

Learning to love baseball and hating the Yanks.

I was born and grew up in Philadelphia. In 1950 two big things happened in my life.

In May I contracted viral hepatitis, which at that time was known as yellow jaundice. There were no medications to treat it. Bed rest and a diet of Cheerios with skim milk and jello was the routine from May until October. Houstonians who remember life in 1950 without air conditioning or TV will understand when I say being confined to a small bedroom for over five months during the summer months wasn't much fun. Philadelphia's summer heat and humidity is pretty much the same as Houston's, and that year it lasted through September. When all the other kids in my neighborhood were starting to play baseball, I had to learn the game by listening to the radio. The Phils' games became my lifeline.

I listened to the radio all day. There were lots of great shows to look forward to each day like Hopalong Cassidy, The Long Ranger, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, Milton Berle, Red Skelton, Groucho Marx, The Shadow and others. But what I looked forward to the most was the listening to the Phils, known as the "Whiz Kids" because they had a number of starting players like Robin Roberts, Curt Simmons, Granny Hamner, Stan Lopata, Del Ennis, Bob Miller, and Richie Ashburn who were all younger than 25. Ashburn at 21 was the Rookie of the Year in the National League in 1948.

Baseball announcers in 1950 (before TV) understood that they had to be the eyes for the listener. They described everything about how the park looked and what the atmosphere was like. You knew that Ashburn looked especially skinny in his baggy uniform, and that Roberts' fastball looked like an aspirin tablet to the hitter. You knew everything about Shibe Park, especially what the monster wall in right field looked like with the enormous 1890's bicycle making the three ring sign for Ballantine Beer, and how the ball would take crazy bounces off it because of its sloping metal tiers.

So through the humidity and heat from May until September, the Phils on the radio got me through yellow jaundice. As the season went on, my interest and knowledge of the game grew as the amazing Whiz Kids did something that the Phils had not done in many prior seasons. They were in a pennant race with Brooklyn and St Louis. The Phils had not won the National League Pennant since 1915. But this year was different. They were still winning in late September.

But then the gloom of seasons past started to reappear. They were leading the League, but then they lost five in a row on the road to the Giants and Brooklyn to put them in a tie with Brooklyn. The last game of the regular season came down to playing Brooklyn on October 1st at Ebbets Field. This last week of the season seemed like a month. Each loss was heartache. But the Phils still had one last shot. It came down to Don Newcombe verses Robin Roberts. Both pitchers had had great seasons. Newcombe was 19 and 10, and the ace of the Dodgers staff. Roberts was 19 and 11 and the Phil's ace. The Dodgers had Duke Snider in center, Carl Furillo in right, Jackie Robinson at second, Gil Hodges at first, Roy Campanella catching, and Pee Wee Reese at short.

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For the Phils there was Richie Ashburn in center, Del Ennis in right field, Dick Sissler in left, Granny Hamner at short, Eddie Waitkus at first and Andy Seminick catching.

This final game for the Pennant became the second most memorable thing that happened for me in 1950. By today's standards I would describe the hype about the game as pretty modest. There weren't analysts like we have today. Pretty much just the regular announcers. But even on the radio you could sense the tension from Brooklyn. The Bum's crowd was confident that they could beat the slumping Phils. The Cinderella Whiz Kids were about to miss the big party according to the Brooklyn announcers. After all, the Dodgers were at home and had beaten the Phils the day before. Reese, Robinson and Snider would be the difference.

As expected, the game was dominated by the pitching of Newcombe and Roberts. The Phils got a single from Ennis in the second inning, and another single from Sisler in the 4th. The Dodgers first hit was a double by Pee Wee Reese in the fifth. After five innings neither team had pushed a run across. But in the sixth the Phils produced a run on three consecutive singles. Newcombe had opened the door. Suddenly the heat and humidity disappeared, my back didn't hurt at all and the Whiz Kids had a real chance. But then in the Dodger's half with two outs, Pee Wee Reese homered, and the game was tied at one run apiece.

The next three innings were all goose eggs. How could this happen? After all the games and all the innings of an entire season it came down to a tie in the tenth inning. Both Roberts and Newcombe were still in the game. Every pitch was excruciating. Both pitchers were still going strong.

Robin Roberts led off the top of the 10th and he singled. Then Waitkus singled. Ashburn, the Phils' best bunter was up, but the bunt goes back to Newcombe and Roberts is thrown out at third. The roller coaster went from the highest peak to the lowest drop. How could Richie fail to do what he had done so brilliantly all season? He was the best bunter in all of baseball. Before I could recover from the queasy feeling in my stomach, Dick Sissler stepped in, and hit a three run homer. The Whiz Kids were on top 4 to 1! Wow! Just like that! A three run shot.

