

CAL ABRAMS

On November 20, 1980, Eli Wohlgernter interviewed Cal Abrams and his wife, May. Now housed in the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library, the record of this interview goes beyond statistics, to which British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli disdained in a pungent remark, often quoted and wrongly attributed: “There are lies, damned lies, and statistics.” With regard to Calvin Ross Abrams, whose lifetime batting average of .269 in a truncated eight year major league career, the bare record is less than overwhelming. Abrams’s impact, however, bears closer scrutiny and more appreciation.

Born in Philadelphia on March 2, 1924, Calvin at three weeks of age moved with his parents to Brooklyn. He lived in various sections: Coney Island, Bensonhurst, Sheepshead Bay, and Flatbush, where he grew up in the 1930s listening to Dodger games on the radio and honing his baseball skills on the sandlots of his adopted borough. For the ambitious young player, Brooklyn, as he recalled, offered the best of everything: Chinese food (dinner for twenty-five cents), handball, basketball courts, baseball fields at the Parade Grounds adjacent to Prospect Park, dancing (his passion), and entertainment in the downtown section, the equal of Manhattan events. Cal’s father, a frustrated athlete, pushed his son and *shepped nachas* (derived vicarious joy) from his success—so much so that Abrams likened his “overly critical father” to Jimmy Piersall’s dad (Wohlgernter Interview, (I-26).

Cal attended James Madison High School (two blocks from my current residence); where Brooklyn Dodger scout Joe Labate saw him hit a mammoth home run in a game. Shortly thereafter, Labate signed Abrams to a Dodger contract. Assigned to a Class D Pony League team, Abrams played in only 19 games, hitting .327 before joining the U.S. Anti-Aircraft Artillery on January 22, 1943. Serving in both the European and Pacific theaters, Cal earned two battle stars in the Pacific.

Released three years later, on January 17, Abrams resumed his baseball career with the Class B Danville Dodgers in 1946. In this, his first full year of organized baseball, he hit a robust .331. Basically a slap hitter, the left-handed young outfielder got most of his base hits to the left side of the diamond. The following two years found Abrams in the Double A Southern Association sporting a Mobile Bears uniform. With 203 hits in 589 official turns at bat, Abrams hit a hefty .345 in 1947 and .337 in 1948. Moving laterally to Fort Worth in the Texas League, Cal continued to wield a hot bat with a .336 average and a measurably colder bat when summoned to the major leagues. As a Brooklyn Dodger, competing on a team with an abundance of outfielders, Abrams managed only two hits in 26 at bats. Never a home run hitter, the Brooklyn native traveled around the minor league circuit where he never hit below .300. 1950 was no exception. Starting off in Double A again; this time as a Jewish Saint Paul Saint, Abrams hit a solid .333 in 58 games before he was called up to the major leagues, as in the Count Basie chant: “One more time!” (Abrams’ minor league statistics come from a treasure trove: SABR Minor Leagues Database: Cal Abrams).

Cal changed his uniform number from 36 to 18 or *chai* (life) as he affirmed his Judiasm. *Gurnisht helfn!* Nothing helped during that traumatic year, not even *chai*. With a less than potent .205 batting average in 44 games, primarily as a pinch hitter, Abrams missed his chance for glory on the last day—a day that lives in infamy for all Dodger

fans--on October 1 of the 1950 season. Brooklyn trailed Philadelphia by only one game. A win over the Phillies would lead to a playoff series. Two aces—Robin Roberts and Don Newcombe—hooked up in a pitcher’s duel. Knotted at 1-1 in the ninth inning, Abrams, sent up to pinch hit, worked the count full and walked. He moved to second on a single by Pee Wee Reese. Duke Snider stepped to the plate with two men on and no out. He hit a bullet into center field, where the speedy but weak-armed Richie Ashburn darted in and fired a strike to the plate to catch the ill-fated Abrams by ten to fifteen feet (or a mile in Brooklynese). Jackie Robinson was intentionally walked to fill the bases. Carl Furillo fouled out and Gil Hodges flied to right for the third out. A potential winning run was wasted by a stupid signal from that miscreant of a third base coach, Milt Stock who sent Abrams on a suicidal dash to the plate. In their account, Peter and Joachim Horvitz, *The Big Book of Jewish Baseball...* make two glaring errors on this one play. They locate the game in Philadelphia rather than Ebbets Field and claim that Abrams’s out at the plate ended the ninth inning.

In the tenth inning, Dick Sisler hit an opposite field three run home run into left-field bleachers against a wilted Don Newcombe: sending the “Whiz Kids” of Philadelphia to their first World Series since 1915 if only to serve as sacrificial lambs for baseball’s imperial rulers, the New York Yankees who proceeded to sweep the Phillies in four consecutive games.

