

# Villanova University Charles Widger School of Law

---

From the Selected Works of Mitchell J Nathanson

---

Spring March 4, 2016

## God Almighty Hissself: The Life and Legacy of Dick Allen

Mitchell J Nathanson



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/mitchell\\_nathanson/34/](https://works.bepress.com/mitchell_nathanson/34/)

## PROLOGUE

### Baseball's Way

“I wouldn't say that I hate Whitey, but deep down in my heart, I just can't stand Whitey's ways, man.”<sup>1</sup> Dick Allen, in repose, at last, with a reporter of all people, spoke freely and held nothing back. A confluence of factors unburdened him, for what seemed like the first time in years, maybe the first time ever, or at least since anybody outside of Wampum, Pennsylvania had become aware of the bespectacled Superman with the seemingly never-ending litany of first names (Dick? Rich? Richie? Sleepy?). He was finally rid of both Philadelphia and the Phillies after six-plus years of torment on both sides of the equation, having settled tranquilly (although not wholly without incident) in St. Louis with the Cardinals, an organization known as much for its acceptance of its black ballplayers as its on-field success. He was now just one of the guys on a team replete with future Hall-of-Famers such as Lou Brock, Bob Gibson and Steve Carlton, and no longer the athletic fulcrum of an entire city. And he was rapping with a member of the black media for a change – speaking with someone who perhaps was more likely to understand who he was and where had been -- someone who knew what it took to have to deal with those who assumed that the issue of equality had been solved years before with the abolition of “separate but equal” and the segregated lunch counters and water fountains that went with it. For a moment at least, Dick Allen was at peace.

The Ebony reporter tried to get it all down as Allen went on: “I get to reading those novels and things and get right mad.” Here now a revelation – Dick Allen, the man reviled by so many in Philadelphia, the man thought by so many in the stands as well as a share of the media to be witless and clueless, saw truth in fiction, saw himself and all that he had been subjected to, in the characters and progression of a novel. “I just got through reading – what was it – [The]

Greengage Affair, I think it was, about the life of a black cat who lived in Mississippi.” Written by Linda Du Breuil, who would later be known as the Queen of Pornography for such sex-soaked paperbacks as The Teeny-Boffer, Peter Powers, and Sex on St. James Street (written under one of her many nom de plumes, D. Barry Linder), The Greengage Affair was something else altogether – outside of a solitary (albeit simmering) sex scene, a meditation on race relations in both the Deep South as well as the supposedly more enlightened North.<sup>2</sup>

Chronicling the emergence of black consciousness in Lex Morrow, the novel’s protagonist, The Greengage Affair resonated with Dick for its asides on the ugly truth of contemporary race relations, be they in the backwater of the fictional Greengage, Mississippi, the real-world Little Rock, Arkansas where Dick endured a minor league trial-by-fire in 1963, or the large, allegedly progressive Northern cities such as Detroit or even Philadelphia. “It’s a good book,” Allen continued, sharing a thought that would no doubt get lost, get jumbled, get misconstrued by a different audience, “but, you see, all this type of stuff makes me mad. And then I’m really aware of Whitey, man, really aware of Whitey. Philly taught me that people can be the cruelest things in the world.”<sup>3</sup> Philly wasn’t Little Rock, but as Lex’s father explained in The Greengage Affair, that wasn’t saying all that much if you really thought about it: “Sure, they ain’t no signs up in the rest rooms, ain’t no WHITE LADIES tacked on the restroom door and COLORED WOMEN on the others but...they don’t *need* signs up here. We got Negro juke joints and Negro restaurants and Negro churches and Negro schools. Ain’t a bit of difference. Not when you get right down to the gritty end, they ain’t.”<sup>4</sup>

“In Philly,” Dick remarked, “white barbers won’t even let you in their shops, and [then] whites were hollering from the stands, ‘Get your hair cut!’”<sup>5</sup> Confusion, mixed messages, seemingly reigned throughout his tenure in the city but eventually Dick became resigned to it.

