

On Sunday, May 20, 1945, thirty-six thousand spectators packed Yankee Stadium, in the Bronx, for a doubleheader that pitted the New York Yankees against the defending American League champions, the St. Louis Browns. The Yankees, who had finished in third place in the previous season, six games behind the Browns, had something to prove that afternoon. Even though World War II had stripped their lineup of star players Joe DiMaggio, Phil Rizzuto, and Red Ruffing, the Yankees believed that 1945 would be "their year."

The first game got underway with Browns rookie outfielder Pete Gray (1915–2002) leading off against former twenty-game winner Spud Chandler. After taking the first pitch, Gray lined a fastball into right field for the first hit of the game. During the rookie's second trip to the plate, Chandler challenged Gray with another fastball on the first pitch. Once again, the Brownie outfielder hit a line drive single into right field. Chandler responded like an angry bull, kicking the mound in frustration. It would only get worse for the Yankees. By the end of the afternoon, Pete Gray had reached base five times with four hits. He scored twice and knocked in two runs while he fielded his position flawlessly with nine chances. The Browns swept the doubleheader, ten to one and five to two.

Any ball player would have been proud of that performance, but for the St. Louis rookie, it was a dream come true. As a young boy growing up in the anthracite region of northeastern Pennsylvania's Wyoming Valley, Pete Gray—who changed his name from Peter J. Wyshner Jr. when he turned pro in the early forties—committed himself to fulfilling his dream.

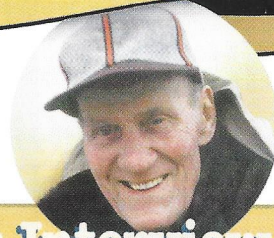
Born March 6, 1915, in the Hanover section of Nanticoke in Luzerne County, he was the son of Lithuanian immigrants, Peter and Antoinette Wyshner, who settled in the Wyoming valley at the opening of the twentieth century. At the age of six he lost his right arm in a horrible accident. He had hitched a ride from a farmer who stopped to take him home from the west end of Nanticoke. Standing on the running board of the farmer's produce truck, he was thrown from the vehicle when the driver stopped suddenly. The slight boy fell under the running board, and his arm was mangled in the spokes of a wheel. The farmer drove him home and left him lying on the front porch in a fit of hysteria. A passerby noticed how badly the helpless young boy was

injured and took him to a hospital, where his arm was amputated above the elbow. Because he was naturally right-handed, it was a difficult adjustment to learn to eat and write with his left hand, but even more challenging to throw and hit a baseball with his left arm. Nevertheless, his love for the game never paled. Eleven years later, at the age of seventeen, he hitched a ride from Nanticoke to Chicago to see

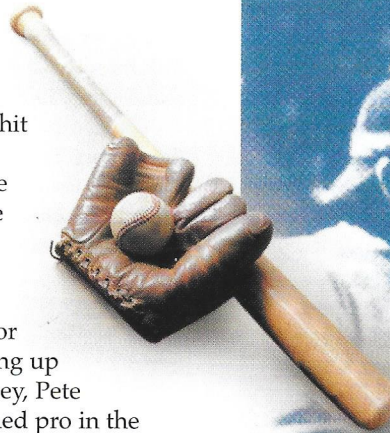
Baseball

One-Armed

by William C. Kashatu



An Interview with the Late Great,



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Pete Gray developed a powerful left-handed swing after the loss of his right arm. Gray was eighty years old in 1995 when he granted a rare interview and was photographed in Nanticoke, Luzerne County (inset, opposite page). In 1944, Gray was the Southern League's MVP and had a league-leading sixty-eight stolen bases while playing for the Memphis Chickens (opposite page, bottom).

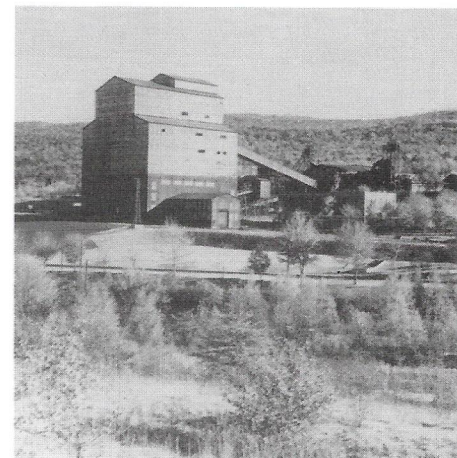
Pete Gray

career in the minor leagues.

