

World Series Game Four--New York Yankees vs. Brooklyn Dodgers (October 5, 1941)

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Essay by J.P. Hoornstra (guest post)*



Mickey Owen

A blue envelope arrived at Ebbets Field via telegraph on Monday, October 6, 1941. Brooklyn Dodgers catcher Mickey Owen's name was on it, along with the words "Personal Delivery Only." The sender was a 10-year-old boy, a Dodger fan who scrounged up some coins and begged his mother to help him mail a letter to his favorite player. "My son has worshipped Mickey Owen all year and said he felt Mickey might go to pieces after that mistake he made yesterday if he didn't get enough encouragement to carry on," the boy's mother said. Owen reportedly kept the note in his uniform pocket for Game 5 of the World Series.¹

It wasn't the catcher's fault the Yankees beat the Dodgers in the 1941 World Series, but history has already rendered its narrative. Owen's dropped third strike with two outs in the ninth inning of Game 4 was so dramatic, so ill-timed, and so integral in turning a 2-2 series tie into a 3-1 Yankee lead, no one needs years of perspective to identify a scapegoat. A 10-year-old could figure out who needed a pat on the back before the next game even started. This narrative misses a crucial fact, however. The first eight innings of Game 4 represented the Dodgers at their most dominant in decades. From Kirby Higbe's first pitch until Hugh Casey threw what might have been the last, the mighty Yankees--winners in four of the previous five World Series--appeared to have met their match in Brooklyn.

While the European theater of World War II raged like an inferno, Brooklyn was experiencing its own heat wave. Ebbets Field reached 96 degrees² during the afternoon of Game 4, a record for

¹ Parrott, Harrold, "Lad Raids Penny Bank to Buck Up Mickey," *Brooklyn Eagle*, October 6, 1941.

² Photo caption on page 8, *Brooklyn Eagle*, October 6, 1941.

the city on that date³ but not enough to deter 33,813 fans.⁴ It was only a few degrees cooler the day before, when the Bronx Bombers took a two-games-to-one lead in the series. After seven scoreless innings, the Yankees scored twice off Casey to win 2-1. It was the third consecutive one-run game to begin the series. The first postseason game at Ebbets Field in 21 years ended in Dodger defeat.

Atley Donald was scheduled to take the ball for the Yankees in Game 4. Brooklyn starter Kirby Higbe spotted him a one-run lead. The Yankees sent six batters to the plate in the top of the first inning, and got their run when Charlie Keller singled in Red Rolfe. In the fourth inning, still leading 1-0, the Yankees loaded the bases with no outs. Keller was forced out at home plate, but Johnny Sturm's two-out single put the Yankees ahead 3-0. That was the last pitch Higbe would throw, as Larry French was summoned from the bullpen to record the final out of the inning.

Donald blanked the Dodgers for three innings. In the bottom of the fourth, Owen and Pete Coscarart drew walks with two outs. Pinch-hitter Jimmy Wasdell drove in both runners with a double, drawing the Dodgers within 3-2.

In the fifth, the Yankees loaded the bases again with two outs, and Casey was summoned from the bullpen for the second straight day. Dodgers general manager Larry MacPhail had publicly criticized his 27-year-old pitcher--and even the Dodgers' bullpen catcher--for not warming up faster in Game 3.⁵ Casey must have learned his lesson; he looked plenty warm when Joe Gordon hit a fly ball for the third out. The Yankees didn't get a runner past first base against Casey until the fateful ninth inning.

If not for Owen's dropped third strike, Pete Reiser would have been remembered as the game's hero. He certainly earned it. The 1941 season was a career year for several Dodger players and none more than "Pistol Pete," who led the National League with a .343 batting average. In his first year as the Dodgers' everyday center fielder, Reiser finished second to Camilli in voting for the Most Valuable Player award.

With Dixie Walker on second base and none out, Reiser hit a two-run home run to right field over the Ebbets Field scoreboard⁶ to give the Dodgers a 4-3 lead. The way Casey was pitching, the score wasn't likely to change. Casey was "making a hollow mockery of the vaunted Yankee power," wrote the "Philadelphia Record."⁷ "The Yanks had gone into that ninth (inning) a beaten team," wrote the "Boston Post."⁸

Sturm and Rolfe grounded out to begin the final inning. Two down, one to go. Casey went to a full count against Henrich and Owen called for a curveball. This proposition wasn't as simple as it seems. "Casey had two pitches--a fastball and a curve," Owen told "Sports Illustrated" in

³ "Even 90 Degree Heat Strikes A Chill in Dodgerville," *Brooklyn Eagle*, October 6, 1941.