Abrams confided to a crowd of baseball fans gathered at the Brooklyn Historical Society in the early 1990s that he could have beaten Ashburn’s throw were it not for a pick-off signal that brought the Phillie centerfielder into a shallow position close to second base. Robin Robert confirmed this account at the Babe Ruth Conference at Hofstra University in 1995. Phillies catcher Stan Lopata called for a pick-off (in a different account it was a sign for a sacrifice bunt). To cover for a possible errant throw, Ashburn rushed into an extremely shallow center field position. Roberts evidently missed or ignored this signal and Ashburn had the advantage of a short throw to catch the lumbering Abrams. To an incredulous audience in Brooklyn, Abrams insisted that he was a fast runner. Given his ability to hit triples if not home runs as his records attest, perhaps Calvin really ran fast and we doubting Thomases, albeit Jewish skeptics, were dead wrong. Branch Rickey, however, did not like the way Abrams ran the base paths (Lowenfish, 483).

Redemption seemed possible in 1951 when Cal hit the road running and batted at a .450 clip while Mickey Mantle in his rookie year floundered prompting a curious *New York Post* [when it was real newspaper rather than a Murdoch rag] headline: “Mantle, Shmantle, we’ve got Abie!” When Jewish fans feted Abrams with a “Night,” he received many gifts except the one he craved most: a spot in the Dodger lineup. Cal and May Abrams insisted that it was anti-Semitism that prompted Dodger manager Charlie Dressen to bench the young outfielder who finished the year—in and out of the lineup—with a competent if not sensational BA of .280. To illustrate his plight, Abrams told interviewer Wohlglerner that the Dressen sent him, Abrams, up to pinch hit for Dodger immortal, team captain Pee Wee Reese with two strikes in the ninth inning. He popped out (Golenbock, *Bums...*, 267). He also alleged that Dressen ordered him to rattle Reds’ Manager Rogers Hornsby with verbal abuse from the bench just before he was traded to Cincinnati. A fact checker discovered that Luke Sewell was manager at that time. Hornsby replaced him much later (for details of this account, shades of a great Japanese

film, *Rashomon* see snopes.com: Cal Abrams). Did time play tricks with Abrams's sense of truth and its consequences?

When asked why he had not achieved more in baseball, Cal blamed his managers, specifically, Charlie Dressen and Paul Richards: arguing that they were anti-Semitic. Brought up in 1949 after Carl Furillo, regular right fielder, was "beaned," Cal had high hopes. No doubt Abrams carried the mark of Cain when, on the last day of National League play in the last inning, he was thrown out at the plate: defusing a Dodger rally and ending a tie with the Phillies of Philadelphia. Although third base coach, Milt Stock waved him home and was justly fired for his reckless decision, Dodger loyalist pinned the proverbial tail on Abrams's backside. He emerged as a convenient scapegoat.

In 1951, enjoying a hot streak of 17 hits in 28 ABs, a gaudy .475 average, Abrams was rewarded with removal from the starting lineup. He ended his last full season with the Dodgers at .280. Traded to Cincinnati Reds in 1952 after appearing in only ten games with Brooklyn, Abrams was greeted by a new boss, Gabe Paul who shared his Jewish connection. Later that season, Rogers Hornsby "a coarse, crude man" and a notorious anti-Semite arrived as the new Reds' manager. Despite a respectable .278 BA, Abrams was traded to the Pirates of Pittsburgh, who at that time played more like the Pirates of Penzance. In America's principal town of steel, Cal hit a career high of 15 home runs in 119 games. Finally, he had learned to pull pitches to right field. Not unlike the proverbial wandering Jew, Abrams shuffled off to Baltimore, where he thrived under the aegis of a competent manager, Jimmy Dykes. Abrams hit .293 to lead his team in that category. Hitting over .300 late in the season, Calvin wanted to protect his average by not playing but Dykes refused. Jewish fans feted, however, Abrams with a celebratory "Day"—on which, again, he did not play.

In retrospect, Abrams's admiration for Dodger manager Charley Dressen was also well under control. He complained to author Peter Golenbock (*Bums...*, 1984, p. 267) that Dressen "played me enough to give me rope to hang myself." Was this charge sour grapes or an accurate assessment of the young outfielder's predicament? To be sure, the Brooklyn nine had many capable players, though no angels, in the outfield. Nevertheless, the record shows that Abrams sported impressive numbers when he played, regularly. His minor league achievements are truly impressive.

So what happened to prevent the success of this local boy with Jewish roots? After all, New York pro-teams from the Giants on tried to beef up box office receipts through the acquisition of Andy Cohen: a so-called "Rabbi of Swat;" later with Phil Weintraub, Sid Gordon, Goody Rosen, Mike Epstein, Shawn Green, and baseball's first designated hitter Ron Bloomberg (no relation to our former billionaire mayor) spring to mind. True, Hank Greenberg opted for a Detroit connection and Sandy Koufax, one of the best pitchers in baseball, could not hit a lick. Rod Carew, who married a Jewish woman, went to Minneapolis, then to LA while a Jewish convert Elliot Maddox ran afoul of manager Billy Martin, allegedly a rabid anti-Semite, and despite pushing Bobby Murcer out of center field could not stay the course. He too was swept away in one of many Steinbrenner's fruitless trades. So what can we conclude from the Abrams' saga?

