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Was the '51 Giants Comeback a Miracle, Or Did They Simply Steal the Pennant?

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Bobby Thomson, the New York Giants' third baseman, stands poised in the batter's box. In the bottom of the ninth inning in the final game of a playoff, his team trails the Brooklyn Dodgers 4-2, with two men on base. Dodgers pitcher Ralph Branca's fastball hurtles toward him. Mr. Thomson swings, he connects, and the ball sails over the left-field wall and into history.

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¹ How a Home Run Hit in 1951 Engaged Albert Engelken's Life (Oct. 27, 1989)

That home run capped an unprecedented comeback by the Giants, propelled the team to the 1951 World Series, and secured Robert Brown Thomson's name in American lore.

Months shy of its 50th anniversary, Mr. Thomson's "Shot Heard Round the World" echoes ever louder. In recent years, the U.S. Postal Service honored it with a stamp. Author Don DeLillo threaded it through his 827-page novel, "Underworld." 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). And this year, among the many celebrations planned to mark the jubilee anniversary of the home run, there will be a reunion of the surviving Giants and Dodgers who met Oct. 3, 1951, at the Polo Grounds on Coogan's Bluff in Harlem.

But in all the encomiums and analyses of that singular moment through half a century, 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.

"Stealing signs is nothing to be proud of," says Mr. Thomson, now 77 years old. "Of course, the question is, did I take the signs that day?"

Sixteen players and coaches who appeared on the 1951 Giants are dead. In interviews with all 21 surviving players and the one living coach, many are at last willing to confirm that they executed an elaborate scheme relying on an electrician and a spyglass. And, they say, they stole signs not only during their encounter with the Dodgers, but during home games all through the last 10 weeks of the 1951 season, a period when the Giants appeared to summon mysterious resources of will and talent.

"Every hitter knew what was coming," says 83-year-old Al Gettel, a pitcher on the 1951 Giants roster into August. "Made a big difference."

The Giants husbanded their secret well. Still, Mr. Thomson says, "it's reared its ugly head every once in a while." Indeed, a few times over 50 years, rumors that the 1951 Giants stole signs circulated in the press and sports literature. But they came to nothing. In the 1992 book "The Great Chase: The Dodgers-Giants Pennant Race of 1951," author Harvey Rosenfeld devotes two pages to talk of sign stealing. He concludes the passage with a Dodgers official who said he "believes all this sign-stealing business is total fiction."

The secret was safe.

In 1958, the Giants left Harlem for San Francisco. The Polo Grounds later gave way to a housing complex. And as the remembered history of the 5-4 "Miracle at Coogan's Bluff" evolved into baseball legend, the keepers of the secret bore an ever heavier burden. "It was hard for any of us," says Al Corwin, 74, a rookie pitcher on the 1951 Giants. "It's put a question mark as to what happened when and where."

The answer begins with a small leather case on a boy's desk in Westford, Mass. Robert Henry Ehasz, 16, pops open a shiny steel snap engraved with the maker's name, Wollensak, and lifts out a telescope. "Papa used it to spy on the Germans," he says. "No, not the Germans," corrects his mother, Susan. "An opposing baseball team."

"Papa," Robert Henry's grandfather, was Henry Leonard Schenz, a box of a man with a 48-inch chest and 68-inch frame. Mr. Schenz was a utility infielder who played six middling seasons in the Major Leagues. In the middle of his last -- on June 30, 1951 -- the Pittsburgh Pirates put him on waivers, and the Giants snapped him up.

As a Giant, Mr. Schenz had no at-bats and no stolen bases and scored a lone run. Most of the time, the 32-year-old ballplayer razzed opponents from the dugout.

He had other skills. Before his stint with the Pirates, Mr. Schenz spent four years with the Chicago Cubs and occasionally spied signals for his Cub teammates with a telescope. "This whole thing began when he was with Chicago," says his son Jerald Schenz, 53. "They had a spot in the scoreboard at Wrigley. He was out there at times."

