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# The Fireman

ROBERT A. MOSS

This is the story of a great pitcher and a deeply flawed man, of a duality that elicits both admiration and regret, and of the tragic realization that it is often impossible to savor the taste of one without the bitterness of the other.

In Brooklyn, the summer of 1947 was a time of hope for Dodgers fans. The war had ended, and Branch Rickey, president and general manager of the Dodgers since 1943, was building a pennant-winner. He had stocked up on talent during the war, and now those young players, Carl Furillo, Gil Hodges, and Duke Snider, were back from the military, joining established returning stars like Pee Wee Reese and Pete Reiser. The Dodgers were a rising force, perhaps one player away from dominance. That player arrived in 1947; his name was Jackie Robinson. Despite the opposition of all fifteen of the other major-league owners, Rickey had broken the color line. Baseball and the country were changing.

I was seven that summer, just beginning to understand baseball and in love with the Brooklyn Dodgers. After school, I would hurry home to catch the end of Dodgers games on the radio. On hot summer afternoons, I would often sit on an upended milk crate outside my father's grocery store on St. John's Place in Brooklyn, listening to the dulcet southern tones of Red Barber on our new portable radio. I learned about "sittin' in the cat-bird seat," "rhubarbs" on the playing field, and "F.O.B.," which meant that the bases were "full of Brooklyn's."

Red Barber had been born in Mississippi, raised in Florida, and steeped in the bigotry endemic to his habitat. When Rickey told him, in confidence, of his plan to bring an African American to the Dodgers, Barber seriously considered resigning. As he tells it, his wife Lylah urged him not to act rashly. Barber listened to her advice, thought things through, and realized that his job was to broadcast the ballgame, not to concern himself with the color of the ballplayers.<sup>1</sup> And that's what he did; he described the game and Robinson's tal-

ent spoke for itself. Not only did he galvanize the Dodgers, but he electrified Brooklyn with strategic bunts, stolen bases, clutch line drives, and unquenchable verve. He was on his way to Rookie of the Year, to be followed in 1949 by the MVP award, and the Dodgers were on their way to a pennant. Robinson's Hall of Fame career has been recounted many times and, in 1997, his number forty-two was permanently retired throughout Major League Baseball.

There were other stars on the 1947 Dodgers—Pee Wee Reese, Pete Reiser, and Dixie Walker—but there was another player I also came to admire. His name was Hugh Casey, also known as the “Fireman,” a nonpareil reliever who won 10 games, lost 4, and saved 18, the most in the National League. He pitched seventy-six innings, all in relief, and it seemed to me that he magically materialized at moments of maximum peril. I began to anticipate his appearance when the game was most on the line. The other Dodgers could forge a lead, but only Casey could preserve it. In 1947, the closer's role was not well-defined, and managers would put their best man on the mound late in the game and ask him to pitch two or three innings as needed. For the Dodgers, the best man was Casey.

As Red Barber put it: “Trouble starts in the game and away down in the right field corner, a bulky right-hander gets off the bullpen bench, picks up his glove, and in almost majestic and unhurried tempo begins warming up . . . then an arm is waved toward the bullpen and here he comes. Ole Casey, walking as serenely as a barefoot boy down an empty country road.”<sup>2</sup> “Sukeforth waited at the mound with the ball. He handed it to Casey, and left. There was nothing Sukeforth could tell Casey. You don't tell a supreme artist how to paint a canvas or sing an aria.”<sup>3</sup> Casey said that his manager, Burt (Barney) Shotton was responsible for his success in 1947: “Barney handled me perfectly. He asked me how much work I thought I could do, and I told him I could work three innings almost every day if necessary. So Shotton told me he would never call on me before the seventh.”<sup>4</sup> Shotton used to sit next to Casey in the dugout during the first six innings, picking his brain for advice on the opposition's batters. Only in the seventh would Casey trudge down to the bullpen in case he was needed.

