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The Echoes of a Home Run

'The Shot Heard Round the World' Stirred the Nation, The Secret Behind It Preyed on Two Men

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On October 3, 1951, a home run by Bobby Thomson of the New York Giants off Ralph Branca of the Brooklyn Dodgers captured the nation's attention like few moments in sports before or since. It gave the Giants the National League pennant, capping a dizzying comeback over their crosstown rival. It was the first home run ever to end a playoff or World Series, and it was the first ever nationally televised sporting event. In an instant, the home run became a shared national experience and a question was born: "Where were you when Thomson hit the home run?"



Adapted from 'The Echoing Green: The Untold Story of Bobby Thomson, Ralph Branca and the Shot Heard Round the World' by Joshua Prager. Copyright 2006 by Joshua Prager. Published by Pantheon Books, a division of Random House Inc.

Behind the historic moment was a secret, rumored

about, but confirmed only 50 years later, when [Joshua Prager reported](#)¹ in *The Wall Street Journal* that the Giants had concealed an electric buzzer and a telescope to steal the signals of opposing catchers. In his new book, "The Echoing Green," Mr. Prager details how that shot reverberated through American society, and how the secret preyed on two men.


The immediate effect of the home run was physical. At 21-06 Cornaga Avenue in Queens, Dodger fan Philip Arbiter heard Thomson's blast and flumped to the floor of Far Rockaway Laundermat, dead at 55 of a coronary occlusion.

Those folks left standing were jolted just the same. Fred Fields, a boy of 12 in Chatham, N.J., saw the ball leave Branca's hand, then the peanut-buttered slice of bread in his do the same, heading for his 12-inch RCA television screen. It stuck. Fedoras and straw hats flew too, thrown in glee and disgust in Grand Central Station. And on West 121st Street in Manhattan, George Carlin sat beside his Crosley radio, a boy of 14 squeezing his black kitten Ezzard. The

moment Thomson's home run landed Ezzard took off, thrown unwittingly by the future comedian toward an open window. The kitten clawed a curtain, clung on even as he swung out three stories above a concrete courtyard and lived.

Everywhere, the dip of a ball behind a wall triggered shock. In the press box at the Polo Grounds, John Drebingler lost track of limb, the deaf New York Times reporter pounding the hat of a scribe before him down to his ears. The future historian Doris Kearns, eight, could not record in the red scorebook on her lap the home run she saw on a 10-inch table console in Rockville Centre, N.Y. And behind a meat counter at Cookie's deli on 65th Street in Bensonhurst, future Mets owner Fred Wilpon, a Dodger fan bled by the blast, sliced along with a ham his left pinkie.

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On this afternoon at 3:58 p.m. future billionaire Warren Buffett found himself sitting in a waiting room outside Phil Gilmore's office in Omaha. Set to recommend Government Employees Insurance stock, Buffett, 21, readied his pitch when he heard Branca's swatted to left. Branca threw down his rosin bag and at 247 Park Avenue, future Federal Reserve chief Alan Greenspan, a Dodger fan and junior employee at the National Industrial Conference Board tuning in to the game at work, ached for the pitcher exactly two months older than he. Inside a pool hall in Mobile, Ala., Hank Aaron, 17 and playing hooky, ran for home as did Thomson, the future home-run king imagining all the way that he was the hero to be carried off the field.



Thomson and Branca at the site on March 23, 2006.

Most of all, Thomson's home run set off screams. At 6 West 57th Street, the shouts of stunned New Yorkers rose five stories where the writers of the NBC television program "Your Show of Shows" -- Carl Reiner, Mel Brooks, Neil Simon, Joe Stein and others -- rushed to their windows to listen. In the nation's capital, the roar of a pride of truant senators forced Harry Cain, the Washington Republican on the Senate floor, to pause a full three minutes from talk of the Korean War.

Arthur Miller, 12 days shy of 36, had long since stopped reading box scores. But as he stepped out of the elevator of a building at Broadway and 46th Street, saw his producer bellowing and learned of Thomson's heroics, the playwright was struck. "I was not any longer a baseball fan," wrote Miller, "but when I heard what had happened I felt the axis of the world had shifted slightly and we must all be happy for at least five minutes."

The ballgame swayed Jack Kerouac too. The beat poet loved baseball and later wrote: "When Bobby Thompson hit that home run in 1951, I trembled with joy and couldn't get over it for days and wrote poems about how it is possible for the human spirit to win after all!"