In the 20 or so seconds between every pitch of every baseball game, players and coaches communicate strategy in silence, tugging their ear lobes, for example, swiping their caps, or adjusting their pant legs. Likewise, scouts, coaches and players keep close eyes on their opponents in hopes of glimpsing a pitcher's grip on the ball or deciphering a coach's body language. Runners on second base peer at the catcher's fingers as he signs to the pitcher whether to throw a fastball, curveball or another type of pitch.

A Wire in the Dirt

These tactics are accepted practice. More elaborate efforts are frowned on. In 1898, Cincinnati Red Tommy Corcoran got his spikes stuck in the dirt around the coaching box at third base in Philadelphia. When he tugged at what he thought was a root, he unearthed a telegraph wire that ran to the Phillies clubhouse (where a backup catcher sat with binoculars spying signals and communicating them to the third-base coach, presumably via vibrations from the wire). In the early 1960s, at Milwaukee's County Stadium, star pitcher Bob Buhl sat in street clothes among the fans in center field and peered through binoculars to spy and relay signs. In the 1980s, at Chicago's old Comiskey Park, White Sox batters looked to a flickering 25-watt refrigerator bulb in the scoreboard for pitch tips.

Baseball has always been an ambiguous game. It has no clock. The strike zone is constantly reinterpreted. Official scorers can be notoriously loyal to the home team. Pitchers continued to rely on spitballs long after the pitch was banned in 1920, and groundskeepers still moisten base paths to slow

fleet opponents. It wasn't until 1961 that Major League Baseball passed a rule banning sign stealing by way of a "mechanical device."

In theory, knowing the incoming pitch gives the batter an edge. But sign stealing, legitimate or otherwise, doesn't always help. Many batters don't even want to know what's coming. "Suppose he calls a curveball and throws a fastball," says Wes Westrum, the starting catcher on the 1951 Giants. "You could get ripped in two." And even with advance notice, a batter must still hit the pitch.

Mr. Schenz had been with the Giants 18 days when, on July 18, 1951, the team lost for the sixth time in nine games, falling eight games behind the Dodgers. The team was in third place in the National League and heading south.

The next day, Leo Ernest Durocher, then the Giants' manager, called a team meeting. "He said, 'Goddam it!' " recalls Mr. Corwin, the rookie pitcher who joined the Giants that very day. " 'We can't get first, but we got to get second!' "

Mr. Durocher, 46, and his new player Mr. Schenz were of like dispositions. Mr. Durocher is credited with coining the phrase "Nice guys finish last." Mr. Schenz, teammates recall, enjoyed sharpening his cleats in view of his opponents. No one recalls Mr. Schenz talking to Mr. Durocher about his telescope, but at that July 19 team meeting, players say, Mr. Durocher brought up sign stealing for the first time that year.

"He asked each person if he wanted the sign," says Monte Irvin, the Giants' star left fielder, now 81. "I told him no. He said, 'You mean to tell me, if a fat fastball is coming, you don't want to know?' "

According to other surviving players, enough of the team did want to know. "I'd probably say 50-50," Mr. Corwin says.

On July 19, the day of the Giants' meeting, rain washed out all Major League games east of Cleveland, including a double-header scheduled at the Polo Grounds. Mr. Durocher told the press that the rainouts were a blessing -- a chance to rest and align his tired pitching staff. And based on what the players say took place the following night, the rain gave Mr. Durocher time to put his plan to work.

The Giants' clubhouse looked out on the diamond from high above the center-field wall -- 483 feet away from home plate in 1951, an absurdly long distance by Major League standards. Mr. Durocher, who died in 1991, told his players that their clubhouse, directly aligned with home plate, was the perfect crow's nest for stealing signs.

The matter remained of somehow relaying the signs to the batter from behind a wire-mesh screen in the clubhouse. There were no lights in the scoreboard, so flashing a bulb was out of the question. However, the bullpens, where pitchers warmed up, were in fair territory along the outfield walls. When a batter stepped to the plate, he could look just to the right of the pitcher and see his teammates much farther beyond, on a bench in right-center field. Though they sat between 440 and 449 feet away, they could motion their signals unimpeded.