“Even if they gave me an opportunity to tell all of my side of the story, I wouldn’t take it because I just don’t trust the white press in general. There may be some exceptions, but I don’t trust the white press in general.”<sup>6</sup> And so he took a different path, one he saw reflected in The Greengage Affair. As Lex Morrow put it, “there’s a difference between [simply] wanting to get out of something and refusing to participate.”<sup>7</sup> A subtle, yet strongly defiant, message is sent when the former route – perhaps the easier, clearer, route – is forsaken for the latter. Something is said through the mere act of refusal that cannot be uttered otherwise; something that brings a measure of dignity to what might otherwise be a situation devoid of any. And so Dick Allen refused to participate, first in little ways and then in greater ones. And a message was delivered. And a message was, ultimately, received.

Through the course of his major league career, Dick Allen was without doubt recognized for doing a lot of things. He was the 1964 National League Rookie of the Year and the 1972 American League Most Valuable Player. His 351 home runs are more than Hall of Famer Ron Santo and trail Hall of Famer Orlando Cepeda by only 28 despite the fact that he accumulated nearly 1,400 fewer plate appearances than Cepeda. His three slugging titles dwarf the lone title claimed by the prototypical slugger of the era, Harmon Killebrew, and his lifetime .292 batting average tops Killebrew’s by 36 points. And for those who pray to the alter of sabermetrics, his “adjusted OPS+” is higher than the greatest slugger of all time, Hall of Famer Hank Aaron. Because of all that he did, the MLB Network in 2012 ranked him as a member of its “Top Ten Not in the Hall of Fame” (he placed ninth). However, despite all that he did, Dick Allen is remembered more often for the myriad ways he refused to participate: in pregame batting and fielding practice most obviously, but in other ways more subtly. He refused to pander to the media, refused to accept management’s time-honored methods for determining the value of a

ballplayer, and most explosively, refused to go along with and kowtow to the racial double-standard that had evolved within Major League Baseball in the wake of the game's integration in 1947.

Because of all that he did as well as all that he refused to do, Dick became one of the most controversial players in the history of a game replete with them. *As Sports Illustrated* summed him up in 1970, "He is known as a man who hits a baseball even harder than he hits the bottle ... Allen shakes the game's Establishment and stirs up its followers as no other player can."<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, nearly every baseball fan with an opinion had a strong one when it came to Dick Allen and today, many still do.

Throughout the arc of his productive yet strange and oftentimes maddening career, and in the decades thereafter, the debate over who was ultimately to blame for the controversy that seemingly followed him wherever he went raged on, and rages still. Was Dick the cause of his problems or merely misunderstood? Were they contrived by a media and fan base that resented what was perceived as his assertion of Black Power, or were they grounded in and simply the inevitable fallout from a player who just refused to be a team player in the most basic sense of the term? Who is responsible for the tragedy that was Dick Allen? For all of his talent, and despite how much his teammates seemed to like him wherever he went, who is to blame for the fact that no matter where his travels took him over the arc of his fifteen-year career – Philadelphia, St. Louis, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia again, and Oakland – disharmony, dissension, disagreement and disruption invariably came along for the ride? Why is it that one of the most talented players of his generation was ranked by the preeminent baseball historian Bill James as not only the second most controversial player in baseball history (behind only Rogers Hornsby, an accused wife-beater, inveterate gambler and all-around deadbeat who was

continually dragged into court for his failure to pay his taxes and other debts), but someone who “did more to *keep* his teams from winning than anybody else who ever played major league baseball”<sup>9</sup> Good questions all.

Unfortunately, much of the reason why these questions have never been satisfactorily answered is because they’re the wrong ones. Instead, the foundational question raised by Dick Allen’s mercurial career is this: why wasn’t a black superstar such as Dick, as difficult as he could be at times, accorded the same deference by the working press and fan base as were the white superstars of his era? Unquestionably, Dick both expected and demanded treatment that was not accorded to his teammates, but in so doing he was not alone; for decades, temperamental baseball superstars such as Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio and others made similar demands and, more often than not, their demands were met by a compliant media and public that were more than willing to ignore or explain away transgressions and repeated instances of bad behavior in their zeal to immortalize and purify their heroes. Despite the newly ravenous media that emerged in the 1960s, this pattern persisted, with players such as Mickey Mantle and Carl Yastrzemski likewise reaping the benefits of the game’s treatment of its luminaries irrespective of their personal foibles.