Not surprisingly, after his professional career ended, Pete Gray returned to the Hanover section of Nanticoke, just as he had at the end of every season he spent in baseball. For the remainder of his life, neighbors and townspeople knew him as Petey, his childhood moniker. His one-year stint in major league baseball did not qualify him for a pension, and he managed to earn a modest income with a poolroom he owned and later by renting out rooms in the white, double-block house his parents built. A lifelong bachelor, he spent his days walking through the community, stopping to talk with friends and residents, especially young boys who looked up to him as a hero. He spent most of his evenings at a local fire company station shooting pool, playing cards, and watching televised sporting events. Until the end of his life, he shunned publicity, refusing to install a telephone in his home. Reporters and journalists who sought him out found him to be uncooperative and cantankerous, angry because earlier writers regarded him as a curiosity item and not the extraordinary athlete he was.

Pete Gray died on Sunday, June 30, 2002, at the Mercy Health Care Center in the Sheatown section of Nanticoke, prompting former St. Louis Browns teammate and professional baseball scout for nearly fifty years, Al LaMacchia, to recall an incident during a batting practice in spring 1945. "I can recall I was mad at Pete for some reason. He had a way of making a lot of people mad at him. Anyway, I threw him a changeup in batting practice and he swung and missed and really stumbled. Pete was so badly fooled by the pitch that he nearly fell down as he made his swing. It wasn't a nice thing to do and I still regret it."

LaMacchia encountered Gray again in 1949, when they were teammates on



The Truesdale coal breaker in the Hanover section of Nanticoke.



In 1934, at age nineteen, Pete (Gray) Wyshner (top row, fourth from right), and his brother Tony (at Pete's left) played for the Hanover "Lits" of the Luzerne County League.

Babe Ruth play in the 1932 World Series at Wrigley Field.

Pete Gray was like many in the region where the word hard was used to describe not only the type of coal, but a way of life as well. Between 1876 and 1960, more than one hundred northeastern Pennsylvanians had played, managed, coached, or umpired in major league baseball. For these men, many the sons of coal miners, professional baseball was an escape from the difficult times, dangerous work, and uncertain futures faced by their fathers. Baseball tantalized the players with the prospect of freedom from deadly work deep in dark mines far below the earth's surface, the searing pain and crushing humiliation of ethnic discrimination, and wildly fluctuating wages that stalled many dreams. For them, the game of baseball was a symbolic representation of the American Dream itself.

From the gritty gray coal fields of northeastern Pennsylvania to the plush, velvety green diamonds of the American League, Pete Gray carried himself with a courage, determination, and relentlessness that's only been rivaled in the twentieth-century history of the game by the likes of Ty Cobb and Jackie Robinson. Yet, more than a half-century after realizing his seemingly impossible dream, there are still those who refuse to even acknowledge his achievement.

Most baseball historians credit Gray's professional career to the depletion of talented players from the majors during World War II. Some claim that the St. Louis Browns acquired Gray as a gate attraction, while others considered him a

publicity ploy, or "curiosity," to divert the attention of a nation wearied by war. Even worse, he did not enjoy the respect of his own teammates, many of whom believed he cost them the chance in 1945 to repeat as American League champions.

While America's involvement in World War II might have helped Pete Gray find a way to the realm of professional baseball, once he arrived at the top he did more than his fair share for the sport and for the nation. For wounded veterans and their families, the one-armed outfielder was a heroic symbol on the home front. Gray asked for no sympathy from anyone; rather, he stepped up to the plate, his bat in his left hand—a picture of defiance—and he competed on even terms with his rivals. His example gave veterans hope that they, too, could succeed in whatever endeavor they chose as long as they gave it their all. Gray delivered his message on playing fields across the country, as well as in veterans hospitals, where he spoke with the injured, especially amputees, reassuring them that there was hope in their future.

