

Bats

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Passing Down a Love for Snider

By HOWARD MEGDAL

Howard Megdal, 31, is the author of "Taking the Field: A Fan's Quest to Run the Team He Loves," which will be published by Bloomsbury in May. Readers can share their memories of Snider in the comment section below.

Duke Snider went out in style at my house on Sunday, homering in a tilt between the 1955 Brooklyn Dodgers and the Milwaukee Braves as I introduced my father to Strat-o-Matic baseball. A half-hour later, I learned that Snider, the Dodger great, had died.

To me, Duke Snider was the most important of the three great center fielders who patrolled New York in the 1950s. Sure, Mickey Mantle was Billy Crystal's favorite player. And Willie Mays was everybody's favorite player. But Duke Snider was my father's favorite player, and at the center of the myths I grew up hearing.



Associated Press Duke Snider with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1954.

There was something so close, yet so remote about the Brooklyn Dodgers. They had played in New York just like the Yankees, battled them so famously, but sons of Yankees fans got the chance to be Yankees fans. I grew up with the Mets, an evolution or devolution, depending on the year, but indisputably different.

Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier; Gil Hodges inspired cheers even when he went 0-for-the-World-Series; but they had both accomplished their greatest feats, and died, before I was born. Duke Snider was proof in the flesh that great teams had once played in Brooklyn.

My father decided in 1988 that it would be important for me to meet Willie, Mickey and The Duke. Mantle came first, in a friendly-enough encounter in Atlantic City. He was courteous, professional and perfunctory — the Yankee way. We tracked down Mays and Snider at a baseball card show in Philadelphia.

Mays didn't look up as he signed an autograph in a copy of his autobiography. My father asked if he'd sign it "To Howard," but his handler assured us that he would not. The experience with Snider, by contrast, could scarcely have been more meaningful. It felt like it would for children who suffered through Greek mythology to meet Zeus, or for those weaned on Goldilocks to finally taste that third bowl of porridge. Snider graciously talked to us for what felt like 15 minutes. He remembered, or at least pretended to remember, my father's first game, at Roosevelt Stadium in Jersey City.

In short, he played the hero well. He towered over me, that great silvery hair giving him the proper bearing of a god. Only later would I learn about the self-doubt that plagued him throughout his playing career — and that didn't matter. Snider was forever the player my father saw, and the man I met that day. The three autobiographies sat atop a bookshelf in an honored place with Snider's hardcover "The Duke of Flatbush" looming over the paperback copies of "The Mick" and "Say Hey."

In the years that followed, my father and I looked for ways to indulge the fiction that a baseball team made up of mortals can live forever, as long as those who first loved them still cared. A computer game, Micro League Baseball, extended Snider's playing career, as did carefully poring over reprinted card sets of 1952 and 1953 Topps. Even an eBay-fueled project to collect every Brooklyn Dodger in the 1955 Bowman set served as a means of celebrating the team my father could only pass down to me through memory and tale, blurred video of Jackie Robinson stealing home and Sandy Amoros sticking his right-gloved hand out in the left-field corner.

It no more occurred to me that Duke Snider could be mortal than the possibility that Vin Scully would ever retire. At the appointed time, my father and I would simply seek Duke Snider out again, this time with my daughter, and history's thread would continue.

Somehow, my father and I had gone more than 31 years without playing Strat-o-Matic. He had been 15 when the game premiered in 1961. After playing a sample version of the game late last year, I went all in. I bought the latest edition. I bought the 1990 player cards, so that I'd soon get the chance to introduce my daughter to the stars I'd worshiped: Darryl Strawberry, Dwight Gooden and even Dave Magadan. And I purchased 1955, knowing that there would soon come a time when my father and I would get together and relive that powerhouse team of his childhood.

That day came Sunday. Naturally, he loved the game. Snider homered, while Carl Erskine kept the Braves off-balance all afternoon. The Dodgers held a 6-1 lead in the sixth inning when we had to suspend the game for the variety of reasons adults can't play Strat-O-Matic as much as we'd like.

My mother and father drove away, and shortly thereafter, I read the news: The Los Angeles Dodgers announced that Duke Snider had died. But the Duke of Flatbush will live forever; I'll pass him to my daughter, and she to her children.

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