# Heroes on the Home Front

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WHEN I was a young boy my father introduced me to Pete Gray, the one-armed baseball player who captured the attention of the sports world in 1945 when he played outfield for the St. Louis Browns. I sat and watched in awe as he demonstrated how in one swift motion, he could catch a baseball, remove it from his glove, and throw. All of this with just one arm. Before we parted ways, Gray patted me on the head and handed me an autographed baseball, saying: "Remember me when you make it to the big leagues."

Pete Gray was a young boy's hero, what I came to expect of every professional baseball player. What's more, Gray was my father's hero, a part of his boyhood that he wanted to share with me. And there wasn't much else about his childhood that he would wish for anyone.

My father was born and raised in the same small, northeastern Pennsylvania coal town as Gray. A child of the Depression era, he learned at an early age that hard work and an education were the only true measures of a person's worth. During his high school and college years he hauled coal in order to help his family make ends meet. And whenever he felt as if his life was a "no win" situation, he could always point to Pete Gray as someone from his own world who beat the odds and made it big time. When my father left those coal fields, in the 1950s, to attend a Philadelphia medical school, he was chasing the "American dream," just like his hero.

Not surprisingly, during my boyhood, baseball and Pete Gray became synonymous. Summer afternoons were spent in the backyard fielding ground balls and shagging flies with dad. Whenever I managed to make a spectacular catch, the inevitable comparison to Pete Gray was made. Even though I had two limbs, I had the legacy of a one-armed outfielder to fulfill. Predictably, I began playing the game as an outfielder. I even adopted Gray's uniform number – 14 – and worked to develop his trademark skills: stealing the extra base, beating out a bunt for an infield hit, and manufacturing line drive singles to the opposite field. Pete Gray was my hero, too. Until I became an adolescent.

Suddenly Gray was an embarrassment. After all, who could defend the career of a one-armed player to his peers? The .218 batting average he posted in 77 games with the Browns seemed, to me, to reinforce the common belief among baseball writers that Gray's single season in the majors was a public-relations ploy to divert the attention of a war-weary nation. He was more of a "curiosity-item" than a bona-fide big leaguer, and I wanted as little as possible to do with him. Besides, I had already come to believe that there was no glory in playing the outfield. It wasn't a skill position, and I certainly didn't believe that stealing a base or hitting line-drive singles was as significant or nearly as dramatic as the home run, the true measure of a hitter's brilliance.

By my senior year in high school I had completely rejected my father's hero, just as I had rejected most of the other things my father valued: his religion, his medical profession, and his heritage. I didn't really care about his aspirations for me, nor did I bother to understand his rationale for those dreams. As far as I was concerned, Pete Gray was part of my father's world, not mine.

I was enamored of the Mike Schmidts of the game. They had more class, more natural ability, more power, and more impressive statistics. Thus it was no great surprise that when I left home for college, I had purposely grown a mustache, changed my uniform number to 20, and shifted to third base – a testimony of my devotion to Michael Jack. I had declared my independence. I was my own man.

Everyone needs a hero. Heroes exemplify the values we aspire to in our own lives. No matter how public heroes become, they always remain very personal to those who adopt them because our heroes help us to define ourselves, our lives, and our ambitions, particularly in adolescence. "Class," "talent," "strength" – these were the qualities I admired in a person, what I saw in Mike Schmidt and not Pete Gray. But perhaps, like most adolescents, I was just too wrapped up in myself to take a closer look. All that changed on Memorial Day, 1989.

On that day my father phoned to say how sorry he was to learn that my hero had just announced his retirement. That he realized how much Mike Schmidt, the baseball player, had meant to me and that maybe one day, when I have a son of my own, the magic of the game would return and I would be able to share in my child's fantasies of *his* baseball hero. It was sometime in that phone conversation – somewhere between the realization that my adolescence had finally ended and the admission that I had entered the very same phase of life in which fathers play catch with their sons – that I began to reconsider what Pete Gray actually meant to my father.

Perhaps it is just a coincidence that they were both born and raised in the same small anthracite town and that they are both the sons of coal miners whose families immigrated to this country from Lithuania in search of the American dream. But there is no denying the fact that it was because of those less-than-humble beginnings that they dared to succeed.

As young men, they both chased after their dreams, caught up with them, and lived them. One did it through professional baseball, the other by becoming a Philadelphia physician. Few people in this world have that kind of determination to succeed in life, fewer have the compassion and understanding to allow their children to form their own identities. As a teenager, I really didn't have to look any further than my own backyard to find the true hero in my life, maybe I was the one who owed the apology.

Today, Pete Gray is right up there with Mike Schmidt in my estimation. He can play on my field of dreams any day because he started out in life at a disadvantage, and yet he still managed to collect his 51 hits in the major leagues. Nothing can ever take that away from him. What is more important, though, is the fact that I am my father's son, and I have learned to become grateful that nothing can ever take that away from me.

**William Kashatus**