but he really was apart. There was no Latino community in Pittsburgh. He was black, yes, but he spoke a different language. So there was an unusual double barrier that he had to deal with. One of the most fun things for me to research was the Pittsburgh Courier newspaper, because I hadn't seen anybody look into the black press and how it covered Clemente. It doesn't all get into the book, but it informs the book. The Courier's coverage was

fascinating. It helped me to understand Clemente, even though there was some tension in that relationship. For instance, I'd heard about what happened after Game 7 in the 1960 World Series, after [Bill] Mazerowski hits the famous home run to beat the Yankees, where the Pirates are celebrating in the clubhouse and Clemente sort of disappears. There are fleeting references to this in Markeson's book. But when I went back and read the Pittsburgh Courier, there it all is: [reporter] Bill Nunn, Jr. was with Clemente in the locker-room, and he writes his whole column about exactly what happened. That was something lost to history unless you went back to the black press.

SL: How difficult was it for Latinos to make it to the Majors at that time?

DM: I think it was very difficult. There were usually only one or two on a team, so there was that sense of cultural isolation. There were all of the stereotypes. None of the sportswriters knew Spanish, and they had this tendency to quote the Latin players in broken English, with phonetic spellings. Even someone I admire — [pitcher-turned-author] Jim Brosnan — talked about Clemente with his Latin American-style “showboating.” Clemente played with flair, but he wasn't a showboat.

SL: Did he have to overcome two types of racism?

DM: He had to overcome two barriers. In different ways, each created different obstacles. I think his troubles with the sportswriters were more because of his language than his race.

SL: How was baseball changing in the 1960s and how did reflect what was happening in America?

DM: Everything changed over the course of that decade. In 1960, the players had no freedom. Everything was run by the managers and the owners. This was also before television exploded. By the end of the 1960s, there was the dawn of freedom for players. It really starts in 1969, when Curt Flood decides to fight the reserve clause. Clemente represented some of that. Without overdoing it, he was an individualist. He had his own aura, which was a 1960s-type of thing. He wasn't afraid to express himself and what he believed in.

I think that he was a very modern person. He could fit into any era. He could fit in easily today, though I don't think he would necessarily like everything about today's game.

SL: What did you discover about Clemente that most surprised you?

DM: The overwhelming thing that surprised me was not about him, but about the plane crash. I'd known that the plane was probably overloaded and that that was why it crashed. But when I got all the [Federal Aviation Administration and National Transportation Safety Board] documents and saw the borderline criminality of that plane ever being allowed to take off — it was revealing and depressing that he got on that plane.

SL: How much cooperation did you receive from the Clemente family?

DM: Vera [Clemente's widow] was incredibly gracious. I spent two extended stays in Puerto Rico and interviewed her both times for hours. The middle son, Luis, was very helpful, and his older brother, Matino, was wonderful.

SL: Why were the Pirates' World Series appearances, in 1960 and 1971, so crucial to understanding Clemente's legend?

DM: They helped define him because he performed so well in the clutch, in the national spotlight. . But those two teams also show the difference between two eras. The '60 Pirates were crew-cut white guys. The '71 Pirates quietly made history by fielding the first black-Latino line-up.

SL: Clemente played a lot of winter-league ball in Puerto Rico and in the Caribbean: why was that so important to him?

DM: It was always confounding to the Pittsburgh people. They thought he got tired during the season because of it. But I think it was about his pride in place — that he really felt an obligation to Puerto Rico, and so he did it. In his later years, he managed, too. That was one of the great moments of interviewing, when I was speaking with Orlando Cepeda. He was the bat-boy for the Santurce Cangrejeros [in the winter of 1954]. Before games, he'd stand near home plate and take throws from the outfield. I asked him,

“Who was throwing?” He said: “Oh, two guys. Willie Mays and Roberto Clemente.” Playing side-by-side on the same team!

SL: How would Clemente view the present-day “Latinization” of Major League Baseball?

DM: I think he’d be very, very proud of it. Back when he played, he was constantly fighting for players like Juan Marichal to get recognition. Now, I think everybody probably agrees that Albert Pujols is the best hitter in baseball, and then there’s A-Rod, and Vladimir Guerrero, and the list goes on. I think he’d be very happy for Ozzie Guillen, managing the White Sox to the World Series. I think he is the patron saint of all that. At the same time, the number of black players has really declined. The interesting thing about that from the Clemente perspective is that baseball has also declined in Puerto Rico. In some ways, it has a closer relationship to New York City than to the Caribbean. So, basketball is bigger there now.

SL: What would Clemente have thought about the inaugural World Baseball Classic?

DM: Well, he played in a lot of those — it’s just that the U.S. wasn’t in them. Teams from Puerto Rico were constantly playing Venezuela and the Dominican and Cuba. That was a big part of what he did. The tournament he was in Nicaragua [right before his death] had teams from Japan, Denmark and Germany. The concept wouldn’t have been new to him.