But with Dick Allen things were different. Yearning to be the beneficiary of the hallowed double-standard accorded to the game’s superstar elite, Dick found himself instead the victim of another double-standard, one which enforced a code of conduct upon the game’s black players, even black superstars, that was neither required or expected of similarly situated white ones. This he could not fathom; this he could not countenance. And so he rebelled. Not by yelling and stomping his feet but quietly, by simply refusing to go along with it all. And the game would never be the same.

For all of the ink spilled over the triumphant victory that was Jackie Robinson and the twentieth century integration of Organized Baseball, there was a wave of black players that followed the pioneering Robinson and his cohorts -- Larry Doby, Hank Aaron, Willie Mays and Ernie Banks et. al. -- a wave that began to infiltrate the game in the late '50s, just as the Negro Leagues' short tenure as a de facto minor league was coming to an end. This generation negotiated a harrowing minor league gauntlet of segregated Southern cities and towns on their path to The Show, where they would emerge not as symbols of racial progress, living monuments to the power of change, but merely as ballplayers, no different than the white ones playing alongside of them. No different but yet oftentimes, in countless subtle ways, subjected to differing treatment nonetheless.

This second generation of black players has received much less attention than Jackie Robinson's perhaps because their stories are less obviously triumphant, less clearly symbolic of *something*. This was Dick Allen's generation and their stories are, in fact, no less compelling, no less triumphant. But this generation, unlike Robinson's, did not end with an exclamation mark. Instead, it bled slowly and imperceptibly into the modern game, where the racial double standard finally disappeared, and if you don't look for it, you're likely to miss it. But it's there. And Dick Allen, at times unwittingly, at times quite cunningly, is a large part of the reason it ultimately succeeded.

In a way, Dick Allen's fight with baseball was like Robinson's -- a fight for equality. But whereas Jackie's fight was simply for the right to play on the same field as equally talented white players, Dick's was to be accorded the same respect and deference as his white peers. Thanks to Jackie Robinson and his first wave contemporaries, Dick was able to take the field under the assumption that he had just as much of a right to be there as anyone else, but he extended the

battle into its logical next phase – the fight for equal treatment among the equally talented. He would accept nothing short of this and, eventually, baseball, its fans and its attendant media would see things his way, but not without a succession of clashes that would consume virtually his entire career. For as Dick surveyed the baseball landscape, he saw not that fans and the media were unable to appreciate and applaud black superstars; many within the first wave were rightly lauded and repeatedly so. Rather, he saw that those who expected white praise were in exchange expected to sublimate their anger just as Robinson was famously instructed by Dodgers President Branch Rickey to do, or simply not talk about the death threats, the ugliness of their minor league experiences, the callowness they were subjected to both as blacks as well as ballplayers. “Richie Allen wants to be treated like Willie Mays so bad he can taste it,” asserted Gene Mauch, his inaugural manager in Philadelphia. “But so far he’s still trying to find out how to act like Willie Mays.”<sup>10</sup> Dick realized very early on, however, that he was unable to abide as his predecessors had done. And he paid the price for this.

What follows is an examination of Dick Allen’s baseball life and career with an eye toward explaining not only how one of the greatest natural talents in baseball history both fulfilled and frustrated expectations all at once, but how he compelled fans, the media, and baseball itself to confront at last the racial double-standard that became entrenched in the wake of the game’s integration a generation earlier. Herein also lies an attempt to clarify the walking dichotomy that was Dick Allen, a man who was introverted in the extreme but who spoke out frequently nonetheless, a man who routinely hid from the media but who was described by Roy Blount, Jr. in 1973 as “the first black man, and indeed the only contemporary man of any color, to assert himself in baseball with something like the unaccommodating force of Muhammad Ali in boxing, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in basketball and Jim Brown in football.”<sup>11</sup> A man who was