Pete Gray's major league baseball career came to an end when, on November 20, 1946 Bill DeWitt, general manager of the St. Louis Browns, sold him to the Toledo Mud Hens, the organization's top farm club. Gray learned of his fate on the radio the following day. On June 28, 1949, Pete Gray walked away from a



Pete Gray with his parents, Peter and Antoinette Wyshner, at Yankee Stadium in May 1945.

another team in the minor leagues. "When the team owner decided to send Pete down to a class B team, Pete retired rather than go to the low minors. As far as I know, that marked the end of his baseball career." He lost track of Gray until he had heard that his former teammate had died at the age of eighty-seven.

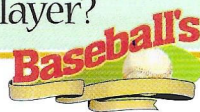
"When I used to scout in Pennsylvania and would get near Nanticoke," LaMacchia, who now scouts for Florida's Tampa Bay Devil Rays, remembers, "I often thought about stopping by to see if I could find Pete Gray. I wish I had... I wanted to tell him that I thought he was a real good player. And I wanted him to know that I was sorry for throwing that changeup in batting practice."

This interview was conducted with the legendary Pete Gray during visits made in the mid-1990s while the writer was working on *One-Armed Wonder: Pete Gray, Wartime Baseball and the American Dream*.

How did you first become interested in baseball?

Back in the nineteen-twenties, baseball was everything. All the kids in Hanover

Until that time, I dreamed of playing in the major leagues, but thought it was out of the question. After all, who ever heard of a one-armed ballplayer?



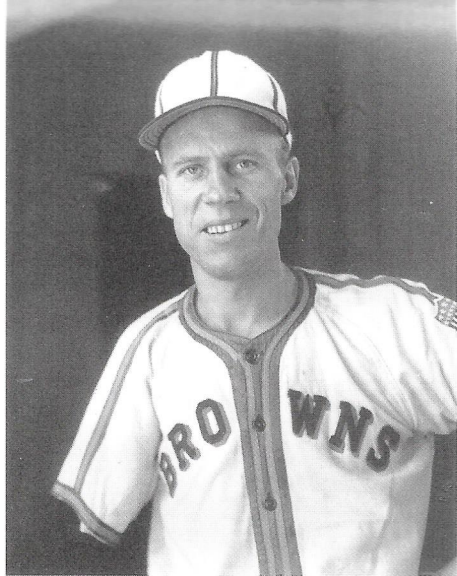
followed the New York Yankees. Rooting for them was as patriotic as the American flag. They had quite a team too, especially the nineteen-twenty-seven squad with Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and the famous "Murderer's Row." I still think that that twenty-seven team was the greatest to have ever played the game.

Besides following the sport, we played it from morning 'til night. Hanover had a team on every street and there were seven diamonds in the town. Kids were always playing ball. We were a rough

and tumble bunch of kids, the sons of coal miners. It wouldn't take much to get into a fight, either. When that happened, you stuck up for your own. That meant that if a Lithuanian kid got into a scrap with a Welsh or English kid all the Litvaks would defend him. We were like a big family and baseball was our favorite pastime. In fact, as a kid, all I ever dreamed about was making the big leagues and playing in Yankee Stadium.

When you lost your arm at the age of six, how did you expect to play professionally?

If anything, losing the arm made me more determined to fulfill my dream of playing in the majors. Initially, the other kids made me a batboy just to make me feel part of the gang. I didn't want their sympathy, I wanted to play ball. I knew that I had a better eye for hitting than most of those kids; I just had to learn how to hit and throw with one arm. The trick was to train myself to become left-handed. Until then I had been a right-hander. So, I'd go up to the railroad tracks in town, find a long stick, and



Pete Gray with the St. Louis Browns in 1945.

throw up a rock to practice my hitting. I'd do that for hours and hours every day to develop a quick wrist. Hitting was actually the easy part. Learning to field and throw was the real challenge.

I knew that there was no way that I could play the infield because of the quick change of direction and reaction time that was required to stop a ball to my right. But if I could find a way to release the ball from my glove quickly after fielding it, I could become a very good outfielder.

Eventually, I learned that by removing almost all the padding from my glove and wearing it on my fingertips with the little finger purposely extended outside of the mitt, that I was able to catch the ball and exchange it to my throwing hand in one swift motion. I'd catch the ball in my glove and stick it under the stub of my right arm. Then I'd squeeze the ball out of my glove with my arm and it would roll across my chest, drop to my stomach, and into my hand. My small finger prevented it from bouncing away.

