

# PETE GRAY

ON MAY 20, 1945, a crowd of thirty-six thousand packed Yankee Stadium to watch a double-header that pitted New York's finest against the defending American League champions, the St. Louis Browns. The Yankees, who had finished third the previous season behind the Browns and the Detroit Tigers, had something to prove that afternoon. Even though World War II had stripped their lineup of star players like Joe DiMaggio, Phil Rizzuto, and "Red" Ruffing, their traditional Yankee pride inspired the belief that 1945 would be "their year."

Game one of the double-header got underway with the Brown's rookie outfielder, Pete Gray, 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 a mad bull, kicking the mound in frustration. By the end of the afternoon, Gray had reached base five times with four hits. He scored twice and knocked in two runs while fielding his position flawlessly in nine chances. The Browns swept the double-header, ten to one and five to two.

Any player would have been proud of that performance, but for the St. Louis rookie it was a dream come true. As a boy growing up in the anthracite coal region of Pennsylvania's Wyoming Valley, Peter Wyshner—who adopted the name "Gray" when he turned pro in the 1940s—had committed himself to fulfilling that dream. More impressively, he managed it all with only one arm, having lost his right arm above the elbow in a grocery truck accident at the age of six. A natural right-hander prior to the

mishap, Gray subsequently learned to hit, catch, and throw with his left hand. And he did it so well that for one glorious season he played for a championship-caliber American League team.

"The only thing I ever wanted to do as a kid was to play in Yankee Stadium," Gray, now in his eighties, recalls. "I had always been a big New York fan, and Babe Ruth was one of my childhood heroes." In fact, it was the Bambino's *called shot* against the Chicago Cubs in the 1932 World Series that inspired Gray in his quest to play in the "House that Ruth Built." At age seventeen, Gray observed the famous round-tripper from Wrigley Field's bleachers. "After that called shot I said to myself, 'Pete, the whole trick is confidence in yourself. If you are sure you can do it, you will do it.' And it happened: in 1945 my dream came true."

For the son of a Lithuanian immigrant coal miner, major-league baseball was an escape from the difficult times and uncertain future experienced by his father. "When you have that kind of motivation," says Gray with a wide, engaging grin, "you tend to be hungrier than most other ballplayers who come out of different parts of the country. I *know* I was." So while his father and brothers went to work in the mines, Pete Gray devoted himself to baseball.

"I'd spend hours just flipping up rocks and tin cans and hitting 'em with a club," says Gray. "But I had some trouble fielding the ball. I just couldn't figure out how to get rid of it after I made a catch." Eventually, however, Gray devised a way to catch the ball and shed his glove in one swift motion. "I'd catch the ball in my glove and stick it under the stub of my right arm. I'd sort of squeeze the ball out of my glove with my arm, allowing it to roll across my chest and drop right into my hand."

Although many scouts would like to take credit for discovering Gray's talent, the one-armed sensation made things happen for himself through sheer determination. A visit to a tryout camp for the St. Louis Cardinals in the mid-1930s ended in a turn-down, as did an interview several years later with Connie Mack, the owner-manager of the Philadelphia Athletics. "Son," Mack told him, "I've got men with two arms who can't play this game." Gray's voice falters at the memory: "He never let me on the field to show him what I could do."

Gray finally got his chance in 1942 with the Three Rivers (Quebec) Club in the Canadian-American League. In only 42 games, the one-armed wonder collected 61 hits, 13 RBIs, and 31 runs scored—compiling a batting average of .381 before breaking his collarbone while trying to steal home. His performance caught the attention of the Memphis Chicks of the Southern Association, who signed Gray in 1943. "The two seasons I spent in Memphis were the best of my entire professional baseball career," he recalls, "especially 1944 when I hit .333 and collected 21 doubles and 60 RBIs. And the 68 bases I stole tied a league record. If anyone had any doubts about my ability to play in the majors, those statistics and the Most Valuable Player Award I earned quickly eliminated them." Gray was signed by the St. Louis Browns the following year.

Although Gray weighed only 150 pounds, the six-foot-tall outfielder's left arm was so powerful that he could wield a 36-ounce bat—heavier than those used by most major-league hitters at the time. Pitchers tried to take advantage of the one-armed rookie (who had to begin his swing early to compensate for his handicap) by blowing fastballs by him, but Gray's superb eye and good bat control

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enabled him to excel as a fastball hitter. But he does admit to having trouble with the breaking pitch. "Had I been thrown nothing but fastballs, I would have been a .300 hitter in the majors. But when the pitchers discovered that I couldn't hit the slower breaking balls, they fed me a steady diet of curves."

For wounded war veterans, the one-armed outfielder—who asked no sympathy from anyone and competed on even terms with all rivals—became a heroic symbol on the home front. Gray's example gave these veterans hope that they, too, could succeed in whatever career they chose as long as they gave it their all. He delivered this message on playing fields as well as in veterans' hospitals where he spoke with amputees, reassuring them that there was hope in their futures.

How does Gray view his place in baseball history? With great modesty he responds, "When Philadelphia sportswriters honored me in 1943 as the 'Most Courageous Athlete of the Year,' I had mixed emotions. As much as I appreciated that honor, I had to admit that 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 my professional baseball career accomplished that, then I've done my little bit."

World War II and the effect draft call-ups had on the national pastime may have helped to make Pete Gray a major-league baseball player. But it also helped make him an authentic American hero ★

Historian William C. Kashatus is author of *One-Armed Wonder: Pete Gray, Wartime Baseball*, and *The American Dream*, published this year by McFarland & Company.