

Pete Gray: World War II's real hero on the homefront

By BILL KASHATUS

When I was 13 years old my father introduced me to Pete Gray, the one-armed baseball player who captured the attention of the



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sports world in 1945 when he played outfield for the St. Louis Browns. Gray, who was in his mid-fifties when we met, impressed me as a kind-hearted, gentle human being who took a genuine interest in young people.

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."

Gray was a young boy's hero, what I came to expect of every professional baseball player. What I didn't know — and would not realize until I grew older — was that while Gray was a hero to many, he had been manipulated by club owners as well as the media, maligned by many of his own teammates, and left to wonder, just how good a ball player he really was.

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I know Gray was a phenomenal baseball player and one who can spin a yarn of baseball tales to fascinate any listener and yet still keep you guessing about him.

Until recently, I had been under the impression that Gray was born on March 6, 1917 as all of his professional baseball records indicate. When I congratulated him on his upcoming 75th birthday, he chuckled and said, "Unofficially, I'm 77. I was born in 1915. Back in '43 Doc Prothro, the manager of the (Memphis) Chicks had me change my birthdate to 1917, making me a few years younger and more attractive to the (St. Louis) Browns."

Regardless of his age, I hope that Pete Gray will be remembered as a true inspiration to the American public at a time when this nation and its youth needed a hero on the home front.

Most baseball historians credit Gray's professional career to the depletion of quality players from the major leagues during World War II. Some claimed that the Browns purchased Gray as a gate attraction, while others viewed the one-armed outfielder as a "curiosity item" or public relations ploy to divert the attention of a war-weary nation. More disturbing is the fact that Gray did not enjoy the wholehearted respect of his teammates, many of whom believed that his presence in the line-up cost the 1945 Browns the chance to repeat as American League champions.

An introvert who was highly sensitive about his missing arm, Gray took these criticisms to heart. He wanted to be judged by his ability, not to be exploited for his handicap. Nearly 50 years later, when I spoke with him in his hometown of Nanticoke, it appeared as if Pete was still hurting from that treatment and wondering whether he had proven himself as a professional athlete.

When I pointed out the fact that he had compiled a .333 batting average, stole 68 bases, and won the Southern Association's Most Valuable Player Award in 1944 when he played for the Memphis Chicks, it did not seem to convince my aging hero that those minor league achievements could make up for the .218 average he posted with the Browns in his only major league season. Sadly, Pete Gray, just like the

baseball writers and his own teammates, had missed the point.

America's involvement in World War II probably did help to make Gray a professional baseball player. Any professional athlete will admit, if he is honest, that a certain degree of luck and circumstance favored them in their climb to the top. But once Gray arrived at the top, he did more than his fair share for baseball and for the nation.

For wounded veterans and their families, the one-armed outfielder became a heroic symbol on the home front. Gray asked for no sympathy from anyone, rather he stepped up to the plate, holding his bat in his left hand — a picture of defiance — and he competed on even terms with all rivals. 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 across the country as well as in veterans hospitals where he spoke with amputees, reassuring them that there was hope in their futures. And yet, when he was praised for his courage on the ball field Gray, with characteristic humility, remarked: "There is no courage about me. Courage belongs on the battlefield, not on the baseball diamond. But if I can prove to any body who has been physically handicapped that he, too, can compete with the best — well, then, I've done my little bit."

World War II might have helped to make Pete Gray a major league baseball player. But there is no question that it made him an American hero, something that is difficult to find on or off the playing field these days. Happy birthday, Pete, and thanks for your inspiration.