By the time I was sixteen, I was a better player than those other kids. It wasn't because I had any more ability either. It was simply because I *respected* the game more than they did. I worked damnside harder than anyone else to become a good ballplayer. When you only have one arm, you learn to take nothing for granted!

If I was to choose one moment when I knew that I could make it to the big leagues if only given the chance, it would have to be watching Babe Ruth's "called shot" in game three of the 1932 World Series between the Yankees and the

Chicago Cubs. I was seventeen years old at the time and I hitchhiked all the way from Nanticoke to Chicago just to see that series. It was quite a series, to say the least! There was some bad blood between those two teams and in game three anything could have happened.

New York was leading the Series two games to one. Chicago had a diehard attitude and fought their way back into the Series during game three. Ruth came to bat in the top of the fifth inning with the score tied at four. Cub pitcher Charlie Root got the first pitch across the plate for a called strike. Then Ruth held up his hand and pointed to the centerfield bleachers, signaling where he was going to hit the next pitch. Cub fans were booing as loud as they could. Some even began throwing fruit at the Babe. Ruth took the next pitch for a second strike and repeated the same gesture with his hand. The stadium was going wild by now. No one could believe that Ruth was that confident to be able to call his own home run. He was. The Babe drilled the next pitch deep into the centerfield stands and the Yankees went on to win that game, seven to five, and sweep the series.

That event marked a turning point in my life. Until that time, I dreamed of playing in the major leagues, but thought it was out of the question. After all, who ever heard of a one-armed ballplayer? But when the Babe hit that pitch into the bleachers for a home run, I said to myself, "Pete, the whole trick is confidence in yourself. If you are sure you can do it, you will do it."

Aside from your fierce determination, were there any other motivations to make it to the big leagues?

Sure there was. I sure as hell didn't want to work in the coalmines. When I saw my father come home every day, dead tired and for little pay, I knew that I wanted something better. Coal mining was a dangerous business and I'm not just talking about working in the pits either.

When I was growing up in the twenties and thirties, the anthracite industry was in decline. The demand for coal was down across the nation and the Glen Alden Coal Company, which operated many of the collieries in the area, began to shut down many operations. Hanover felt the effects more severely than many other mining towns in the Wyoming Valley. Of the three major collieries in the area, Auchincloss was permanently closed, Bliss was only open for work one

Truesdale—which had been the lifeline of our community and the largest employer in the valley—had its workforce cut by half and its working schedule limited to one hundred and fifty days. By 1935, there was trouble.

The Slovak and Lithuanian miners created their own union, the United Anthracite Miners of Pennsylvania [UAM] that rebelled against the United Mine Workers of America [UMWA] leadership, who they believed were siding with the owners instead of acting for the welfare of miners. The UAM demanded a policy of job equalization and in 1935 went on strike to force an agreement. When the UMW refused, state police had to be sent into Hanover to prevent any vandalism. It was like the Mollie Maguires around here.

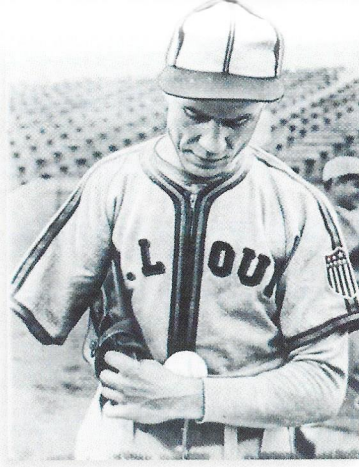
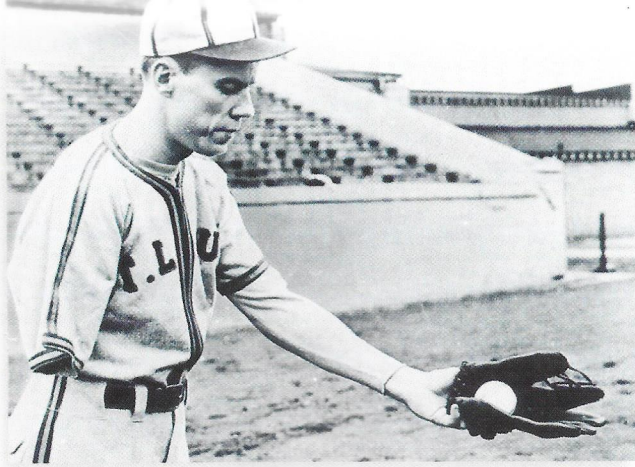
You had to watch your step. Our family depended on the Glen Alden Coal Company for a living. Not only did my father work for them, but so did my brothers, as well as my mother. That's right! My mother went to work in the coalmines, which was unheard of for a woman back at that time. She could be just as tough as any man down there. And she did it while trying to raise five children too!

