

The Shot Heard 'round the World

It is October 3rd, 1951, the last of the ninth inning beneath an overcast sky at the Polo Grounds in New York City. The Brooklyn Dodgers lead their rivals the New York Giants 4 to 2. The next day the winner will cross the Harlem River to Yankee Stadium for the World Series. With one out and Giant runners on first and third Bobby Thomson steps up to the plate to face Brooklyn reliever Ralph Branca. He swings at the second pitch and hits the ball into the left field stands and into baseball lore.

Sixty four years later it hasn't been surpassed as the most famous home run. We will be looking at the build up to and celebration of that homer and the unforeseen events that lurk whenever there is a too-good-to-be-true moment.

The New York Giants stood 13 1/2 games behind the Brooklyn Dodgers on August 11, 1951. Charlie Dressen, Brooklyn manager announced that "the Giants is dead." The New York papers debated his grammar, but did not doubt his conclusion.

Leo 'The Lip' Durocher had managed the Dodgers and in 1949 moved over to the arch rival Giants. Durocher made famous "nice guys finish last." He wanted to win at any cost and exhorted his team to beat the Dodgers.

The Giants got off to a terrible start losing 12 of their first 14 games. Incredibly, they overcame the 13 1/2 game deficit in just 53 days. The Dodgers did not entirely fold, going 26-22 to close out the season. The Giants were blistering hot with a 37-7 pace to finish the year. They had to win their last seven in a row just to tie the Dodgers - 96 wins, 58 losses.

Oren Renick, Professor at State University of Texas writes:
With their magic number at just four, the Dodgers faded the season's final week, losing three of four from the Braves. Tensions ran so high in

the final game of that series that umpire Frank Dascoli not only ejected catcher Roy Campanella over a disputed call, he ejected the entire Brooklyn bench.¹

THE BIG THREE

Baseball in New York City in the 1950s wasn't just a sport, it was a religion. New York was home to three great teams – the Yankees, Dodgers, and Giants. Yankee Stadium catered to the swizzle-stick crowd —bankers, lawyers, executives. The beer-drinking, blue collars loved their Ebbets Field, the home of the Dodgers. The Giants fans who embraced the Polo Grounds were the liberals, somewhere in the middle.²

Between 1949 and 1956 the Yankees played in seven of eight World Series winning six. During those years their opponents were the Dodgers or the Giants. New York was the only city with three teams. In 1951, all three ended the season in first place - the Yankees in the American league, the Dodgers and Giants tied in the National League.

The 1951 Dodgers and Giants symbolized baseball's, and America's, increasing racial integration. The two squads were the most integrated in all of baseball. Their fans increasingly reflected the diversity on the field.³

The emerging star of these inner-city squads was a tense, sensitive, self-absorbed but very exciting center fielder named Willie Mays. The oldest of 12 children, Mays was born in Westfield, Alabama. At the the tender age of 20, Giant's manager Leo Durocher brought him in 1951 to New York from the minor leagues. Willie's start was slow and depressing with one hit in his first 25 at-bats.

(Baseball) “breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart. The game begins in the spring, when everything else begins again, and it blossoms in the summer, filling the afternoons and evenings, and then as soon as the chill rains come, it stops and leaves you to face the fall alone. You count on it, rely on it to buffer the passage of time, to keep

the memory of sunshine and high skies alive, and then just when the days are all twilight, when you need it most, it stops. Today, October 2, a Sunday of rain and broken branches and leaf-clogged drains and slick streets, it stopped and summer was gone.”⁴

In 1951, the playoff let fans in New York and across the country put autumn on hold for a few more days. As summer progressed, the nation had begun to follow the Giants remarkable chase for the pennant.

Game One of the best of three playoffs was held in the cosy confines of Ebbets Field. The Giants prevailed 2 to 1. Game Two in the Polo Grounds, as if to drive their fans up the wall one last time, the Giants were clobbered 10 to zero. The stage was set for the deciding third game also held in the Polo Grounds. Tucked into 115 foot Coogans Bluff meant a unique downhill walk to some of the gates.