⁴ Bell, Christopher, "Scapegoats: Baseballers Whose Careers Are Marked By One Fateful Play," p. 30.

⁵ Parrott, Harrold "Casey Fails Fitz, Blowing Two Plays," *Brooklyn Eagle*, October 5, 1941.

⁶ <http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/92638bc5>

⁷ Fimrite, Ron, "The Play That Beat The Bums," *Sports Illustrated*, October 20, 1997.

⁸ "Yanks Win, 7-4, On Fatal Error," *Boston Post*, Oct. 6, 1941.

1991.⁹ He continued:

But he had two of each. He had a fastball that would either rise or sink. And he threw a big overhand sharp-breaking curve or a hard, quick curve that was a little bit like a slider. When he came into the game in the sixth inning, we both realized that the big curve wasn't working. So whenever I gave him the signal for a curve, he threw the quick one. Then, with the count 3 and 2 on Henrich, I signaled for the curve and Hugh rolled off a big-breaking curve that was probably the best he ever threw in his life. It broke down and in to Henrich, a left-handed batter, just as he swung at it.

Years later, Henrich called it “one of the best and craziest curveballs I’ve ever seen.”¹⁰

Owen, however, told “Sports Illustrated” that he wasn’t expecting that curveball. “I’m expecting the quick curve and couldn’t get my glove around to handle the ball when it broke so sharp,” he said. “Then the ball hits the heel of my glove and rolls back toward the stands as the cops were coming out to keep fans off the field.”¹¹ The public address announcer, Charlie Clark, said the ball nearly reached his seat in front of the backstop: “Mickey came after it with a big vacant stare on his face--disbelief. I got out of his way because he could have bumped right into me, but I felt like kicking it back to him so he could get Henrich going down to first. I could have been famous.”¹²

What happened next sealed Owen’s notoriety, but the Yankees deserve credit for rallying. DiMaggio singled. Keller doubled, scoring Henrich and DiMaggio and giving New York a 5-4 lead. Dickey walked. Then Gordon doubled, scoring Keller and Dickey to make it 7-4. Johnny Murphy pitched a scoreless ninth inning. They were the heroes; immediately afterward Owen conceded¹³, “I guess you’ll have to call me the goat of the game.” One out away from a 2-2 tie, the Yankees forged a 3-1 lead in the best-of-seven series.

Rather than reviling the catcher, Brooklyn embraced Owen. “I got about 4,000 wires and letters,” he told the “Saturday Evening Post.”¹⁴ “I had offers of jobs and proposals of marriage. Some girls sent their pictures in bathing suits, and my wife tore them up.” Brooklyn lost Game 5 the next day at Ebbets Field, 3-1, ending the series. With the young fan’s note in his pocket, Owen received a “tremendous ovation” in his first at-bat.¹⁵ The pats on the back kept coming, and the role of 1941 World Series scapegoat followed Owen to the end of his life. Embraced by his city, Owen was able to embrace his role in history. “I would’ve been completely forgotten,” he said years later, “if I hadn’t missed that pitch.”¹⁶

⁹ Cavanaugh, Jack, “Talk About Dropping The Ball,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 7, 1991.

¹⁰ Fimrite, Ron, *op.cit.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Scorecard,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 17, 1966.

¹³ United Press, “Owen’s Side of It,” *Boston Post*, October 6, 1941.

¹⁴ Goldstein, Richard, “Mickey Owen Dies at 89; Allowed Fateful Passed Ball,” *New York Times*, July 15, 2005.

¹⁵ “Yankees Draw First Blood in 5th Game Today,” *Cortland Standard*, Oct. 6, 1941.

¹⁶ Goldstein, July 15, 2005.

J.P. Hoornstra is an author, journalist, and television analyst based in Los Angeles. His first book, "The 50 Greatest Dodger Games of All-Time," is available via Riverdale Ave. Books.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.