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Brooklyn Dodgers fans were both blessed and cursed. Life never was the same after the move to Los Angeles.

Life After the Brooklyn Dodgers?

by Jay Feldman

Although it's been nearly three decades since the Brooklyn Dodgers moved to Los Angeles, there are still countless numbers of ex-Brooklynites who haven't gotten over the shock of the displacement, and to this day we continue to mourn the loss. Indeed, there are those of us who still don't believe it actually happened.

In our age of mobility, Brooklyn natives can now be found living all over the United States, but the one thing that unites us forever is the memory of our "Bums." Whenever two or more former Brooklynites meet, it's a good bet that the conversation will turn sooner or later to Pee Wee and Jackie, Campy and "Oisk," "Newk" and the Duke, for the Brooklyn Dodgers were more than just a baseball team—the Brooklyn Dodgers were a way of life.

Now, in the last few years,

The author at age seven in his Dodgers uniform.



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everybody and his brother is suddenly interested in the Brooklyn Dodgers. Every time I turn around, there's another piece about the team in one of the national sports magazines. On August 2, 1982, the United States Post Office issued the Jackie Robinson commemorative stamp. We've had David Ritz's romantic novel, *The Man Who Brought the Dodgers Back to Brooklyn*; a television movie based on Roger Kahn's classic, *The Boys of Summer*; and Peter Golenbock's *BUMS: An Oral History of the Brooklyn Dodgers*. I've even heard that the Borough President of Brooklyn has been making noises

about importing another ballclub.

Let me tell you what it was like for me growing up rooting for the Brooks, and the scars it left on my young psyche.

First, my credentials: born and raised in Brooklyn, I was a Dodger fan from birth. On my fourth birthday (April 10, 1947), the Dodgers purchased Jackie Robinson's contract from their Montreal farm club, and Jackie came to Brooklyn—a more magnificent birthday present no boy ever received. My identification with the Dodgers ran deep; ever so passionately, I lived and died with the ups and downs of the team.

Second, my theory: in the decade from 1947 to 1956, the Dodgers were more than just a great baseball team. As a result of the Jackie Robinson-Branch Rickey connection and the consequent breaking of baseball's color line, the Dodgers were an agency of social change, an embodiment of the proposition that all men are created equal. It's almost impossible now, in the '80s, to recall the full intensity of the struggle, the bitterness and violence that accompanied Robinson's arrival in the National League. The Jackie Robinson Dodgers simply changed forever the complexion of professional sports and, with it, the social fabric of American life. The ballplayers who couldn't tolerate Robinson's presence were traded, and by 1954 the Dodgers could field a starting lineup in which, with Don Newcombe on the

This article is adapted from Jay's presentation to the 1985 SABR convention.



mound, black ballplayers outnumbered white. More than any other single factor, perhaps, Jackie Robinson's coming to the Brooklyn Dodgers spelled the beginning of the end of racial segregation in the U.S.

Now, my contention is that because of their pioneer status in integrating major league baseball, the Dodgers were endowed with a spiritual quality that gave the team a particular power and intensity, and thereby elevated it to a level beyond mere excellence. Some would call this quality "charisma"; I prefer the term *baraka*. *Baraka* is an Arabic word that translates roughly as "the impalpable essence of God's blessing." (In Hebrew, the word is *baruch*, the first word of all prayers.)

Simply put, the Dodgers were a team blessed. And, by no particular deserving virtue of our own (except the fortunate accident of being the Dodgers' home town), the entire Borough of Brooklyn—and most especially the team's fans—was also sprinkled by the shower of *baraka* that rained down on the ballclub. As comedian Phil Foster, in his classic routine, "A Brooklyn Baseball Fan," so aptly put it: "And don't laugh at us people fum Brooklyn, 'cause we know what we're doin'—da rest o' da world's mixed up!" In those days, Brooklyn was a very special place, and the closeness in sound of the words *Brooklyn* and *baraka* should not be lightly dismissed—on this point, more later.

But, as the rules of life tell us, you don't get something for nothing, and so the Brooklyn Dodgers,

in a bittersweet exchange for the blessing of being baseball's first integrated team, paid a price, suffering the painful ignominy of an unequaled string of second-place finishes and World Series losses. And we, their fans, suffered with them. Being a Brooklyn Dodger fan was a postgraduate course in "How to Be a Gracious Loser." (Woody Allen, remember, was a Brooklyn boy.) Our guiding principle was the now famous, "Wait till next year!"

If the Dodgers had not been so great a team, their defeats would not have been so poignant. As Roger Kahn wrote in *The Boys of Summer*, "The team was awesomely good and yet defeated. Their skills lifted everyman's spirit and their defeat joined them with everyman's existence . . . irresistible and unable to beat the Yankees." Consider the record:

1947: The Dodgers win the National League pennant and lose the World Series to the Yankees in seven games.

1948: Third place.

1949: Another pennant, another Series loss (five games) to the Yankees.

1950: Brooklyn loses the pennant to the Philadelphia Phillies on the last day of the season on Dick Sisler's 10th inning home run.

1951: The Dodgers blow a 13½-game lead in August to finish the regular season tied for first place with the NY Giants. In the ninth inning of the third game of the playoff series, Bobby Thomson of the Giants hits the home run heard 'round the world, and for the second straight year, Brooklyn loses

a pennant in the final inning of the season.