Casey was born in 1913 in Atlanta, Georgia. Wilbert Robinson, who had managed the Dodgers from 1914 until 1931, became president of the Southern Association's Atlanta Crackers in 1932 and Casey joined his team at age nineteen. “It was debated whether he was picked because he was a fine natural pitcher or because he was an expert shot and had a way with a bird dog. When Casey's first season was over, Mr. Robinson took him to his hunting camp and kept him there all winter.”<sup>5</sup>

Casey meandered through organized ball for seven years with indifferent results, stopping with the Crackers, the Chicago Cubs, their Los Angeles farm team, Birmingham, and Memphis. It was in 1938 that Larry MacPhail, president of the Dodgers, picked Casey up for the bargain price of \$7,500. MacPhail had begun to rebuild a chronic second division team into a powerhouse that would challenge for the pennant in 1940 and win it in 1941. With the Dodgers, Casey flourished, going 15-10 in 1939, 11-8 in 1940, and 14-11 in 1941. At first, he was used as a starting pitcher, but he gradually shifted toward relief. In 1941, he appeared in 45 games and pitched 162 innings, but started only 18 times, compiling 7 (unofficial) saves to go with his 14 wins. He'd become a "closer," finishing 25 games. After the 1941 pennant was secured, Dodgers manager Leo Durocher said "We couldn't have won it without Casey."<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the 1941 World Series against the Yankees featured traumatic gaffe for the Dodgers. Trailing the Yankees two games to one, Brooklyn entrusted a 4-3 lead in Game 4 to Casey. With two out in the ninth inning, and a full count on Tommy Henrich, Casey struck him out on a pitch that broke sharply down and in. Opinions vary whether the pitch was a curve or a spitball, but, more crucially, catcher Mickey Owen couldn't handle it. The ball rolled to the backstop, Henrich reached first safely, and the ensuing rally, fueled by Joe DiMaggio and Charlie Keller, led to a 7-4 Dodgers loss. The Series ended the following day with another Yankee victory; the *Brooklyn Eagle's* sorrowful headline, "Wait Till Next Year," became the mantra of my generation of Dodgers fans.

The 1947 season marked the summit of Casey's career and the World Series his apotheosis, but it generated unprecedented obstacles for the Dodgers. Not only did Jackie Robinson break the color line, with all the internal stress and outward opposition that engendered, but, just before the season began, Manager Leo Durocher was suspended by Commissioner Chandler for "conduct detrimental to baseball." Branch Rickey installed his long-time friend Burt Shotton as manager. Shotton had managed St. Louis farm teams for Rickey and had piloted the Philadelphia Phillies from 1928 to 1933, but presiding over Robinson's rookie year while attempting to bring an elusive pennant to Brooklyn were challenges of far greater magnitude. Casey made his contribution: used only in relief, he appeared in 46 games, finishing 37, winning 10, losing 4, and saving a league-leading 18 games. He was the indispensable man, closing game after crucial game as the Dodgers finished 94-60, five games ahead of the Cardinals.

Once again, Brooklyn's World Series opponent was the Yankees, a classic confrontation that went the full seven games. It was a Series that featured two

outstanding relief pitchers, Joe Page for the Yankees and Casey for the Dodgers. I vividly remember those games sixty-five years later. One of my father's customers had a television set, and I was invited to come to his home after school to watch the late innings. In those days, even a tiny screen with a perpetual "snow storm" was a marvel not to be forgotten, and for the first time in my life I learned what it was like to hang on every pitch and cheer or lament every hit or run.

The Dodgers lost the first two games at Yankee Stadium; Casey pitched two scoreless innings in Game 1, but did not figure in the decision. In the third game, at Ebbets Field, the Dodgers led by 7–2 after three innings, but by the seventh inning their lead was only 9–7 and Shotton called for Casey. Clutch pitching limited the Yankees to one additional run, and Casey, who pitched the final 2 and 2/3 innings, was awarded the victory. In the key moment, he induced Joe DiMaggio to hit into a double play with two runners aboard.