The stadium resembled a massive horseshoe. Center field was an unreachable 455 feet from home plate. However keep in mind that the ball needed to carry only 279 feet to reach the left field wall and just 257 to right.⁵

In comparison a home run at AT&T Park in San Francisco travels 421 to deepest center field, 339 to left and 309 to right. ⁶

IT COMES DOWN TO GAME THREE OF THE PLAYOFFS

Sportswriters regularly face more deadline pressure than most other reporters because sporting events tend to occur late in the day and closer to the deadlines many sports media must observe. Yet they are expected to use the same tools as news journalists, and to uphold the same professional and ethical standards. They must take care not to show bias for any team.⁷

It's no accident that the Thomson home run is so celebrated. New York then, even more than now, was the world media capital. Red Smith, Pulitzer prize winning columnist of the New York Herald Tribune,

scripted this masterpiece for the next morning's edition. Smith describes the game's thrilling conclusion as though it were a paradigm shift, as though everything was different. He was taking creative license, of course, straining for figures of speech that might capture the fantastic rush of glee and overwhelming flood of anguish he saw and heard in the Polo Grounds at 3:58 that afternoon.

"Now it is done. Now the story ends. And there is no way to tell it. Reality has strangled invention. Only the utterly impossible, the inexpressibly fantastic can ever be plausible again."

"...From center field comes burst upon burst of cheering. Pennants are waving, uplifted fists are brandished, hats are flying. Again and again, the dark clubhouse windows blaze with the light of photographers' flash bulbs.

A Timely Hit

And the story remains to be told, the story of how the Giants won the 1951 pennant in the National League....The tale of their barreling run through August and September and into October...On the final day of the season when they won the championship and started home with it from Boston, to hear on the train how the dead, defeated Dodgers had risen from the ashes in the Philadelphia twilight....Of the three-game playoff in which they won, and lost and were losing again with one out in the ninth inning yesterday when — Oh, why bother?

Maybe this is the way to tell it: Bobby Thomson, a young Scot from Staten Island, delivered a timely hit yesterday in the ninth inning of an enjoyable game of baseball before 34,320 witnesses in the Polo Grounds....Or perhaps this is better:

"Well," said Whitey Lockman, standing on second base in the second inning of yesterday's playoff game between the Giants and Dodgers.

"Ah, there," said Bobby Thomson, pulling into the same station after hitting a ball to left field. "How've you been?"

"Fancy," Lockman said, "meeting you here!"

"Ooops!" Thomson said. "Sorry."

And the Giants' first chance for a big inning against Don Newcombe disappeared as they tagged him out. Up in the press section, the voice of Willie Goodrich came over the amplifiers announcing a macabre statistic: "Thomson has now hit safely in fifteen consecutive games".

Dear Virginia: Santa's a Bum (note that Bums was how Brooklyn fans sometimes affectionately referred to their team) It wasn't funny, though, because it seemed for so long that the Giants weren't going to get another chance like the one Thomson squandered by trying to take second base with a playmate already there. They couldn't hit and the Dodgers couldn't do anything wrong. Sal Maglie's most splendid pitching would avail nothing unless New York could match the run Brooklyn had scored in the first inning.

The story was winding up, and it wasn't the happy ending which such a tale demands. Poetic justice was a phrase without meaning.

Now it was the seventh inning and Thomson was up with runners on first and third, none out. Pitching a shutout in Philadelphia last Saturday night, pitching again in Philadelphia on Sunday, holding the Giants scoreless this far, Newcombe had now gone twenty-one innings without allowing a run.

He threw four strikes to Thomson. Two were fouled off out of play. Then he threw a fifth. Thomson's fly scored Monte Irvin. The score was tied. It was a new ball game.

Wait a moment, though. Here's Pee Wee Reese hitting safely in the eighth. Here's Duke Snider singling Reese to third. Here's Maglie, wild — pitching a run home. Here's Andy Pafko slashing a hit through

Thomson for another score. Here's Billy Cox batting still another home. Where does his hit go? Where else? Through Thomson at third.

The World Series? What's That

So it was the Dodgers ball game, 4 to 1, and the Dodgers' pennant. So all right. Better get started and beat the crowd home. That stuff in the ninth inning? That didn't mean anything.