It fell to Abraham Chadwick to get the signals from clubhouse to bullpen.

The only thing Mr. Chadwick loved more than being an electrician was baseball. And when it came to baseball, he loved only the Brooklyn Dodgers. "His whole life was the Dodgers," says daughter Harriet Mesulam, 66. "He would fight with anyone if they said anything about the Dodgers."

In May 1947, Mr. Chadwick's brother Nat, an official at Local 3 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers in lower Manhattan, got a part-time job for Abe operating the lights at a ballpark. But

it wasn't at Brooklyn's Ebbets Field. It was at the Polo Grounds.

Still, the 49-year-old Mr. Chadwick was proud of his new gig. "He said, 'Without me, no game,' " Ms. Mesulam says.

Mr. Chadwick, since deceased, had only to turn the park's lights on before games and off afterward. The work lasted five minutes. The rest of the time, Mr. Chadwick sat in the stands in his fedora, smoking cigars and watching baseball. The Giants were no threat to his Dodgers. By July 1951, Brooklyn was comfortably ahead of New York for the seventh consecutive season.

According to electricians who knew him, Mr. Chadwick installed a bell-and-buzzer system in the clubhouse and connected it to the phones in the bullpen and the dugout. With the press of a button in the clubhouse -- once for a fastball, twice for an off-speed pitch -- the phones would buzz the sign.

Mr. Chadwick's nifty work was a hit at the Local 3. "The electricians were proud of him," says Walter Carberry, 86, an electrician who knew Mr. Chadwick from union meetings. "They never let it get around."

The following day, July 20, the Giants hosted the Cincinnati Reds for the start of a four-game series. It was a night game, and, as always, Mr. Chadwick walked to the roof and flipped the park's circuit breakers. Players won't say whether they saw Mr. Schenz in the clubhouse spying, but they recall him talking about the duty. "The funny thing he said," recalls Davey Williams, a backup infielder on the 1951 Giants, "was that he couldn't hold [the telescope close] to his eye because it was so strong that it blurred everything."

Focused on an object 500 feet away, a 35-millimeter lens like the one in Mr. Schenz's telescope provides a resolution of about 0.2 inch. And so, peering through the spyglass from a perch in Mr. Durocher's locked office in the clubhouse, Mr. Schenz could have distinguished the tips of catchers' fingers spread at least 0.2 inch apart.

"The first time the buzzer went off, we fell off the bench," says Mr. Corwin, who was sitting in the bullpen. "We thought the whole ballpark could hear." But the crowd, which included Gen. Douglas MacArthur, seemed oblivious.

The Giants beat the Reds, 11-5.

Mr. Chadwick fine-tuned his handiwork. "Whoever this guy was," Mr. Corwin says, "when we got out the next day, [the buzz] was softer."

The Giants took three of four games from the Reds and on July 23 left for Pittsburgh. Three days later, deep below the streets of New York on the Pelham Bay local, Mr. Chadwick grew faint. "He felt this weakness coming over him in the subway," recalls Helen Smith, 74, Mr. Chadwick's daughter.

The news was bad. Mr. Chadwick had stomach cancer. After surgery, he returned home to the Bronx. In lieu of food, he drank vanilla malteds. He lay on a living-room couch in his pajamas and watched the Dodgers games on a television set his brother bought for him. Brooklyn closed out July with 10 consecutive wins, and an electrician named Seymour Schmelzer replaced Mr. Chadwick at the Polo Grounds.

The Giants, meantime, were on their longest road trip of the season, a 17-game swing through Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Chicago, St. Louis and Brooklyn. They won nine of their first 14 games. But heading into Brooklyn on Aug. 8, they still trailed their rivals by 9 1/2 games. The Dodgers beat the Giants three straight. The gap between the teams ballooned to 12 1/2 games. Proclaimed Dodgers Manager Charlie

Dressen: "The Giants is dead."