Going to the bottom of the 10th, Roberts took the mound. I was starting to believe the Phils could pull it off. Three outs to go. Then Roy Campanella stepped up and hit a line drive single to left. Was the roller coaster going down again? My back started to hurt, and bad thoughts started to reappear. But then Roberts reached back. He struck out the next batter and popped up the next hitters. Just like that it was over. The mighty Dodgers were gone and the Phils had won the Pennant! The Whiz Kids had achieved what other Philadelphia teams since 1915 had not achieved. They got to the World Series! They would face the dreaded Yankees, who had clinched the American League Pennant sometime in early August. It was a glorious Sunday afternoon. The Phils were National League champs!

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The next day I remember waking up and I couldn't wait for the Inquirer to arrive. My Mom, who grew up in Brooklyn and was a Dodgers fan, could spend the whole morning with me going over all the details of the game while the other kids had to go to school and couldn't pour over the play by play until they got home that afternoon.

Then, disaster! I opened the paper to learn that three of the Phils were not going to be able to play in the Series. Instead they had to report to the draft board for induction because of the Korean War. One of these players was starting pitcher Curt Simmons. After Robin Roberts he was the next best in ERA and strikeouts. I will never forget the sense of unfairness that came over me. Surely the Yankees were responsible for this! Who else could it be? The Yankees didn't have to send anybody to the draft board. Doesn't the Army know it's the World Series? What's wrong with them?! I know it was some "big shot" in New York who caused this. No one who truly cared about the game would let this happen. God, do something! Make this wrong right!

So in the summer of 1950 I learned to love the game of baseball even though I never set foot on a field that year. In a day, I forgot about the Dodgers, and started hating the Yankees! Mom and I were on the same side this time. She didn't like the Yanks either. Those unfair Yankees! How come they get to have all their pitchers and the Phils would lose Simmons! At least the Phils were at Shibe Park for the first two games. We still had Roberts, a twenty game winner, and Jim Konstanty, who had twenty-two saves, and Meyer, Miller and Heintzelman. Roberts and Konstanty were good hitters for pitchers. On to the Series!

The 1950 edition of the Yankees was a fearsome group. They had won the 1947 and 1949 Series over the Brooklyn Dodgers. DiMaggio in center, Bauer in right, Mize at first and Rizzuto at short. The Yanks starting rotation included Reynolds, Raschi, Ferrick and Whitey Ford.

Game One was almost a repeat of the Brooklyn game. It didn't go ten innings, but it was a nail biter. Jim Konstanty started for the Phils and Raschi for the Yanks. After three innings it was 0 to 0. In the fourth, the Yanks got a run on a sacrifice fly. The Yanks only collected five hits, but the Phils were only able to muster two hits all day. The Phils had hung around, but the Yanks prevailed 1 to 0. Big disappointment, but this fearsome group from the Bronx wasn't so big and bad after all. A sac fly was the difference. The outcome surely would have been different if Simmons had been there to pitch Game One.

Game Two pitted Roberts against Reynolds. It turned out to be another ten inning battle for Roberts. The Yanks got a single run across in the second. The Phils answered with a single run in the bottom of the fifth on an Ashburn sac fly. The game remained tied until the tenth. Dimaggio was the lead off hitter, and promptly hit a homer. The Phils disappeared quietly in the bottom of the 10th. Game Two was in the bank, and the Yanks had defeated the Phils' two best pitchers in their own park. Gloom set it as the Series moved to Yankee Stadium.

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I was now in full hate mode. Life was not fair. In Game Three, the Phils sent Heintzelman to the mound. He was a 35 year old war horse with a 3 up and 9 down record. It turned into another one run loss. The Phils took the lead 2 to 1 in the seventh inning, but the Yankees answered in the bottom of the eighth to tie it at 2. In the bottom of the ninth, the Yanks sequenced three singles with two outs to push across the third and winning run. The Series stood at 3 to zip for the Yanks. I really started to hate the Army draft board with all the might I could muster!

Game Four was not close. The Yanks got 2 in the first, and 3 in there sixth. The Phils didn't score until the top of the ninth when they scored 2 runs on a sloppy play by the Yanks. But Whitey Ford was the winner. A Series sweep.

The following Monday the doctor said I could go to school. No more radio. No more games until next year.

Looking back after 63 years, I certainly will never forget that season. Those games were amazing. I became a baseball fan, and I began to learn the subtle, little things that make it such a wonderful game. Every pitch matters, every chance a fielder gets makes a difference. Every swing makes a difference. As we all know from Yogi, "The game isn't over until it's over."

After 63 years I still think it was unfair that the Phils didn't have their full staff. Who knows what difference Curt Simmons would have made. After all the Phils lost three games by one run. Couldn't the Army wait a week or so?

After 63 years the thing that amazes me most is that it all seems like yesterday.