A single by Al Dark. A single by Don Mueller. Irvin's pop-up. Lockman's one-run double. Now the corniest possible sort of Hollywood schmaltz — stretcher bearers plodding away with an injured Mueller between them, symbolic of the Giants themselves.

There went Newcombe and here came Ralph Branca. Who's at bat Thomson again? He beat Branca with a home run the other day. would Manager Charlie Dressen order him walked, putting the winning run on base, to pitch to the dead-end kids at the bottom of the batting order? No, Branca's first pitch was called a strike.

The second pitch — well, when Thomson reached first base he turned and looked toward the left-field stands. Then he started jumping straight up in the air, again and again. Then he trotted around the bases, taking his time.

Ralph turned and started for the clubhouse. The number on his uniform looked huge. Thirteen.”

Roger Kahn would write, “For seconds, which seemed like minutes, the crowd sat dumb. Then came the roar. it was a roar matched all across the country, where ever people sat at radio or television sets, a roar of delight, a roar of horror, but mostly a roar of utter shock. It was a moment when all the country roared and when an office worker in a tall building on Wall Street, hearing a cry rise all about her, wondered if war had been declared.

Describing the home run is arguably the most famous call in sports. The recording has been replayed countless for over sixty years.

Russ Hodges broadcast the games on WMCA-AM radio for Giants fans. He put his stamp on history with an avalanche of verbal hysteria. His heartfelt call of the Thomson homer captured what the grainy black and white film couldn't, the emotion of one of the most dramatic baseball moments:

"Branca pitches and Bobby takes a strike called on the inside corner. Branca throws, there's a long fly. It's gonna be, I believe ... The Giants win the pennant! Bobby Thomson hits it into the lower deck of the left-field stands. The Giants win the pennant and they're going crazy! They're going crazy! Waaa-hoo".

The main reason the WMCA call was recorded and saved for posterity was that a Brooklyn-based fan asked his mother to record the end of game. An urban legend says that Lawrence Goldberg was a Dodger fan who sought to torture a friend who was a Giants fan by capturing and replaying Russ Hodges' heartbreak from a Giants' loss. In reality, Goldberg himself had been a Giant fan since childhood.⁸

Red Barber, the Dodger sports caster's call on WMGM was as you might suspect entirely different. We pick up Barber's call: "Branca pitches and Thomson takes a strike. Big Branca called on for his most important job in his baseball career. Well, everything is the most important for all of these players as we come around. Here it is. Searing hot. Branca pumps. Delivers...Swung on, belted deep out to left field. It is - a home run. And the New York Giants win the National League pennant and the Polo Grounds goes wild"

Barber was silent for 59 seconds while the crowd roared. Once the crowd noise went down he went to a commercial, After that, he put the matter into prospective mentioning that a couple hundred Americans had

been killed in Korea that week. Then he said “The Dodgers will get over this, and so will their fans .”

Barber was openly critical of Hodges' famous call, labeling it "unprofessional." On National Public Radio, Barber lambasted Hodges, calling him an "out and out rooter. He just started hollering, 'The Giants win the pennant!' I think he said it seven or eight times. I don't think that's reporting."⁹

Hodges took Giant losses hard. While the team was making its improbable run, he was a bundle of nerves and superstitions. In fact, he wore the same yellow shirt each day, washing it each night.¹⁰

Pulitzer Prize nominee Don DeLillo in “Underworld” threaded the playoff through his 833 page novel.¹¹

He created a fictionalized Russ Hodges after game’s end, after his famous home run call. He writes, “Russ thinks this is another kind of history. He thinks they will carry something out of here that joins them all in a rare way, that binds them to a memory with protective power. “People are climbing lampposts on Amsterdam Avenue, tooting car horns in Little Italy. Isn’t it possible that this midcentury moment enters the skin more lastingly than the vast shaping strategies of eminent leaders, generals steely in their sun glasses - the mapped visions that pierce our dreams? Russ wants to believe a thing like this keeps us safe in some undetermined way This is the thing that will pulse in his brain come old age and double vision and dizzy spells - the surge sensation the leap of people already standing, that bolt of noise and joy when the ball went in. This is the peoples’ history and it has flesh and breath that quicken to the force of this old, safe game of ours. And fans at the Polo Grounds today will be able to tell their grandchildren and they will be the gassy old men leaning into the next century and trying to convince anyone willing to listen, pressing in with medicine breath, that they were here when it happened.”