Home at last on Aug. 11, the Giants hit rock bottom. They lost to Philadelphia 4-0, and Brooklyn beat Boston 8-1, pushing the Dodgers' lead to 13 1/2 games.

But then, everything changed.

The Dodgers' lead started to shrink a few hours later. Boston beat Brooklyn 8-4 in the second game of a double-header.

After losing the series opener, the Giants beat Philadelphia three straight. They beat the Dodgers three straight. They again swept three games from the Phillies. They took a pair from Cincinnati and a single game against St. Louis. They beat Chicago four straight.

When evening settled on Aug. 27, the Giants had reeled off 16 wins in a row, baseball's longest streak in 16 years. Thirteen of their victories had come at home. They trailed the Dodgers by just five games.

Code Words and Crossed Legs

By this time, relaying signs from the dugout, where chosen players could shout code words to batters, was deemed too conspicuous. The Giants were mainly relaying signals from the bullpen. The player relaying would sit closest to center field. After hearing the buzzer buzz, he might cross his legs to denote a fastball. He might toss a ball in the air. He might sit still. The method was based, Mr. Corwin says, on "what was easiest to see, what was the quickest."

Another change: Mr. Schenz was no longer the spy in the clubhouse. He had struggled to decode the opposing catcher's signs.

Herman Louis Franks, the Giants third-base coach in 1951, had been a catcher. Like all catchers, he knew signs and how to mask them when runners led off second base. Mr. Franks, now 87, drops his fingers between his thighs and shoots numbers: two, one, two. "I varied them so much you could never tell what the hell they were," he says.

And so Mr. Franks took Mr. Schenz's spot in the clubhouse (and Mr. Durocher replaced Mr. Franks at third base). "I haven't talked about it in 49 years," Mr. Franks says. His voice rises. "If I'm ever asked about it, I'm denying everything."

Other players are more forthcoming. "Herman would sit in the clubhouse," says Mr. Irvin. "He's sitting there with a telescope, and he'd relay it to the bullpen."

Adds Salvadore Yvars, a backup catcher on the 1951 Giants, now 76: "He knew how to get the signs. Catchers know what the hell they're doing."

Over the first two days of September, the Giants trounced the Dodgers by the combined score of 19 to 3. Mr. Dressen, the Dodgers' skipper, became suspicious.

"We took binoculars out on the bench to observe center field," Dodgers coach Cookie Lavagetto told Mr. Rosenfeld in "The Great Chase." Mr. Lavagetto, who died in 1990, continued: "The umpire spotted us. He ran over and grabbed those binoculars away from us. There was nothing we could do. We told the ump that we were just trying to observe center field. Whatever Durocher had out there, he had a good system."

The Dodgers investigated no further. And the Giants continued to win.

Winning streaks self-perpetuate. By the time the Giants hit the road in early September, Giants batters had patient, level swings. Giants pitchers had rested arms. The team won 14 of its final 18 road games, including the last four games of the season. Incredibly, the Giants had overcome a 13 1/2 -game deficit in just 53 days and finished the season tied with the Dodgers: 96 up, 58 down.

The Yankees claimed the American League pennant, and for the first and last time, all three of New York's teams finished the season in first place. New York braced itself for a best-of-three playoff between the Dodgers and the Giants to determine which team would face the Yankees in the subway series.

The Giants won the first game, the Dodgers the second. And on the overcast afternoon of Oct. 3, the Dodgers and Giants met for their deciding game at Coogan's Bluff.

"Twenty years from now, the fans will be talking about this afternoon's hero as yet unknown," intoned radio announcer Gordon McClendon of the Texas-based Liberty Broadcasting System. "And if there's a goat, his name will echo down the corridor of time."

Ralph Theodore Joseph Branca started warming up in the bottom of the ninth inning, with the Dodgers leading 4-1. Starting pitcher Don Newcombe gave up singles to Alvin Dark and Don Mueller and a one-out double to Whitey Lockman. The score was 4-2, with men on second and third.