The ninth inning of Game 4 remains high on the all-time list of World Series tension. After eight innings, the Yankees led 2–1 and pitcher Bill Bevens, though wild, had yet to surrender a hit. In the top of the ninth, the Yankees loaded the bases with one out. Tommy Henrich was due up, and Shotton brought in Casey. Six years after the debacle of 1941, Casey faced Henrich again. This time, with a single pitch, Casey induced a comebacker that he turned into an inning-ending double play! In the last of the ninth, Bevens walked Furillo and Al Gionfriddo ran for him. With two out, Pete Reiser, on a badly sprained ankle (actually fractured), pinch hit for the pitcher. On Shotton's signal, Gionfriddo stole second. The Yankees then walked Rieser intentionally and Eddie Miksis ran for him. What happened next has never been better described than in Red Barber's classic radio play-by-play: "Wait a minute . . . Stanky is being called back from the plate and Lavagetto goes up to hit. . . . Gionfriddo walks off second . . . Miksis off first. . . . They're both ready to go on anything. . . . Two men out, last of the ninth . . . the pitch . . . swung on, there's a drive hit out toward the right field corner. Henrich is going back. He can't get it! It's off the wall for a base hit! Here comes the tying run, and here comes the winning run! . . . Well, I'll be a suck-egg mule!"<sup>77</sup> The Dodgers won 3–2 on Lavagetto's double, their only hit; they had evened the series at 2–2, and Casey was awarded the victory for his single crucial pitch to Henrich. In Barber's words, Casey "was at a peak few pitchers ever reach. He had defended completely in the Series everything his manager had entrusted to him."<sup>78</sup>

The Dodgers lost Game 5 to Spec Shea's four-hitter, 2–1. Casey pitched the eighth and ninth innings of this tight ballgame, giving up no runs and one hit. In the ninth inning, an error and a hit-batsman put two men on for the Yan-

kees with none out, but Casey again induced a double-play grounder from DiMaggio.

Game 6 provided the last hurrah for both the Dodgers and the Fireman. It was another scintillating contest, featuring a come-from-behind rally that propelled the Dodgers to an 8–5 advantage, preserved by a spectacular catch by Al Gionfriddo that robbed DiMaggio of a game-tying three-run homer (Red Barber: “Here’s the pitch, swung on, belted . . . it’s a long one . . . back goes Gionfriddo, back, back, back, back, back, back . . . heeee makes a one-handed catch against the bullpen! Oh, Doctor!”<sup>9</sup>). In the last of the ninth, Joe Hatten put two Yankees on with no one out. Once again, Casey took the mound. Rizzuto was retired on a fly ball. Aaron Robinson singled, loading the bases. Lonny Frey grounded into a force out and a run scored, but that was the second out. Casey then got Snuffy Stirnweiss on a comebacker, saving the 8–6 victory.

That the Dodgers lost the final game and the Series was not Casey’s fault; of the three Dodgers victories, Casey was credited with two wins and a save. He appeared in six of the seven contests, but Game 7, a 5–2 defeat for Brooklyn, was lost before Casey entered in the seventh inning. He did surrender a run on one hit, but Joe Page pitched five innings of shutout relief to seal the win for New York. After the Series, Tom Meany asked DiMaggio what had impressed him most about the Dodgers. DiMaggio replied: “Casey, Ol’ Case really had it this time.”<sup>10</sup> Red Barber summed it up: “There he stood in October, but in my mind’s eye he has been standing there for many and many a year. He was great against the Yankees in 1947, but he has been doing that same job, game in and game out, through the weeks and months.”<sup>11</sup>

I was devastated. How could my team have lost? It was the beginning of a life-long detestation of the Yankees. Even today, with the Dodgers long gone from Brooklyn, I watch Yankees games and reflexively root for their opponents. But Yankees-phobia is not my subject here. Rather, it is a young man’s realization that all people, most assuredly including baseball players, are amalgams of the admirable and the deplorable. It’s one thing for a seven-year-old to thrill to the Fireman’s on-field heroics; it’s another for someone ten times his age to scrutinize the darker, ultimately tragic flaws of Casey’s character. At age eleven, in 1951, I was unaware of Casey’s troubled life and ultimate suicide (of which more later). My mother and I were then trying to cope with our own tragedy, the untimely death of my father. Although baseball remained important to me as I grew up, it assumed a more proportionate place in my increasingly adult world.

From the vantage point of age, I can see Casey in the round: he was a good old southern boy who, in no particular order of preference, liked cigars,

liquor, women, and a good fight. And in keeping with his origins, he didn't particularly like black people.