For a possible answer, we revert to the 1980 interview, wherein Cal and his wife, May engaged in self-deprecating humor, that is until they confronted the unpretty poison of anti-Semitism. Cal recalled verbal rather than physical abuse. Raised in a secular family, Abrams adapted an "avoidance response" (re: Gordon Allport). Finally, in the

majors as Dodger Rookie, Abrams was approached by Coach Jake Pitler, a fellow Jew, who advised him to take off on Jewish holidays. Afraid to jeopardize his position, the young Dodger initially refused to do so. In later years, Abrams developed a stronger bond with his ancestral tribe.

Abrams began 1955 with the Orioles. He was joined by another Jewish player, pitcher Saul Rogovin, who seemed to suffer, Abrams believed, from a sleeping sickness. Evidently, they did not hit it off. Neither did Abrams as he compiled an anemic BA of .243 in 118 games. To add to his *tsores* (woes), manager Paul Richards, a *farbissener* anti-Semite according to Abrams, pulled him out of a game for failure to hustle after a batted ball that caromed off of the right field fence and over his head (Eisenberg, 34-5). Ending his major league career with yet another team, the Chicago White Sox in 1956, Abrams went one for three in only four games.

Abrams spent the last two years in the minor leagues hitting; 278 in both seasons, primarily with Miami Marlins of the International League. He played with former major leaguers including fellow Jew, Sid Gordon and black star, Satchel Paige. The latter earned Abrams's disrespect for his ignorance. Abrams bemoaned the legendary Negro star's inability to remember names (a failure he shared with another legend, Babe Ruth) and his abuse of the English through frequent malapropisms. Turning to his own weaknesses, he explained the difference between "making it" in the major as opposed to the minor league. In the majors, one had to hit a curve ball, rather than a fast ball, on a three and two pitch. A great hitter in the minors, Abrams never quite measured up in "The Big Show."

Nevertheless, Calvin Ross Abrams found *koved* (favor) among Jewish fans. They gifted him with two "Nights" in his honor. In 1996, they inducted him into the B'nai B'rith Jewish American Sports Hall of Fame, housed in Washington D.C.. Even his misadventure in the last game of 1950, reporter Vic Ziegel argued, propelled him into fame, not infamy. In fact, Abrams confided in the *Daily News* writer that he was proud of his "out" because he "ran himself into the history books." Who could argue with such Talmudic logic?

In summary, Cal identified his heroes, namely, Babe Ruth, Ted Williams, Joe DiMaggio, Johnny Mize, and Stan Musial. On his own survival, Calvin admitted to playing the carefree clown who went along to get along with teammates Chuck Connors, George Shuba, and Dick Williams. Conversely, several baseball writers made the Abrams's enemy list. In their 1980 interview, housed in the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library, Cal and May Abrams labelled reporters Jack Lang as "evil" and Dick Young as unfair, indeed vicious and vindictive, "the Don Rickles of newspaper media" (Wohlgelernter Interview, III-256, 261-2). They also accused these veteran writers with anti-Semitism though both were Jewish. Umpire Larry Goetz is also cited for a lack of fairness. Were these sour grapes or the gripes of Philip Roth? Only Harold Rosenthal of the *Herald Tribune* and Arch Murray of *The New York Post* were deemed fair to the sensitive Brooklyn Dodger outfielder. Abrams found a measure of solace by laughing on the outside to hide the hurt boiling within. May Abrams called it correctly when she cited Cal's sensitivity coupled, one might add with vulnerability. At an "Old Timer's Day," Cal cried. (Wohlgelernter, 282).

After baseball, Abrams managed an OTB parlor in Penn Station ("Lead us not into Penn Station"), operated several businesses—a gas station, restaurants, a cocktail

lounge--with modest success. In the Garden City cocktail lounge, near the campus of Adelphi University, he lost his hearing not to mention his money. He stopped smoking—"cold turkey"--after an initial heart attack in 1974. Eventually, the Abrams family headed south to Florida in 1991, for reasons of health and to find the Semitic "Fountain of Youth." He donated a kidney to a sick son, one of four children. After suffering a second heart attack, Cal Abrams went to his *rueh plotz* (resting place) on February 25, 1997 just a few days short of his 73rd birthday. Buried in Florida in his number 18 Dodger uniform, Abram's epitaph could have read: "The saddest words: it might have been."

A few years ago, I reconnected with May Abrams, Cal's loving wife at Brooklyn's James Madison High School, where he was inducted into their Hall of Fame along with prolific historian Robert Dalleck and Judge Judy among other, mostly Jewish, luminous alums. I was asked to pinch-hit for equally famous but fatally ill alum, Maury Allen (ne Rosenberg) to sing the praise of Cal Abrams. The above written remarks are essentially what I delivered, orally. Impressed, May Abrams invited me to her Wynmoor apartment in Coconut Creek, Florida where, several winter months later, I pored through voluminous scrapbooks filled with biographical documents, historical events, and illuminating photographs. Having survived many slights tinged with anti-Semitism, I learned a vital lesson. Through their turbulent years in public arenas, Jewish athletes needed a strong base of support spanning family, friends, fans, and team-mates. May Abrams was all that and more as she entered her tenth decade of life. *Biz hundert un tzvontzik!*

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