AFTER THE GAME

The game was headlined the next day as “The Shot Heard ‘round the Baseball World” in the Daily News. The Times called it the “Home Run Heard round the World”. The origin was of course Concord Hymn by Ralph Waldo Emerson sung at the completion of the Battle Monument, July 4, 1837.

“By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April’s breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world”.

The phrase resonates still, a snapshot of America in the middle of the 20th century.

In one very real way, "the shot heard 'round the world" was not much of an exaggeration after all. An unprecedented audience of many millions tuned in to radio and television broadcasts of the playoffs. The Giants network alone reached three to four million listeners on 38 stations. There were five radio networks. AT&T had installed coast-to-coast cable in the months before the playoffs, so the playoffs became the first time baseball was televised live nationally.¹²

Hundreds of thousands of American military personnel stationed around the world in Europe and Asia heard ‘the shot’ via Armed Forces Radio. Millions of others who who experienced as it occurred also literally heard it on radio broadcasts beamed not merely across the New York metropolitan area, but throughout the nation. Significantly still others saw rather than heard the shot in homes, in bars, or standing on the street outside store windows with television sets, many of them watching their first televised baseball game. Thus Thomson’s home run, was both the last great moment of radio sportscasting and the start of national TV coverage.¹³

Troops in Korea woke up to the sound of home - playoff baseball on the radio. They heard the loudest home run any ballplayer has ever hit.

Media coverage included press in Cuba, Japan, the Philippines. Mexico and in Thomson's honor, the Scottish Daily Record.

This phrase, which seems at first glance a simplistic hyperbole borne of a sportswriter's overactive imagination, holds far greater meaning upon reflection. In one phrase, and one moment, we find captured the spirit of the times. All at once, it echoes America's anxiety during the Cold War and the Korean War and brags about the global reach of America's national pastime.

It seemed to me as one of the last times in which people's enormous joy brought them out into the streets to run and shout and climb lampposts (but not to set fire to automobiles or ransack appliance stores).

The game, for many Dodgers fans, constituted a wound so deep that it lingered through their lifetimes. Brooklyn's collective memory still bears the image of [Ralph] Branca's pitch to Thomson. The significance of baseball, more than other sports, lies in the very nature of the game — slow and spread out and rambling. It's a game of history and memory, a kind of living archive.

The heartbreaking defeat of the Brooklyn Dodgers in the 1951 playoff is long remembered as the emotional nadir of that franchise . But in 1952 there was a reawakening, a Dodger team that has learned its lessons from the last day frustrations in 1950 against the Phillies and in 1951. Starting in 1952, the Dodgers, first in Brooklyn and then in Los Angeles, have won 13 National League pennants and six world Series championships through 1991 no National League team has done better. Only the Yankees have a better record.¹⁴

Over in Manhattan it created memories for a fan who would play a large role in the Giants' future. "It was the greatest home run in the history of baseball," according to Peter Magowan. "I remember it like it was yesterday." He was in fifth grade and living in New York at the time. He remembers his teacher interrupted class so the kids could listen to the final inning on the radio. The connection continued when the

Magowan moved to San Francisco about the same time as the Giants. In 1992, the Giants were as good as gone to Tampa Bay and Magowan bought the team in the final moments of moving day. The Giants stayed in San Francisco and built their hoped for downtown ball park.

Meanwhile, played almost as an anticlimax, the World Series started the next day at Yankee Stadium where the Giants beat the Yankees in Game 1 before losing Game 2. Those two games were the only ones in which three of the greatest center fielders of all time -- DiMaggio, Mantle and Mays -- all played. Mantle, playing right field, stepped on a drainage outlet while chasing a fly ball in Game 2, ripping up his knee, knocking him out of the series and beginning the leg problems that would last his entire career.

