

# The Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants at the Polo Grounds, announced by Vin Scully (September 8, 1957)

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From 1903 through 1957, New York City was the home of three major league baseball teams. For most of this time, the Yankees played in the Bronx, the Giants played across the Harlem River in upper Manhattan and the Dodgers played in Brooklyn in the Flatbush-Crown Heights neighborhood. Each club had its own distinct history. Each team had its hyper-loyal fan base, but often the fan bases were interlocking. Sometimes families were split. The guy or gal at the next desk in an office might be a fan of a different club. Sometimes marriage partners disagreed on whether The Duke was better than Mays or if Mantle was the best of the three. The personal rivalries among fans and players were fierce. There were grudges. Harsh unprintable words. Fist fights.

It was wonderful.

Baseball was part of the fabric of New York City in the mid-1950s. But you didn't have to go to the ballpark to savor it. Most of the games of the New York clubs were on local television, channels 9 and 11. Many people did not yet have TV's, so taverns were quick to get them. Men --and more women than one might think--jammed bars on summer afternoons and evenings to watch the games. It was no surprise then that Schaefer Beer and Lucky Strike became sponsors of Dodgers game. The Giants had Knickerbocker and Chesterfields. Yankee fans made the three-ring sign of Ballantine Beer. Beer, smokes and baseball. It's how things were.

All of the games were on radio. The Giants were on WMCA, 570 on the AM dial. The Yankees were on WINS and the Dodgers were on WMGM. Not surprisingly, WINS at 1010 and WMGM at 1050 were neighbors on the radio broadcast band, meaning two of the teams were again in each other's face. Or at least in each other's ears.

The Giants played at a rambling two-decked stadium that was shaped like an old fashioned bathtub. The ball park was called the Polo Grounds, located at Eighth Avenue and 155<sup>th</sup> Street. Polo--as in the game played by rich guys with chukkas, mallets and horses--had never actually been played there. Like every weird thing in New York, the name had a quirky explanation steeped in the city's history.

In the late 19th century, the Giants had played in Central Park at 110<sup>th</sup> Street where polo had been played. Hence, the team's home site in Manhattan became known as the Polo Grounds. Even when a new stadium was built farther uptown, the new place, which had more than one incarnation, was best known by the same name. Simply put, as any New Yorker could tell you at time, "the Giants play at the Polo Grounds," even if polo was not played there in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the "grounds" had moved from time to time.

The Dodgers played a few miles across the Brooklyn Bridge from lower Manhattan. The Dodgers' home was a friendly little bandbox named Ebbets Field. It anchored what was once known as the "Pigtown" area. Pigtown in the 19th century had been a gritty, smelly swampy wasteland where people took wagonloads of ash waste, old furniture and assorted junk and dumped it where no one was looking and presumably no one would care. Wild pigs roamed the area, the last remnants of farms that had been pushed out of other parts of developing Brooklyn. A man named Charles Hercules Ebbets owned the Brooklyn club in the National League. He acquired cheap land in Pigtown, built a ballpark there and named it after himself.

Thus, Ebbets Field. The place opened in 1913 and would last 43 years.

The third part of the baseball equation, the lordly New York Yankees, played first at a place called Highland Park which was where Columbia Presbyterian Hospital now stands. The Yankees were known as the Highlanders then. Why? Their home turf was a high stretch of land on Manhattan Island. Later they moved into the Polo Grounds as tenants of the Giants and changed their name to the Yankees. When the Yankees of the Babe Ruth era became more successful than the Giants, the landlord--Giants management--told them to get lost.

Far from getting lost, the Yankees built Yankee Stadium in the Bronx at a location that was just across the Harlem River from the Polo Grounds. There was a footbridge between the two ball parks. If a fan sat behind home plate at the Polo Grounds and looked over the bleachers in center field, he or she could see Yankee Stadium. Normally, the Yankees and Giants didn't play home games on the same dates but on, some days, they did. If one game was in the afternoon and the other in the evening--after lights came into standard use after World War Two--one could easily go to one game, nosh on hot dogs after the game, and walk to the other.

This completed a home park arrangement that would last from 1923 through 1957. Never mind that the Yankees were in the rival American League. During the 36 seasons from 1921 through 1957, the Yankees won 23 pennants. They played the Giants six times in the World Series and played the Dodgers in seven. The Yankees won ten of those 13 match-ups, losing only to the Giants in 1921 and 1922, at the start of the Babe Ruth era, and in 1955, to the Dodgers of the "Boys of Summer" generation.

As bitterly as the World Series were contested, the regular season rivalry between the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants was even more intense. The internecine relationships, even in the front offices, were snarly and incestuous, with no nefarious move off the table. Horace Stoneham, the Giants owner in the 1950s, once grew tired of hearing Branch Rickey and Walter O'Malley chirping about what a great groundskeeper Ebbets Field had in Matty Schwab. So Stoneham hired Mr. Schwab away, then gave him and his family an apartment under the left field grandstand within the Polo Grounds, where O'Malley couldn't get at him. Bobby Thomson's famous pennant winning home run in 1951--the most famous play in American baseball in the 20th century and against the Dodgers, of course--landed on the Schwab family's roof.