In *Bums*, Peter Golenbock gives us a reality check on Casey's personality and his hair-trigger temper. Once, late in the 1941 pennant race, umpire George Magerkurth—a particular peeve of manager Leo Durocher—called a balk on Casey, waving in the tying run from third base in a hard-fought game against the Pirates. Casey threw the next pitch at Magerkurth's head; and the ball "whistled past Magerkurth's left ear."<sup>12</sup> In fact, in *Superstars and Screwballs*, Richard Goldstein maintains that Casey threw three successive pitches at Magerkurth. When the umpire warned Casey, Durocher bounded out of the dugout, took issue with Magerkurth, and was promptly ejected. Worse, the Dodgers went on to lose the game.<sup>13</sup>

Another time, Casey and Bill Reddy, on the trail of someone kiting checks forged with Casey's signature, explored and patronized a succession of Brooklyn bars, and then engaged in a brawl in Flatlands. "Before the fight ended, Hugh had thrown someone through a plate-glass window of a saloon. But the police didn't arrest him, because he was Hugh Casey."<sup>14</sup> Carl Furillo recalled that whereas most players took along toiletries on road trips, Casey's kit bag contained two quarts of whiskey. Red Barber heard from teammates that Casey's "bedtime routine included cigars, comic books, and a bottle of whiskey. He would lie in bed smoking the stogie, reading the comic books, and drinking his liquor straight until either the bottle or he was finished."<sup>15</sup>

A legendary example of Casey's pugnacious temperament took place when the Dodgers trained in Havana prior to the 1942 season. After a day of pigeon shooting with Ernest Hemingway, several Dodgers—including Billy Herman, Larry French, Augie Galan, and Casey—accompanied Hemingway back to his home outside the city. There, after preparatory libations, Hemingway observed that he and Casey were of like size and ought to spar a few rounds. As they were putting on boxing gloves, Hemingway quick-punched Casey, arousing his ire. In return, he decked Hemingway, launching glasses and bottles across the room. Finally, the spectators separated the combatants, additional drinks provided calm (if not stupor), and the evening came to a close around midnight. As the Dodgers were leaving, an inebriated Ernest took Hugh by the arm and said, "You got the better of me tonight, but I'd like to try you again. In the morning we'll both be sober and we'll have a duel. You pick the weapons—pistols or knives or swords—whatever you want to use."<sup>16</sup> Fortunately, for both literature and baseball, the duel never took place; a chastened Hemingway apologized the next morning.

During spring training in 1947, also in Havana, Dixie Walker led an infamous attempt to prevent Jackie Robinson's addition to the Brooklyn roster.

Walker enlisted mainly southern players, although Golenbock reports that Casey was not enthusiastic. To his lasting credit, manager Durocher squelched this initiative in colorfully profane rhetoric. Nevertheless, Casey's southern bias was painfully evident in his unthinking way with words. As Golenbock recounts: "One time Robinson was playing poker with pitcher Hugh Casey, and Hugh was losing. To everyone in the room, Hugh hollered, "You know what ah used to do down in Georgia when ah ran into bad luck. Ah used to go out and fine me the biggest, blackest, nigger woman ah could find and rub her teats to change my luck." Robinson became dizzy, but did nothing. "Deal the cards," he said icily.<sup>17</sup>

Baseball Annies abounded on Dodgers road trips and Casey was susceptible. Carl Prince maintains that "the pursuit of sex was part of some Dodgers' road life."<sup>18</sup> Paternity suits were a constant threat, and one of them ultimately led to Casey's downfall. He owned a bar and grill near Ebbets Field in Brooklyn. It was there, Casey claimed, that he met Hilda Weissman. Hilda claimed much more, specifically that she spent four nights with Casey at Brooklyn's St. George Hotel, where Casey fathered her son, born in November 1949.<sup>19</sup> Weissman lodged a paternity suit against Casey which she won in December 1950. By then, Casey had left the Dodgers and was out of baseball, but his marriage—rocky to begin with—broke up. His wife Kathleen, who was living in Georgia, accepted Casey's denials of paternity, but did not return to him. According to Al Gionfriddo, Hilda Weissman was "crazy for ballplayers" and "it could have been anybody's baby."<sup>20</sup> But, in those long ago days before DNA, who really knew the truth?