Just 25, Mr. Branca was a star. He already boasted 76 career wins. He was a veteran of three All-Star teams. Mr. Dressen pulled Mr. Newcombe and called on Mr. Branca to face the next batter, Mr. Thomson.

Mr. Dressen feared walking the potential winning run and instructed Mr. Branca to pitch to Mr. Thomson, even though Mr. Thomson had hit home runs off Mr. Branca in two of their previous three meetings. Mr. Thomson was hitting everyone well. Since July 20, he had hit .353, with 15 home runs, 13 of them away from the Polo Grounds. (Before July 20, he had hit just .241, with 16 home runs.)

Mr. Branca, nicknamed "the Hawk," eyed catcher Rube Walker for the sign. Mr. Walker changed his finger sequences to protect them from Mr. Lockman, the Giants runner who lurked off second base. It worked. "I didn't recognize the sequence," Mr. Lockman, now 74, says. Mr. Lockman says he touched his belt buckle to let Mr. Thomson know that he couldn't read the sign.

But the Giants had other means. "My wife never likes me to talk about it," says Mr. Yvars, the backup catcher, talking as he chews a mouthful of muffin in a coffee shop. "She gets embarrassed."

The 1951 season was Mr. Yvars's first full year in the Majors. He pinch-hit and occasionally started. But his chief duty was warming up pitchers. And as a bullpen fixture, he often relayed signs.

Now, as Mr. Branca pondered his first pitch to Mr. Thomson, Mr. Yvars, who had been busy warming up pitcher Larry Jansen in the previous inning, was in the hot seat. When the buzzer in the bullpen sounded just once, he knew what to do. "If I did nothing, it was a fastball," he says. "I did nothing."

It was a fastball, right over the plate. Mr. Thomson took it for strike one. Did he know that Mr. Franks was perched above center field? "Of course!" he says. Did Mr. Thomson take the signs earlier in the game? "I don't know why I wouldn't have."

Again, Mr. Branca recalls, Mr. Walker called for a fastball. Again, the buzzer sounded once. Again, Mr. Yvars says, he sat still. Russ Hodges, the Giants radio broadcaster, called the action at 3:57 p.m. on WMCA:

"Branca throws. There's a long drive. It's going to be -- I believe! The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant! Bobby Thomson hits into the lower deck of the left-field stands. The Giants win the pennant! And they're going crazy! They're going crazy! Oohhh-oohhh!"

Mr. Thomson hopped around the bases. Mr. Schenz and his hollering teammates crowded around home plate. Mr. Yvars and his four bullpen mates sprinted toward the infield. Mr. Franks, No. 3, isn't visible in numerous extant photos and film footage of the scene.

At 1033 Elder Ave. in the Bronx, an electrician's heart broke. "He cried," remembers Ms. Mesulam, Mr. Chadwick's daughter, who was 15 at the time. "He said, 'I can't believe it. I can't believe it. I can't believe it.' "

Mr. Branca walked slowly from the field, slumped face down on the clubhouse's concrete steps and wept. "I guess we weren't meant to win it," he told reporters.

Within seconds of Mr. Thomson's shot, two spectators at the Polo Grounds suffered heart attacks. Within minutes, Dodgers fans hung effigies of Mr. Branca -- complete with his No. 13 -- from street lights and telephone poles. Within hours, New York Daily Mirror reporter Edwin Wilcox wrote: "There were those who thought of ending it all in a long leap from the Brooklyn Bridge or a deep dive into the Gowanus."

The Giants faced the Yankees in the World Series. Midway through the series, Mr. Chadwick checked into Flower Fifth Avenue Hospital. He didn't watch the Yankees triumph in six games. He died on Nov. 3, a month to the day after Mr. Thomson's home run.

On Dec. 5, the Giants sold Mr. Schenz to Oakland of the Pacific Coast League. He never returned to the Major Leagues and failed to qualify for its pension by 41 days. His children say that for the rest of his life, until he died of a heart attack on May 12, 1988, he kept his telescope in its leather case, tucked away in a chiffonette in his bedroom.