Anyway, when you live under those conditions, you tend to be hungrier than most other ballplayers who come out of different parts of the country. *I know* I was

Can you describe the nature of anthracite region baseball, its organization, and its role in the community?

In Hanover alone, there were four teams that were organized by ethnic backgrounds: the Crescents were a Slovak team; the Hanover Athletic Club was primarily Welsh and English; St. John's Orthodox Church supported a team; and St. Joseph's Catholic Church sponsored the Lithuanians, or "Lits" for short. Each team belonged to a different league. Since I played for the Lits, I competed in the Luzerne County League, which was one of nearly half-a-dozen associations in the Wyoming Valley at that time. The Lits team was more of a family than a ball club. Most of us started playing ball together in grade school. We lived in the same neighborhood and attended the same church.

When I first began playing for the Lits in thirty-four, the dues were twenty-five cents a month. Our season began in early May and usually ended in September because we made the playoffs. Games were played on Sundays after church



Gray demonstrates catching and throwing by slipping his glove under the right arm stump while rolling and dropping the ball into his left hand.

and our fans would gather along the sidelines to root us on. There would be as many as two to three thousand people at some of those games. Everyone in town came—mothers with their children would as soda vendors or ticket sellers, the old-timers who had come over from Europe sat and kibitzed with one another, trying to figure out just what the hell we were doing on the field, and some of the fellas would pass the hat for a donation. It was a social affair, something you just don't see anymore.

How did you break into professional baseball? Did a major league team scout you?

I wished someone would have scouted me. As it was, I had to make my own breaks by going to try-out camps. The first pro club I tried out for was the St. Louis Cardinals. They had a try-out camp in Minersville [in Schuylkill County] back in the mid-thirties. There were over six hundred others there and each of had a number on our back. After they called my number they watched me for a few minutes and said I'd never make it in organized ball. What was I going to say? So I just turned around and headed back home.

A few years later a friend gave me a letter to meet with Connie Mack, the owner and manager of the Philadelphia Athletics. When he saw me, he said, "Son, I've got men with two arms who can't play this game." He never let me on to the field to show him what I could do. That was the biggest problem—they'd never give me a real chance to show what I could do.

I continued to play Sunday ball with

the Lits through the early forties, and I finally caught the attention of a fella who had some connections in the Canadian-American League. He asked me if I was interested in playing every day and I jumped at the chance. A few days later the Three Rivers Club phoned me and we agreed to a contract. When I got up to Montreal the manager met my train. I had a coat draped over my stump and when I took it off the guy almost passed out. Evidently, nobody told him that I was missing an arm!

They decided to give me a look anyway and things worked out pretty well for me. In forty-two games I collected sixty-one hits, thirteen RBIs [runs batted in] and scored thirty-one runs. My .381 batting average caught the attention of the Memphis Chicks in the Southern Association, a minor league affiliate of the St. Louis Browns, and in 1943 I headed for Tennessee.