The Yankees wound up winning the series in six games and after Game six, DiMaggio told reporters, "I've played my last game."¹⁵

HOW MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL HAS CHANGED SINCE 1951

The public obsession with Baseball began to be challenged by professional football and a variety of sports on TV. It was baseball's last decade of the traditional two eight-team leagues with the 154-game season, perfectly balanced schedules (each team played their seven league rivals 22 games, 11 home, 11 away). Today the Dodgers and Giants play only 15 times making it harder for either team to catch up with its rival. Also double headers (back to back games played on the same day) are no longer scheduled. In 1951, the Giants played 15 double headers. On August 26 and 27 they played four games against the Cubs winning all four and gaining two games on the Dodgers who could only manage a split with the Braves, cutting their lead to five games. Inter-league play only occurred in the World Series. It was the last decade without playoffs required to get to the Fall Classic.

Two years later teams started moving. The Boston Braves jumped to Milwaukee and then to Atlanta. The Major Leagues were about to expand from 16 teams in two leagues located in the Midwest and East

finally to 30 teams in six divisions across the country and into Canada. Today the 162 game schedule pushes the World Series into November. Back then it was over by the 10th of October. Leaves were still on the trees. Storm windows still stored in the garage.

In seven years both the Giants and the Dodgers would abandon New York for California. Stadiums built for both baseball and football in the sixties and seventies followed the middle class out of cities to the suburbs away from public transit with cheap land for mega stadiums and massive parking lots.

Ebbets Field, once the heart of the Borough, succumbed to the wreckers ball on February 25, 1960. The Polo Grounds hosted the start up Mets for two years, surviving until April 10, 1964. Today Polo Grounds refers to a housing project of four towers each with 30 stories of public housing.

In a September 15, 1997, profile of Don DeLillo in *The New Yorker*, David Remnick suggests the "unrepeatable, communal joy" of Thomson's homer was "married" to front-page news announcing the Soviets had set off a second atomic bomb that same day. The Soviet test signaled the end of American nuclear dominance, and the phrase captured both the carefree abandon inspired by Thomson's gallop around the bases and the collective fear inspired by an escalating atomic race.

Baseball-like the nation as a whole-seemed unusually focused on world affairs. The entire season had been played out against the backdrop of Cold War and Korean War tensions. The season opened on April 18 as General Douglas MacArthur, recently relieved of his command, arrived in San Francisco to begin his farewell tour. In the White House President Truman's approval ratings plummeted.

Oren Renick writes: "In relation to all the events of 1951 - Korean War, sentencing of the Rosenbergs, The McCarthy hearings on internal subversion, a US hydrogen bomb blast, publication of J.D. Salinger's

“Catcher in the Rye” first reference to Rock and Roll - Thomson’s home run was not very significant.”

Yet if we pause in its exact historical context, it was and it remains a event to be celebrated. Time has not dimmed the home run; time has dimmed its historical context. Seen in that perspective, one can argue that we have underplayed rather than overplayed Thomson’s homer.

Approximately six years after the end of World War II, we were again in a shooting war. It was at the center of what we were coming to understand as our Cold War with Communism. It was a time of national anxiety and emerging self-doubt.¹⁶

In the midst of our troubles we were emotionally rescued by a team known as the New York Giants. Their symbolic charge to our rescue in the summer of 1951 still evokes what was perhaps baseball’s greatest pennant race. In microcosm we saw in them our potential as a nation if we could be unified and meld as a team. If we could only get it together and hold it together, our potential was unlimited. After all these years the glue that holds together the metaphor of that pennant race and our potential as a nation is Bobby Thomson and his home run that became known as the “shot heard round the world”.

On the 50th anniversary the U.S. Postal Service honored the Thomson home run with a commemorative stamp. The Sporting News christened it the greatest moment in baseball history. Sports Illustrated ranked it the second-greatest sports moment of the 20th Century (after the U.S. hockey team's victory over the Soviet Union in the 1980 Olympics). But in all the encomiums and analyses of that singular moment, one crucial element has been missing — unknown that afternoon even to the nine Dodgers on the field, the 34,320 paid spectators at the Polo Grounds, and the millions who followed the flight of the ball on radio and television. The Giants were stealing the Dodgers' signs, the finger signals transmitted from catcher to pitcher that determine the pitch to be thrown.