Casey's had long skirted disaster on the ballfield, but it caught up with him in 1948. Shortly after the season began, he fell down a flight of stairs at his apartment, above the bar. Whether drink contributed to this accident is unclear, but torn ligaments and tendons sidelined Casey for more than two months. When he did pitch again, he was much less effective, logging only 36 innings and completing only 11 games, with his 3-0 record offset by a swollen 8.00 ERA. The Dodgers released him in September of 1948. In 1949, he pitched acceptably for the sixth-place Pirates, appearing in 33 games, closing 23 of them, compiling a 4-1 record with 5 saves and a 4.66 ERA. However, the Pirates released him too, and he signed with the Yankees, appearing in just four games. He was not on the Yankees World Series roster and did not pitch against his old team when the Yankees, much to my dismay, defeated Brooklyn four games to one in the 1949 Series.

Hugh Casey had just one more season of baseball left, and it ended where it began, in Atlanta. Dixie Walker had been traded to the Pirates after the 1947 season, finishing his playing career with them in 1949. In 1950, he was named



manager of the Class AA Atlanta Crackers of the Southern Association and set out to reinvigorate a struggling team. Walker hired Kirbe Higbe as pitching coach and Hugh Casey for his pitching staff, while he took on the duties of the batting coach himself. Although Casey was hit hard in his first few appearances, he soon returned to form. By season's end, the 92-59 Crackers boasted the best record in the league, and Casey had appeared in 45 games, winning 10 and losing 4.<sup>21</sup> Encouraged by his success, Casey attempted to return to the Dodgers in 1951, but nothing came of it; he was finished as a major-league pitcher.

And then Casey's troubles compounded. To his failure on the diamond was added the stress of the paternity suit, separation from his wife, and tax troubles with his bar and grill. These were not problems to be solved with a curve ball. Casey returned to Atlanta in June and checked into the Atlantan Hotel, telling the bellboy that a heart condition gave him only ten days to live.<sup>22</sup> At 1 AM on July 3, Casey called his friend Gordon McNabb and announced that he was about to kill himself. While McNabb hurried to the hotel, Casey called Kathleen informing her that he was "ready to die, ready to go." She pleaded with him, telling him that she believed he was innocent of the paternity charge and that it was "for God to decide when a man must die." But Casey replied, "I feel just like I was walking out to the pitcher's box. I was never any more calm than I am right now." He continued, "I can't eat or sleep since going through all the embarrassment. And I had to drag you through it, too, but I swear with a dying oath that I'm innocent. I'm completely innocent of those charges." Kathleen heard the shotgun blast over the telephone, as Casey shot himself in the neck. Gordon McNabb, who arrived at Casey's door at the same moment, heard it too.<sup>23</sup> At Casey's funeral, his old teammates Dixie Walker and Whitlow Wyatt served as pallbearers. The minister, referring to the paternity suit, said, "You never know what is in a man's mind at such a time, but I think Hugh believed that he had been knocked out of the box, unjustly perhaps, and he didn't want to go back to the bench."<sup>24</sup>

How do we measure a man's life? How does one square the flawed Casey of reality with the idealized, one-dimensional hero of the seven-year-old child? How can we reconcile similar dualities in anyone? I've come to believe that it's impossible; it's the cost of growing up; nothing is proof against disillusion. Perhaps only in the realm of art can good and bad coexist in a tenuous equilibrium.

For poor Casey, I prefer to imagine a different dimension, another earth, where Ebbets Field still stands. There, it is the late September of a close pennant race, the final innings of a bitterly contested game. An arm is waved toward the bullpen, and, amid hopeful recognition from the faithful, num-

ber twenty-five ambles slowly toward the mound. This Casey is neither a bigot nor a boozier, and his life is in order. Without a word, Clyde Sukeforth hands him the ball and turns away. The small knot of players dissolves: Bruce Edwards dons his mask and heads back to home plate, Spider Jorgensen returns to third, Pee Wee Reese to short, and Eddie Stanky to second. The black first baseman lingers for a moment. The country boy looks up at him and smiles: "Nothin' to fear, Ole Casey's here." Jackie Robinson smiles too: "Go get 'em, big fella!"

## NOTES

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12. Peter Golenbock, *Bums* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1984), 47.
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15. Russell Wolinsky, "Hugh Casey," in *The Team That Forever Changed Baseball and America: The 1947 Brooklyn Dodgers*, ed. Lyle Spatz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 117.
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24. Spatz, “Three Georgia-Born Former Dodgers Lead the Crackers to a Pennant.”