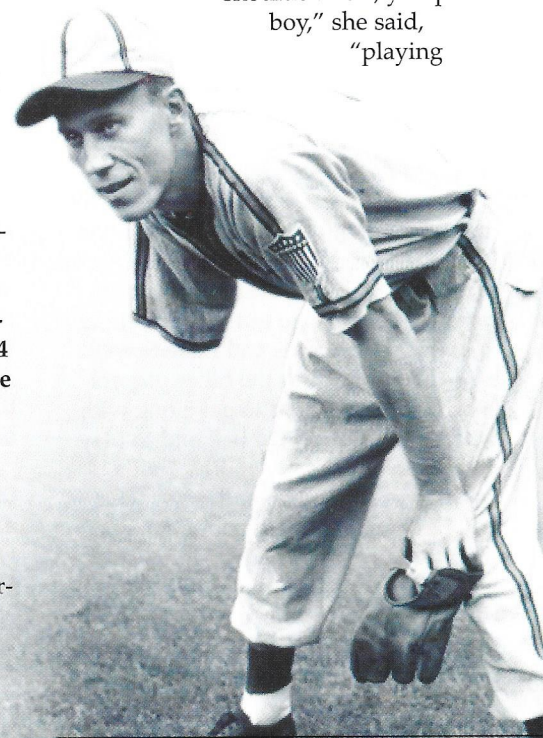
You compiled impressive statistics during your two years in Memphis. In 1944 alone, you hit .333, collected twenty-one doubles, 60 RBIs, and stole sixty-eight bases, which tied a Southern Association record set by Hall-of-Famer Kiki Cuyler. Those stats were so convincing that you captured the Most Valuable Player Award for the league.

I learned to play within my limits during those two seasons in Memphis. The secret to my success was my speed and batting eye. I was plenty fast so I could beat out the bunts for a base hit, as well as take the extra base on a hit to the opposite field. Those sixty-eight stolen bases were a good indication of my ability. As far as hitting was concerned, I sim-

ply realized that I didn't have the power to hit home runs regularly, so I tried to advance the runner when the situation called for it and to hit for average.

I was also more relaxed at Memphis. It was fun to play ball there. Because of that I was much less sensitive about my missing arm and could even laugh about it at times. I remember this one afternoon after we won a close game.

I was jogging for the locker room to take a shower when a lady fan reached over the runway and grabbed me by the shoulder. "Oh, you poor boy," she said, "playing



Pete Gray's defensive stance during a pregame practice session in 1945 with the St. Louis Browns.

baseball with just one arm and running and throwing and swinging that bat so hard. It must be an awfully tough job for you." She kept running on like that for five minutes. I'll admit that I was getting a little tired of waiting for her to finish, but I stuck it out. "And how did you lose your arm?" she finally asked. Without a second thought I said, "A lady in Brooklyn talked it off, ma'am," and I sprinted to the showers!

If there was any question left in the minds of big league owners whether or not I could make it at the top, those two seasons in Memphis eliminated them. The next season I was playing the outfield for the St. Louis Browns and in May I had fulfilled my childhood dream of playing in Yankee Stadium.

What kind of team was the 1945 St. Louis Browns?

The other Browns players seemed to think that the forty-five team was every bit as good as the forty-four pennant winner because nearly everybody was back. To be sure, Luke Sewell was a fine manager. He knew and understood the players and was an excellent strategist. But you have to remember that Hank Greenburg, who had been off in war in forty-four, had returned to the majors near the end of the forty-five season and that Hal Newhouser [Detroit Tigers' Hall of Famer] was putting together another fine year on the mound. That gave a decided advantage to Detroit which eventually did capture the American League flag. We finished in third place, mostly because our pitching slumped. There wasn't a twenty-game winner to be found on our staff.

I'll admit that I didn't have as much fun playing with the Browns as I did in Memphis. I sort of kept to myself. [Short-stop] Vern Stephens and I were pretty close. We would go out for something to eat after the game, and Luke Sewell was good to me. But the other players had it that I was hard to get along with. Truth is, I came to play ball and to play to the very best of my ability. That's what I was paid to do and that's what I did. Nothing else really mattered, nor should it have mattered to anyone else.

How do you rate your performance in that one season of major league baseball with the St. Louis Browns?

Statistically, I didn't have a good year. I appeared in only seventy-seven games and hit .218 for the season with seven RBIs and only five stolen bases. I gave it my all every time I set foot on the field. I could hit anybody's fastball. You name



Gray (with bat) encouraged other amputees to show that they "could compete with the best" during a visit to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C., in 1945.

him, Bob Feller [Cleveland Indians' Hall of Famer], Hal Newhouser, I could hit 'em. But I had trouble with the breaking pitch. Had I been thrown nothing but fastballs, I would have been a .300 hitter in the majors. When the pitchers discovered that I couldn't hit the slower-breaking balls, they fed me a steady diet of curves.