dismissed by even his staunchest supporters as inarticulate and confused who nevertheless sized up the inherent inequalities present in the contract negotiating process as it was then routinely conducted and became one of the first players of any color to successfully insert his agent into the deliberations: “The owner, he goes out and gets himself a qualified man to negotiate for him. He sends his man with all his experience or all his degrees to negotiate with me. Me? I’ve got 12 years of schooling. So, me, I get my lawyer. The first man, he’s the owner’s protection. The lawyer, well, he’s mine. I mean the word is *negotiate*, isn’t it? All right, so let’s do that. Let’s negotiate. But let’s try to keep the sides even.”<sup>12</sup> In so doing, this seemingly inarticulate and confused man eventually managed to make himself the game’s highest paid player of the pre-free agency era.

But he never confused being rich with being free. To Dick, being rich wasn’t the point. In fact, it was nowhere near the point. All the money in the world couldn’t buy a man his dignity, and he wouldn’t sacrifice his for anything. Although he lived within the world of Organized Baseball, he refused to bow to its traditions, bred as they were in the game’s segregated past. Two sets of rules for Dick Allen? “Yeah, but no one talked about the two sets of rules Black players faced down in segregated Clearwater, Florida. We had to stay in quarters across the tracks while the white ball players stayed in hotels. If that’s not two sets of rules, what is?”<sup>13</sup> Even after the segregated camps were dismantled and Dick was living the life of the rich ballplayer, he saw what so many others missed: “A lot of people who run baseball still don’t think of us, really, as human beings.”<sup>14</sup>

And so, like Lex Morrow of The Greengage Affair, Dick Allen refused to participate. In so many ways, he simply preferred not to do what was either asked or expected of him and in the process sent a message – one that led to chaos as the traditional order of the baseball universe

was at last upended. In this regard, his battles recall those of yet another literary figure, one removed in time by more than a century but one who illustrated all that could ensue as a result of a lone individual's decision to finally stop going along with it all. In Herman Melville's classic, Bartleby the Scrivener, the title character, a lowly mid-nineteenth century Wall Street scrivener, one day decided that he simply preferred not to adhere to the rote expectations inherent in his professional life and ignited bedlam in the process. Dick Allen similarly threatened an establishment that feared anarchy in the wake of one solitary man's decision to no longer accept the received wisdom merely because it had been received for as long as anyone could remember. In both instances, change finally came, but only at exorbitant cost. Herein, then, lays the story of baseball's Bartleby, the tale of a man who simply Preferred Not To. And who made baseball better because of it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lacy J. Banks, "I'm My Own Man," *Ebony*, July 1970, 88, 93.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Du Breuil, *The Greengage Affair* (New York: Tower Publications, Inc., 1969).

<sup>3</sup> Banks, "I'm My Own Man," 93.

<sup>4</sup> Du Breuil, *The Greengage Affair*, 28.

<sup>5</sup> Banks, "I'm My Own Man," 93.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

---

<sup>7</sup> Du Breuil, *The Greengage Affair*, 139.

<sup>8</sup> William Leggett, "A Bird in Hand and a Burning Busch," *Sports Illustrated*, March 23, 1970, <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1083441/index.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Bill James, *The Politics of Glory: How Baseball's Hall of Fame Really Works* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1994), 322-25.

<sup>10</sup> Bill Conlin, "Players, Fans Say, 'Welcome Back, Rich,'" *Philadelphia Daily News*, June 19, 1968, 55.

<sup>11</sup> Roy Blount, Jr., "Swinging In His Own Groove," *Sports Illustrated*, September 10, 1973.

<sup>12</sup> Jerry Izenberg, "Richie Allen in St. Louis: Can the Love Affair Last?," *Sport*, July, 1970, 44, 48.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald E. Kisner, "Dick Allen: Baseball's Big Drawing Card," *42 Jet 52* (August 3, 1972), 55.

<sup>14</sup> "Richie Allen Says: Managers Can Be Brutal," *Cleveland Call and Post*, July 4, 1970, 12B.