Brooklyn was broken. The most populous of boroughs needed a drink. Taverns jammed, eyes to redden until last call at 4 a.m. One fan forlorn over a beer at the end of a bar on Flatbush Avenue hit bottom. "I don't think I've ever felt more depressed in my life," wrote Willie Sutton two years later. Sutton, 50, was on the lam, having escaped in February of 1947 Philadelphia County Prison. It had been his third prison break and the FBI had put Sutton, a bank robber with a pencil moustache and an appetite for fine dress, on its list of Ten Most Wanted Fugitives. Sutton knew well that Brooklyn police headquarters was just a block away on Bergen Street and Sixth Avenue, and after Branca's doomed pitch, freedom was hollow. "I felt like going into headquarters," wrote Sutton, "and giving myself up."



Donald Bowers

The 35-millimeter Wollensak telescope used by the Giants in their centerfield clubhouse. From a distance of 500 feet, it could distinguish a catcher's fingers spread at least 2/10ths of an inch apart.

In an eight by 12 by nine foot cell in Ossining, N.Y., Julius Rosenberg also mourned. Rosenberg, 33, had in March been convicted of passing on to the U.S.S.R. information about U.S. atomic weapons. A federal court had sentenced the father of two to death. Prospects were slim that nine Supreme Court justices would spare Rosenberg the 2,000-volt electric chair just down his concrete hall.

But as Sing-Sing inmate 110-649 sat now behind 12 steel bars to write wife Ethel a letter, she too on death row, he made no mention of courtroom. "Gloom of glooms," wrote Rosenberg in a neat script. "The dear Dodgers lost the penant."

This same day, the White House announced that the Russians had, for the second time, conducted a nuclear test. Nearly all the nation's newspapers trumpeted news of the home run with at least as much oomph. "Any repercussions of the atomic disclosure," wrote the New York Post, "were firmly overshadowed by a thunderous noise that ... was registered at 3:58 pm."

* * *

Three springs after the three-second flight of a home run, it could be stated indubitably that Branca had gotten on with his life. The pitcher had married, fathered kids, found a second profession, a second ball club, picked up by Detroit in 1953. And though famous as a loser, he had come to coexist both with Thomson and his lot. "I'll always be one of the all-time goats of baseball," Branca remarked the summer previous. "It's rough. But gee, I guess that's baseball."

The pitcher began 1954 in the bullpen. That a career was winding down was by June obvious. Branca was 28 years old.

Tiger teammate Ted Gray, 29, was also on the way out, had one more year in him. And it was now in a hotel room on the road that southpaw remembered a secret told him by former Giant Earl Rapp. Perhaps, he wagered, talk of a telescope might soothe his roommate, a vaccine against future pain. "I thought it was something he should know," says Gray. "He was downhearted." Gray turned to Branca.

"We got to bed," remembers Branca. "He just came out, 'I'm not supposed to tell you this but --'"

Branca lay quiet as Gray spoke of signs, buzzer wire, a spyglass and bullpen, struck dumb as Gray recounted what Rapp had avowed: on October 3, 1951, the Giants stole the finger signals to both Branca fastballs. "It was a shock," says Branca. "I had to just ponder it." Remembers Gray: "I think he just kind of shook his head in sorrow."

Branca had long viewed his lot as more unfair than unfortunate. Lying now in a hotel bedroom, two thoughts seized the pitcher: the miracle Giants had done something despicable and an unendurable Dodger loss was in no way his fault. "I made a decision not to speak about it," says Branca. "I didn't want to be a crybaby. Anything I would say about that situation they would label me a sore loser."

But discretion had its price. Leashed, a secret raced round and round in Branca, overtook the baby steps turned strides that had in three years brought peace. "It changed my personality," observes Branca. "I was quick to criticize. I was always looking for reasons to be skeptical. I think I became an angry man after that."

And he grew tired of being introduced as the guy who threw the home run pitch. "It's just like an alcoholic," he told reporter Malcolm Moran. "'You're to be an alcoholic until the day they put you in the ground.'" Another analogy came to mind. "A guy commits murder and he gets pardoned after 20 years," said Branca. "I didn't get pardoned."

If pitcher now perseverated about signs, batter all but let them slip from memory. "I put it out of my mind because it wasn't a plus," says Thomson. "I've thought about this later and I feel bad about it. I guess it didn't sound good. Why would I want to be connected to that?" So as not to be, never would Thomson tell wife Winkie or brother Jim of a spyglass. And what he would tell himself of a stolen sign, Thomson had not yet made clear.

* * *

It was in winter of 1983 that a Baptist reverend named Ronald Durham changed forever the relationship

of hero and goat. Durham owned a New Jersey sports promotion firm. And when it now occurred to him that they who together had ruined his 1951 could pack a room, he asked each if he might for three hours sit beside the other and sign memorabilia.

On December 27, 1983, Branca and Thomson signed on for a thousand dollars each. Eighty-eight days later atop a table in the ballroom of a New Jersey Sheraton, they signed and signed more, an endless queue of aging men tugged to Hasbrouck Heights by nostalgia and worship and Schadenfreude and investment. "Guys had suitcases," says Branca. "Thirty-three items."