SL: You write a lot about Clemente’s rage. Was that a motivating force for him?

DM: I think it was. The smartest observer of Clemente on the Pittsburgh sports scene was a writer-reporter named Roy McHugh [of the Pittsburgh Press]. I interviewed Roy when he was in his 80s. When he was working, he would stand back at the edge of the crowd and watch Clemente. He saw that Clemente’s anger was both real and that he was using it to fuel his own fire. Unlike some athletes who are constantly at odds with sportswriters — and he sort of reminded me of Bill Clinton in a way — Clemente would get really mad but then it would blow over. Or else he would realize he was wrong and say it. And that’s pretty extraordinary for

an athlete.

I don't think it was just because he died that this happened, but you can see that by the time of Clemente's final couple of years, all of the sportswriters respected him tremendously. There wasn't that attitude of, why is this guy such a jerk?

SL: How did his dramatic death affect his legacy?

DM: Oh, it defines it. His was a fascinating life, particularly his final years and what he did after the '71 World Series, when he spoke in Spanish on television. That had a huge reverberation throughout Latin America. But his mythology is totally connected to the way he died. And, not just that he died, but the way it happened and what he was doing when he died and the fact that the body was never found. It was a death of mythic proportions, so that totally affects his legacy.

There was a Puerto Rican writer who said, "On the night we lost Clemente, his immortality began." But it happened that way in Pittsburgh, too. Yesterday, at the L.A. Times Book Festival, I can't tell you how many people came up to me. And, either they were from Pittsburgh or their dad was from Pittsburgh — and they wanted to tell me that Clemente was just it for them. More than any Steeler.

SL: What about the fact that he ended his playing career with an even 3,000 hits?

DM: That only adds to the myth. He was a Hall of Famer no matter what, but it's all part of the perfection of the Clemente myth. The number he wore, "21," has a certain, similar significance: it's half of Jackie Robinson's [who wore number 42], and it adds up to three. I think it's random physics that these things happened, but sometimes poetry comes out of accidents.

SL: Was it difficult as a journalist to deal with the "Saint Roberto" image?

DM: When you go down [to Puerto Rico] and see the cenotaph with him holding a lamb, you realize what his image is. But the way I view it is this: he was a human being, and you deal with the real person. He

had as many character flaws as many human beings do. He decked a kid in Philadelphia. If that happened today, he'd be on ESPN, ESPN2, ESPN News. But myth is something entirely separate. They don't have to be one and the same — in other words, the mythological Clemente can inspire millions of people. The real guy was good enough, but the myth is something else. I tried not to mix them up.

SL: Do you think his number should be permanently retired like Robinson's?

DM: You know, I really don't care. I think he should be honored. All of the Latino ballplayers want to wear that number because of him, but that number is Clemente. It doesn't matter who wears it.

SL: Your book is coming out at the same time as a Curt Flood biography [by Alex Belth] and a book about the 1966 World Series [by Tom Adelman]. Is this a happy accident?

DM: I've heard people say something like, everyone has to write their baseball book. Honestly, I just wanted to write about Clemente. He happened to play baseball, and I love baseball, but I didn't feel that I had to write a baseball book.

SL: Your next book project revolves around the 1960 Rome Olympic Games: what's so special about those Games?

DM: When I was researching the 1960 pennant race for the Clemente book, I'd read the sports section and see mentions of Cassius Clay, Rafer Johnson, Wilma Rudolph, Abebe Bikila. It was really interesting, but I thought, I don't really want to write another sports book.

The more I started thinking about it, the more it all came together in my mind. Like with Clemente and Lombardi, I want to write about the sports and the athletes, but I also want to write about something larger. And so, in my mind, the Olympic book is about the explosion of the modern world at that moment. I can use Rome and the 17 days of the Olympics as a structure that will allow me to write about a lot of things. It's about the Cold War — the U.S. versus the U.S.S.R., with a lot of spying going on and

propaganda from both sides and efforts to get Russian athletes to defect. Then, it's about East and West Germany, right before the Berlin Wall goes up, competing as one team but hating each other. Taiwan and China — and this huge fight over what to call Taiwan right when Kennedy and Nixon are debating it. India and Pakistan competing in the field hockey finals at a crucial moment in their history. That summer of 1960 was also the emergence of black Africa — something like 16 countries got their independence — and Bikila is the first black African to win a gold medal. And, you can't beat his story, running barefoot. It's the first televised Olympics, with CBS but before satellites. There's also the first doping scandal, with a Danish cyclist dying there, and then there's Cassius Clay and Wilma Rudolph and the whole explosion of African-American athletes, with Rafer Johnson the first African-American to carry the U.S. flag. So, it seems to have everything — and, plus, I get to spend time doing research in Rome and Lausanne.