Nearly 60 years after Thomson's home run an article by Joshua Prager appeared in The Wall Street Journal followed by his book "The Echoing Green" claiming that the Giant batters had been tipped off and knew what pitch to expect.

Prager details what had long been suspected: that on July 20, 1951, Herman Franks, a Giants coach, using a Wollensak telescope mounted on a tripod in Manager Leo Durocher's office in the Giants' clubhouse beyond center field started stealing catcher's signs. He relayed his findings, via buzzer to the Giants' bullpen. Another coach or teammate would then signal the hitter.

This is the way the catcher tells the pitcher what to throw. He squats behind the batter and with the right hand closed in a fist between the legs opens one or more fingers, pointing them down from the fist, to signal the pitch to be thrown. One finger exposed might mean fastball, two fingers a curve, and so forth. In the simplest sign stealing schemes, coaches at third and first base attempt to intercept the sign from a careless catcher. Runners on base, especially second base where the base runner has almost as good a view of the sign as the pitcher, have also been known to steal signs. To counter this, the defensive team uses more complex sign systems. In a simple example, the catcher might give four signs with the fourth one being the one that counts. The sign stealers must know the scheme as well as be able to see the sign.

The question is not whether the Giants stole signs, but what effect the sign-stealing had on the Giants' remarkable comeback and the Thompson home run. Dave Smith of Retrosheet researched the Giants scoresheets for the entire season and found something very interesting. While New York went 51-18 after July 20 (including 24-6 at the Polo Grounds), the Giants actually hit worse at home after that point than before.

That doesn't mean the Giants didn't benefit because they might have hit even worse had they not stolen signs. But it does call into question just

how much they might have really benefited from stealing signs and how much from a staff that pitched significantly better in the second half than the first.

Thomson has said that he occasionally took advantage of the stolen signs but definitely not on the final pitch of the season. Branca calls the sign-stealing "despicable" and "immoral" but trusts Thomson and doesn't criticize him.

Dodger pitcher Don Newcombe says he believes Thomson and also downplays the importance of the stolen signs. "The Giants also stole signs in 1952 and 1953," Newcombe says. "And we won those years so it didn't help them then."¹⁷

If you ask the players, managers and coaches of today's game for their thoughts on the subject, most seem to agree on one thing: sign-stealing is not necessarily cheating, but you better be aware of it and you better know when it's happening. It wasn't until 1961 that Major League Baseball passed a rule banning sign stealing by way of a "mechanical device".

Roger Kahn, baseball historian, writes that they didn't only win at home with the signs. They also won on the road. The first game of the play-off the Giants won in Brooklyn and Bobby Thomson hit a home run in Ebbets Field that day...off of who else but Ralph Branca.

The primary playoff protagonists weren't New York Giants from Tennessee or The Brooklyn Dodgers from Ohio. Thomson was born in Scotland, but raised on Staten Island. Ralph Branca was from Mt. Vernon, 20 minutes from the Polo Grounds. Of all the players in the game at the time, they were the only two home-grown New Yorkers.¹⁸

There was Branca, the goat, who felt it never was his place to profane a miracle and Thomson, the hero who hit it and carried the guilt. One moment, the two of them, joined forever until Thomson finally died August 16, 2010, in Savannah, Georgia at the age of 86.

The two of them had made it through all the anniversaries of the three-run shot that Thomson hit that afternoon, all the rumors of stealing pitch signs, all of the photos preserved in black and white for history, everything preserved except the ball, the one truly great missing piece of baseball memorabilia. Somehow that made the moment even better, somehow made it more epic, as if the ball went over the wall and disappeared into memory and imagination and lore forever.

- ¹ 1951 was a season for the ages, Jim Caple ESPN
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- ¹⁶ Thomson, Ralph "Branca and the Shot Heard Round the World", NY Vintage Books, 2008
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- ¹⁸ THE SHOT HEARD 'ROUND THE WORLD New York Post NOVEMBER 17, 1999