1952 and 1953: Two pennants and two Series losses to the Yanks (seven games and six games).

1954: Second place behind the Giants.

1955: Pennant winners, and winners, in seven games over the Yankees, of Brooklyn's first and only World Championship.

1956: Reverting to form, the Dodgers win the pennant and lose the Series in seven games to (who else?) the Yankees. Adding insult to injury, in Game Five, Don Larsen pitches a perfect game, the only no-hitter in World Series history.

These were my formative years, and the effect on my tender, developing psyche was devastating. From being a Brooklyn Dodger fan, I learned to be perpetually prepared for disappointment. The Dodgers were a team for masochists, idealists, and quixotic diehards. On and off the field the ballclub conspired (or so it seemed to me) to find the most diabolical ways to break my heart.

How about the time Roy Campanella, my favorite player, was scheduled to come to my school and speak at a PTA meeting? Putting on my uniform with Campy's number 39 on the back, I went off starry-eyed with my dad to the meeting. I waited through an endless series of boring, grown-up-type speeches and PTA business, pen and paper in hand, ready for my hero's autograph. Do I really need to tell you that Campanella never showed up?

Or how about the time I was looking through my dad's collec-

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tion of 78-rpm phonograph records and came upon a side entitled "The Dodger Song," by the Almanac Singers (Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, etc.)? Excitedly, breathlessly, I put the record on the turntable. Stupid song had nothing to do with baseball.

But the unkindest cut of all, of course, was owner Walter O'Malley's decision to move the team out of Brooklyn. At 14 years old, I found out once and for all how the real world operated: for money, they moved the Brooklyn Dodgers, *my* Brooklyn Dodgers, to the other end of the world. (Years later, during the Vietnam era, I had a dream in which the players, led by Robinson and Pee Wee Reese, stood on the field in uniform, looking up at O'Malley's box with defiantly raised clenched fists, and chanted, "HELL, NO, WE WON'T GO!")

My Uncle Max never forgave O'Malley. "I just wanna live long enough," he'd say, his eyes narrowing to slits, "to dance on dat *momser's* grave." Once, he confided to me that he had enough money set aside for a one-way ticket to Los Angeles. "Ya know why a one-way ticket?" he asked with mischievous delight. "'Cause when I get ovah dere an' start dancin', I'm gonna drop dead from joy, and dey'll hafta bury me on da spot! I should only live so long."

Uncle Max had no patience with the long-suffering laments of Chicago Cubs fans who bemoaned their team's lack of success. "Suffering?" he'd exclaim, his voice rising. "Whatta dey know from suffering, dese ingrates? At least dey still got a team! Our team was

robbed off of us!! How could ya even compare it?!"

Indeed, not only were the Dodgers "robbed off of us," but they were taken at the height of their prowess. The other franchises that were uprooted in the mid-'50s were all losing ballclubs with poor attendance. The Washington Senators, the Philadelphia Athletics, the St. Louis Browns, and the Boston Braves were chronic second-division teams whose fans had all but deserted them. (The only other respectable franchise that moved was the Giants, and that club was simply following the Dodgers—you could look it up.)

The Brooklyn Dodgers, on the other hand, had won six pennants and a World Series in 10 years, and are generally acknowledged as one of the great dynasties in baseball history. Four of our boys—Robinson, Reese, Campanella, and Duke Snider—are in the Hall of Fame, and a fifth—Gil Hodges—belongs there. And the last year the Dodgers were in Brooklyn, they drew over a million fans in Ebbets Field, a park that seated only about 32,000.

But perhaps I've created the impression that being a Brooklyn Dodger fan was unfortunate. On the contrary, I feel lucky to have had the chance, as a boy, to fall in love with baseball by following one of the most exciting and talented teams ever to play the game. I feel most particularly blessed to have shared in the *baraka* that surrounded the team. And sometimes they actually came through for me. I did see Jackie steal home at Ebbets Field against Jim Hearn of the Giants. I was there on the last day

of the '54 season when rookie Karl Spooner set a two-game record for strikeouts (27) for a National League pitcher. Gil Hodges *did* show up to speak to my Babe Ruth League. And above all, there was the incomparable joy of that '55 World Series victory over the Yankees.

But the moment I remember most clearly, the one that characterizes the frustration of being a Brooklyn Dodger fan, is Bobby Thomson's home run. How I wept at the outcome! I didn't know it then, but that heartbreaking '51 pennant loss was part of the price we paid for the *baraka* we received in Brooklyn for breaking the color line in big league baseball. Now I know it was worth it. Still, though, the sound of that madly cheering Polo Grounds crowd remains forever embedded in my mind's ear as a reminder of the bittersweetness of life.

And speaking of sound, recall, if you will, my earlier point about the close similarity of *baraka* and Brooklyn. Now, remember the man chosen by destiny to throw the pitch that Thomson hit out? The man on whose shoulders came to rest the unenviable burden of being forever counted among the great goats in sports history? The man who, more than any other Dodger up to that point, paid the collective price for Brooklyn's *baraka*? That's right—number 13, Ralph Branca.

END

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