The star players of the Giants--Christy Mathewson, John McGraw, Carl Hubbell, Bill Terry, Frankie Frisch, Mel Ott, Willie Mays, Monte Irvin, Hoyt Wilhelm--and the stars of the Dodgers --Zack Wheat, Dazzy Vance, Gil Hodges, Duke Snider, Jackie Robinson--could constitute their own wing at Baseball's Hall of Fame. Then there was churlish Leo Durocher, who played for the Yankees but managed both the Dodgers and the Giants, and zany Casey Stengel who played for the Dodgers and Giants, but managed the Dodgers and more notably the Yankees. (Stengel later managed the expansion New York Mets, earning him the honor of being the only man to wear the uniform of all four New York teams while they were still in New York.)

Sal Maglie, once a star with the Giants, turned up after an exile in Mexico and Cleveland--one worse than the other--as a mainstay of the Dodgers pitching staff in 1956 and 1957, the year of this radio broadcast. Jackie Robinson would have been a Giant that year also and might have been in this game, except he retired from baseball when Brooklyn management tried to trade him to these same hated crosstown rivals.

In this era, the "Golden Era" of New York baseball, the two National League teams played each other 22 times each season, 11 in each ball park. Dodger fans thought nothing of getting on a subway and seeing their "Brooklyns" visit the Polo Grounds. "Jints" fans made similar treks to Ebbets Field also when the baseball heavens were in the right alignment. No one's fans sat quietly when a game was going. There was often brawling on the field and usually brawling in the stands. You can hear it here.

This too, in its way, was wonderful.

But eventually, by mid-century, America started to change and major league baseball changed with it. After five decades of no franchise shifts in major league baseball, clubs began to emigrate to new growing cities. The era of two teams in one city, much less three, died quickly in the 1950s. The Boston Braves found a happy new home in Milwaukee, at least for a few years. The St. Louis Browns moved to Baltimore. The Philadelphia A's moved to Kansas City--much like the Braves in Milwaukee, a mere stopping point till something more lasting could be found.

By 1957, Horace Stoneham and Walter O'Malley, owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, were ready to break the hearts of baseball fans in "Noo Yawk." Having eyed Minneapolis-Saint Paul as a destination, Stoneham settled on San Francisco as the site where the Giants would play in 1958

and beyond. Mr. Stoneham made his announcement in August of 1957 as his club mired in sixth place in an eight-team league, and dead last in attendance. Eyes shifted to Walter O'Malley --or "the O'Malley," as he was known derogatorily in Brooklyn--to see if he would "follow" Stoneham.

Talk on the street, however, something never to be ignored in New York, was that "the O'Malley" was actually *ahead* of Stoneham in getting out of town but delaying his official announcement till the season ended. Why else would the Major of Los Angeles, Norman Paulson, attend Dodger spring training in Vero Beach, Florida, in 1957, flanked by a grinning O'Malley and the famous "sad" clown Emmet Kelley, who worked sometimes as a Dodger mascot? Why else would the O'Malley have traded his Fort Worth, Texas, minor league franchise for a parallel one in Los Angeles, if not to control the territorial rights? That was what happened, of course. The official announcement came during the 1957 World Series, when attention would be on the series not the wreckage of the New York rivalry.

But you still can enjoy some of this.

What you will hear here is a radio hook-up of what might sound like a home game for the Dodgers but which was actually a road game since it was at the Polo Grounds. It was the last meeting of the two clubs when they were in the big city. This account was on "Dodger radio," meaning WMGM. The announcers were Vin Scully, Jerry Doggett and Al Helfer, men who were part of the initial generation of broadcasting "voices."

In the background, you'll hear more voices: occasionally some of the players--the mikes were close to the field--and the leather lungs of the 22,000 restless fans who paid their way into the game. During the breaks between innings, you'll hear the inventive pitches for Lucky Strike, "a great tasting cigarette," and plugs for cold Schaeffer Beer, a "happy brew" akin to "sunlight on a drift of snow," available in the words of Vin Scully "in the twinkling of a can opener" but only if you had the foresight to "bring from home a couple of sixpacks."

Recall that the pop top had not yet been invented. Note also that there is an ad for "bobby pins." The Dodgers had a disproportionate number of female fans. It was no accident that Ladies Day originated at Ebbets.

You'll also note the words of Vin Scully and the subtle melancholy that hangs over this game. Scully references the departure of the rivalry from New York more than once, even though the Brooklyn announcement had not yet come.

So there it was as the 1957 baseball season ebbed to a close. This last meeting of the Dodgers and Giants in New York started with five future Hall of Famers--Reese, Hodges, Snider, Mays and Don Drysdale. The Dodgers and the Giants had fallen out of that season's pennant race and the greatest intra-city rivalry in American sports history came down to a close two hour hard-fought ball game on a warm afternoon, each side trying to get off a few final blows at the other. And yes, Don Drysdale hit a batter, the opposing pitcher, Curt Barclay.

By this time, there wasn't much left to add to the old rivalry, but at least the sounds of the final game remain, and with them, the images in one's mind.

Believe me, it was wonderful.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.