I figured I had a bad year and I knew that I was going to be sent somewhere else—but I didn't care just as long as I was playing baseball and that it was every day. Playing major league baseball is great when you're hot, but when you're not having much success at the plate, it can be really tough.

Why do baseball historians fail to credit you for the remarkable achievement of being a one-armed major leaguer?

Actually, I think they do admit to the fact that I was an exception for what I

had but I always felt they never credited me for my athletic ability. You know, I never wanted to be viewed as a *one-armed* player as much as a player, period. Whether you liked it or not, I realized that I had to make good as a gate attraction. After all, the Browns were willing to give me my big chance, it was my duty to make money for them.

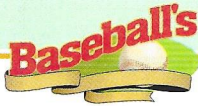
As far as historians are concerned, well, they're going to write whatever they want to and I can't change that. Those who say that my performance cost the Browns a chance to repeat as American League champions should examine the team's statistics more carefully. The pitching left much to be desired. With the exception of Bob Muncrief, who managed to post thirteen victories, no one was able to duplicate their performance from the forty-four season. The hitting wasn't much better.

With the exception of Vern Stephens who led the league with twenty-four home runs and hit for a .289 average, no other regular hit above .277 or collected more than seven home runs. The team batting average dipped to .249, down three points from the previous season. And the forty-five Browns scored eighty-seven fewer runs than they had in nineteen-forty-four when they captured the pennant. As a member of that forty-five team, I'll admit that my performance contributed to those mediocre statistics, but a team is made up of more than one person. It's a bit presumptuous to say that any one person cost the team a chance to capture the league championship.

Little has been written about the inspirational role you played on the home front during World War II. What do you feel was your greatest contribution as a professional baseball player during the war years?

In nineteen-forty-four, the Philadelphia Sportswriters honored me as the "Most Courageous Athlete of the Year." However, I had mixed emotions over that award. As much as I appreciated it, I had to admit there was no courage about me. Courage belonged on the battlefield during World War II, not on the baseball diamond. I only hope that my example proved to any boy who had been physically handicapped during the war that he, too, could compete with the best. If

I'll admit that I didn't have as much fun playing with the Browns as I did in Memphis. I sort of kept to myself. Vern Stephens and I were pretty close.



my professional baseball career accomplished that, then I've done my little bit.

You have become something of a "folk hero" in northeastern Pennsylvania. The 1986 made for television movie, *A Winner Never Quits*, has rekindled public interest in your career. How do you feel about this?

Baseball is still a pretty big part of my life. I still follow the Yankees and, on occasion, go and see them play. You're right about that movie. It has generated a lot of interest in my career, more than I can take at times. Although I am flattered that people remember me, some of the requests that come in are unbelievable. I've already turned down appearances on *Good Morning America* and the *David Letterman Show*. I just don't feel like doing that kind of thing.

I'll admit that I have a soft spot for kids, though. I get a lot of mail from

them requesting my autograph and I answer every one of them. I really believe that professional athletes, whether they are still playing or if they've retired, have that kind of obligation to the kids. I know how much the game and its heroes meant to me as a young boy and if I can pass along that tradition, well, that's important to me.

It's amazing how much interest these kids have in my career. You know, it's been fifty years since I played for the Browns, but kids whose parents hadn't even been born at the time, stop me on the street and ask for my autograph. They've probably seen the movie or hear some of the old-timers talk about my playing days and ask, "How'd you ever play in the majors with one arm?" I get a big kick out of it and tell 'em, "You know, son, there's a lot of fellas with two good arms that don't make it!" I guess I have the satisfaction of knowing that I was one of the very few who did. ❖

William C. Kashatus, of Paoli, is a regular contributor to Pennsylvania Heritage. He is the author of numerous magazine and newspaper articles and several critically acclaimed books, including One-Armed Wonder: Pete Gray, Wartime Baseball and the American Dream, published in 1995.

FOR FURTHER READING

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Author William C. Kashatus (center) introduced Philadelphia Phillies' Tug McGraw to Pete Gray in 2000. Gray never lost interest in baseball.

