

PETE GRAY PURSUED AND FULFILLED HIS UNLIKELY DREAMS

Brownie outfielder honored as an inspiration to soldiers returning home after World War II.

BY WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

In 1945, Pete Gray played in 77 games for the St. Louis Browns. He collected 51 hits, 8 for extra bases, and compiled a .218 batting average. As an outfielder, he made 162 put-outs, 3 assists, and 7 errors for a .959 fielding average.

What the statistics don't tell us is that Gray, who died last year at the age of 87, competed at the major league level with just one arm.

Gray was an inspiration to servicemen returning home from World War II as amputees, and to many people in Pennsylvania's anthracite coal region where he was born and resided.

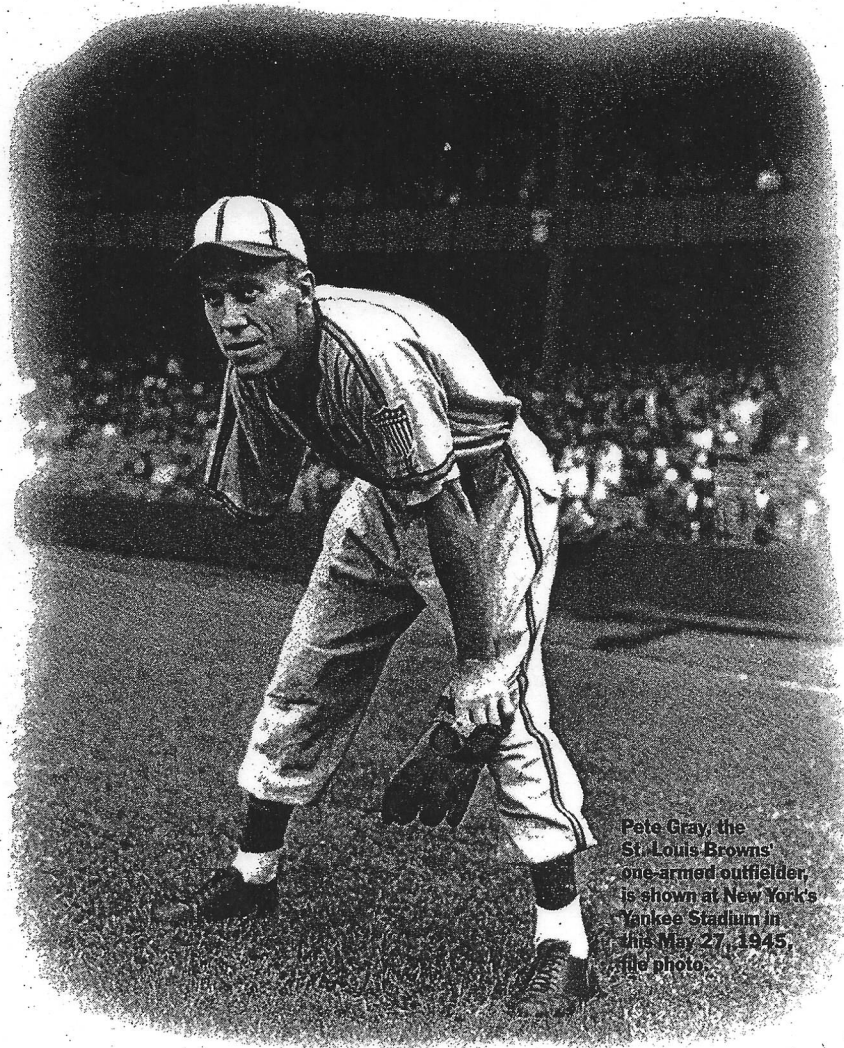
Next Sunday, August 24, Gray will be recognized by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission with a roadside marker in his hometown of Nanticoke, Pennsylvania.

Most baseball historians have credited Gray's professional career to the lack of quality players in the major leagues during World War II. Some claimed that the Browns purchased him as a gate attraction, while others viewed him as a curiosity and public-relations ploy to divert the attention of a war-weary nation.

Nor did Gray enjoy the whole-hearted respect of his teammates, many of whom thought he was cantankerous and believed that his presence in the line-up cost the Browns the chance to repeat as American League champions.

But that wasn't the Pete Gray I remember meeting in 1966 when my father first introduced us.

The son of Lithuanian immigrants who came to this country to look for their American Dream in the coal mines of northeastern Pennsylvania, Pete Wyshner (his real name) showed me how, in one swift motion, he could catch a baseball, remove it from his glove and flip it to his throwing hand. I sat in awe as he asked me, a 6-year-old kid at the time, to remember him when I made it to the big leagues. Gray respected my dreams, and he became my very first hero.



Pete Gray, the St. Louis Browns one-armed outfielder, is shown at New York's Yankee Stadium in this May 27, 1945, file photo.

To be sure, Gray had his own dream — to play in Yankee Stadium — and the loss of his right arm in a truck accident at the age of six did not stop him from pursuing it. Instead, he taught himself to hit and field with his left hand, changed his name to "Gray" to avoid ethnic prejudice and climbed the ladder from local semi-pro ball to the minor league Memphis Chicks. There, his .333 batting average and league-leading 68 stolen bases made him the MVP of the Southern Association in 1944.

Nicknamed "One Armed Wonder" by sportswriters, Gray was signed by the St. Louis Browns the following year. On May 19, 1945, he realized his boyhood dream: He collected 5 hits and 2 RBIs as the Browns swept the Yankees in a double header — at Yankee Stadium.

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Fans across the nation adored the one-armed rookie and turned out by the thousands to watch him perform. Gray's on-field exploits and relentless drive inspired the disabled servicemen he visited in army hospitals and rehabilitation centers, reassuring them that they could still lead productive lives.

Gray's major league career ended on V-J Day, when baseball's stars returned from the battlefield. From 1946 to 1949 he was a journeyman minor lea-

guer, playing for the Toldeo Mud Hens, Elmira Pioneers and Dallas Stars. Left to wonder if he had made the majors on his playing abilities or had been exploited by baseball, Pete returned home to Nanticoke, where he struggled with gambling and alcohol and lived in near poverty.

A 1986 made-for-TV movie "A Winner Never Quits," starring Keith Carradine as Gray, renewed public interest in the elderly ballplayer's career. It also helped to restore a sense of integrity to his contribution to morale on the home front during World War II.

Though Pete Gray is no longer with us, his example is an enduring reminder of the power of dreams, the lessons that life teaches in pursuit of those dreams and the magic that occurs when a dream comes true.