A Hall-of-Famer

Mr. Durocher managed the Giants to a championship in 1954 and left the team after the following season. He later managed the Cubs and the Houston Astros, and retired in 1973, after 2,008 career victories. Three years after he died, he was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

Mr. Franks left the Giants in 1955. Eventually, he managed the San Francisco Giants and the Chicago Cubs to 605 victories. In 1980, after 41 years in baseball, he retired to his hometown in the hills above Salt Lake City.

Mr. Yvars lined out to right field for the final out of the 1951 World Series. The Giants traded him to St. Louis in 1953. He retired the next year and has worked in finance since. In the 1980s, Mr. Yvars planned to publish dozens of tales from his baseball days in a book titled "How We Stole the Pennant." But, he says, he lost his publishing deal when he refused to detail the personal peccadilloes of teammates.

Mr. Branca hurt his back during spring training of 1952 and won just 12 games the rest of his career. He retired at 30 and lives in Westchester County, N.Y. He has long been a partner at an insurance and financial-planning company and today is chairman of the Baseball Assistance Team, which supports indigent former Major Leaguers.

"What's it like to have to live with one awful moment?" wonders Mr. DeLillo in his novel. "Forever plodding across the outfield grass on your way to the clubhouse."

A few years after surrendering baseball's most famous home run, Mr. Branca heard talk that the Giants were stealing signs in 1951. "When I heard those rumors and innuendoes," says Mr. Branca, now 75, "I made a decision not to speak about it." He adds, "I didn't want to look like I was crying over spilled milk."

In 1962, an Associated Press article reported that a spy in the clubhouse helped the Giants win the pennant in 1951, but the story relied on an anonymous source and was vague. Soon after the story appeared, sportscaster Howard Cosell asked Mr. Branca to comment on it, but the pitcher demurred.

Over the years, as Messrs. Branca and Thomson rubbed elbows at countless functions, posed together with President Nixon and co-signed the sweet spots of baseball after baseball, the pitcher said nothing of sign stealing. "Bobby and I are really, really good friends," Mr. Branca says. "He still hit the pitch."

The Giants traded Mr. Thomson away in 1954. He left baseball in 1960, after 15 years and 264 home runs, and worked more than 30 years as an executive at a paper-goods company.

Inside the one-story home in central New Jersey where Mr. Thomson has lived since 1958, there are few signs of a celebrated baseball career: a small horseshoe-shaped replica of the Polo Grounds, a signed copy of Mr. DeLillo's book, a mounted facsimile of the commemorative stamp.

"The Scots are very undemonstrative people," says Mr. Thomson, who was born in Glasgow, the youngest of six children. "We were brought up to be seen and not heard."

Mr. Thomson, now a widower, has never spoken publicly of sign stealing and has never raised the subject with Mr. Branca. "I guess I've been a jerk in a way," he says. "That I don't want to face the music. Maybe I've felt too sensitive, embarrassed maybe."

Mr. Thomson sits on his couch, wearing the tweed jacket and tie he wore to church that morning. Suddenly, he uncrosses his legs, squares his feet with his shoulders and puts his fists together, right over left, as if gripping a bat. He hunches his torso forward and turns his head toward his left shoulder. He looks out of unblinking eyes into his fireplace.

Did he take the sign?

From the batter's box, "you could almost just do it with your eyes," Mr. Thomson says.

His hands relax. He drops his arms to his sides.

Did he take the sign?

"I'd have to say more no than yes," he says. "I don't like to think of something taking away from it."

Pressed further, Mr. Thomson later says, "I was just being too honest and too fair. I could easily have said, 'No, I didn't take the sign.' "

He says, "It would take a little away from me in my mind if I felt I got help on the pitch."

But did he take the sign?

"My answer is no," Mr. Thomson says.

He adds: "I was always proud of that swing."

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