The twin signatures were clear, Thomson at 60 still "Bobby," Branca setting apart the capital R of a first name as had done his aunt Rose. And signing together a first time, the men found a rhythm, alternating as they would forevermore who signed on top and who on bottom. Partners but not quite friends, Thomson and Branca spoke little. "They didn't have a meaningful conversation," says Durham, the reverend seated this spring Saturday between them. "It was very polite."

More shows followed, the most famous winner-loser tandem in American sport for rent. And the regular reliving of a loss was for Branca double-edged. "He was always sensitive," says Thomson. "Someone would say something and Ralph would holler at him. I felt uncomfortable being around him." Says Branca, "I got tired of man's inhumanity to man. ... You don't bring up something a man doesn't want to be remembered for." Observed reporter Mike Lupica this same year: "Branca looks at you and what he really says is, 'Listen to me, I was more than one lousy fastball.'"

Hero and goat were headlining by 1986 some five shows a year. Hours side by side, the men found common ground -- from their dogs Licorice and Grumpy to their daughters in dental hygiene to their staunch support of both the integration of baseball and the Vietnam War. The fan found in them common ground too, hard to tell who had won and who had lost, a pair together treating (as Rudyard Kipling had implored), those two imposters Triumph and Disaster just the same.

And so it was as two signatures overlapped time and again that the relationship of a hero and goat steadily warmed -- and a secret grew ever harder to broach.

* * *

"The word stealing isn't a very nice word," Thomson told me over the phone when I explained that I knew the 1951 Giants had stolen signals, that I had spoken to each of his surviving teammates. "Obviously it's something I've never been proud of. Let me say this. I've got nothing to hide." We arranged to meet that Sunday at his hometown church.

On November 19, 2000, Thomson and I exchanged hellos in the lobby of Wilson Memorial Union Church, then walked to a pew in the rear. Almost immediately Thomson made it known that he had given our lone conversation thought, and that the stealing of signs had never sat well with him. "I guess we were brought up to know the difference between right and wrong," he said of himself and his five siblings. "And I'm far from perfect. Put that down."

December arrived and I phoned Branca. He did not speak to me long, intent only on pointing out both a back injury in 1952 and that when talk of a Giant spy came and went years later, he had pledged to keep mum. "I didn't want to look like I was crying over spilled milk," he explained. There was more. Pitcher had grown accustomed to a grievance, had come in 50 years to lean on an alibi best left undisturbed. Added Branca, "Bobby and I are really, really good friends."

But in truth, neither man savored his time with the other. "I didn't enjoy being in his company," Thomson told me flatly of his five decades beside Branca, "because people would bring up the subject. I've been a

burden to Ralph."

Ralph in turn was a burden to Bobby. Even as Thomson had for decades co-signed the sweet spots of baseball after baseball, not once had he offered up to Branca a confession. "I guess I've been a jerk in a way," he said. "That I don't want to face the music. ... Maybe I've felt too sensitive, embarrassed maybe."

* * *

On Jan. 31, 2001, Branca sat in his rocking chair and read Page One of The Wall Street Journal. Here was hero grappling a first time with a question he had always before derided, with the memory of a pitch flown 18,018 days past. And just as important, here was goat all but absent, no tattletale he. Rumor at last real, Branca lifted his phone. Said Branca the next day, "I just called him to see how he was feeling." Thomson picked up and Branca asked if he had seen the article. He had.

The ease with which the men now spoke of a secret begged why they had not done so sooner. "I guess you feel exonerated," said Thomson. "No," said Branca. "But my tongue is loosened."

Thomson too was freed. "It's been brought up before and I've always been glad where it quieted down," he told WFAN radio host Christopher Russo the next day. "But you know, that's foolish. ... Getting it all out is the best thing. I feel almost like I just got out of prison."

Public deliberation ensued. Most praised Branca -- the heroic goat who had kept quiet a buzzer lest he demean a home run. Most defended Thomson -- the humble hero who still had to hit a pitch and whose alleged offense was not illegal. And while Branca condemned a team but not Thomson, Thomson condemned a home-field advantage but not a home run.

Three days later at an annual banquet of New Jersey writers, Branca approached Thomson in a busy ballroom. "Hiya Hoot!" The men shook hands, Thomson suggesting they slip from the horde come on this fourth of February to toast a golden home run. This they did, two men in an empty corner of the Edison Pines Manor undivided by a secret a first time in 50 years. They spoke alone then turned to a reporter. "It's been a cleansing for both of us," said Branca to Ben Walker of the AP. "He knew that I knew. It's better this way." Added Thomson: "Ralph has been vindicated and I feel the same way about myself. My conscience is clear."

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