

Chapter I

THE WHIZ KIDS WIN A PENNANT

Sunday, October 1, 1950, the day after my 24th birthday, is a day that I will never forget. On that day the Phillies won their first pennant in 35 years. We had come very close to blowing the pennant race and had to defeat the Brooklyn Dodgers in Ebbets Field in the last game of the regular season to avoid a tie and a best-of-three playoff with the Dodgers. We were dubbed the "Whiz Kids" by the press because of our youth, but if we had not beaten the Dodgers that day we would be remembered only for blowing the National League pennant.

Our success in 1950 was not totally unexpected, at least not to us. We had finished sixth in 1948 and third in 1949, and we all knew that we were coming into our own and could play with the better teams in the National League.

Our arrival as a top contender was an important milestone for the Phillies franchise and was of considerable significance to the city of Philadelphia, which had been plagued for years by bad baseball teams. Between 1917 and 1948 the Phils had reached the first division exactly one time, a fourth-place finish in 1932. Included in that span were 16 last-place and 9 seventh-place finishes. The American League Philadelphia Athletics, with whom we shared Shibe Park, had also been dismal since their great teams of the late 1920s and early 1930s. In fact, from 1936 to 1945 both Philadelphia teams finished last in six different years, including a clean sweep in 1940, 1941, and 1942.

Given that history, our 1950 ballclub had really captured the imagination of the city of Philadelphia. On September 20 we had a 7½-game lead

over the Boston Braves and were 9 games up on the Dodgers. But we knew then that we were in for a dog fight. On September 10 we had lost southpaw starter Curt Simmons, who had 17 victories when his Pennsylvania National Guard Unit was called to active duty because of the escalating Korean conflict. Three days earlier, Bill "Swish" Nicholson, our veteran reserve outfielder who had twice led the National League in home runs during the War years, was diagnosed with diabetes and was out for the year. Bob Miller, a right-handed pitcher who had started the year with eight straight wins, had hurt his back slipping on some wet steps in a train station, and on September 15 Bubba Church, yet another starting pitcher, was frighteningly injured when struck in the face by a line drive off the bat of Cincinnati's Ted Kluszewski.

By the time we arrived in New York for the last long weekend of the season our lead was down to four games with six to play. But we managed to lose successive doubleheaders to the New York Giants in the Polo Grounds and then lost to the Dodgers 7-3 on Saturday, September 30, setting the stage for one of the most exciting games in baseball history.

Going into the final game, not only was our pitching depleted and exhausted, but we had gone into one of those inexplicable team batting slumps the last week of the season. That same week, our catcher, Andy Seminick, had injured his left ankle (it turned out to be broken) when knocked flying by the Giants' Monte Irvin in a play at the plate. After missing one game of one doubleheader, he kept playing, although with limited mobility and in considerable pain. The Dodgers, in contrast, were healthy and had played extremely well the last weeks of the season.

With our dissipated pitching staff, it was far from clear whom Manager Eddie Sawyer would name to start against the Dodgers. I had started games the previous Saturday, Wednesday, and Thursday. On Wednesday I had pitched five innings against the Giants (Sawyer took me out the inning after Hank Thompson hit a three-run homer to put us behind 5-2). Eddie then started me the following day in the second game of our doubleheader against the Giants. I pitched the complete game and got beat 3-1 when Whitey Lockman blooped a two-strike fast-ball over third base to drive in the winning run. The team and I were in one of those stretches where we could not believe how hard it was to win a ballgame.

So I honestly did not know who was pitching because Eddie had not told anyone. I did know that I had pitched a lot, but I had had two days rest so I thought I could pitch. The locker room was very tense and quiet

before the game because we knew we had just about blown the pennant. About an hour before the game, Sawyer walked over to me by my locker, tapped me on the shoulder, handed me a new ball and wished me good luck. And that was the only time he ever did something like that before a ballgame.

Dodger ace Don Newcombe was starting for Brooklyn in our fifth head-to-head meeting of the year. To add a little more drama, both Newk and I were trying for our first 20-win seasons, although 20 wins never entered my mind until after the game was over. We were so focused on trying to win the pennant that everything else was secondary.

When I began to warm up I really did not feel particularly good, and I was not sure I could crank my arm up like I needed to. I was nervous and tense because so much was riding on the game. But for some reason I looked over at Newcombe warming up for the Dodgers and I thought, "Hell, he is just as scared as I am." I knew that Newk had pitched almost as much as I had and probably was just as tired, nervous, and anxious as I was. Once I realized that the opposing pitcher was in the same shape, I relaxed and never gave another thought to how tired or nervous I was supposed to be.

Ebbets Field was packed with a standing-room crowd of 35,073. Another 30,000 were turned away, but a fairly sizable minority contingent from Philadelphia managed to get into the park on that bright, mild afternoon.

Newcombe started strongly, retiring Eddie Waitkus, our leadoff hitter and first baseman, on a fly; Richie Ashburn, our center fielder, on a grounder; and Dick Sisler, our left fielder, on a strikeout. In the bottom half of the first, I uncharacteristically walked Cal Abrams, the Brooklyn leadoff man. Pee Wee Reese, the future Hall of Fame Dodger shortstop, then hit a long drive to center that Ashburn was able to corral. I retired Duke Snider and Jackie Robinson on routine outs to end the inning and proceeded to set the Dodgers down in order in the next two innings.

Reese led off the fourth with a double, the Dodgers' first hit. I got Snider when he hit little roller to the right of the plate and ran into it after he left the batter's box. Robinson then hit a comebacker to me and Carl Furillo flew out to end the inning. In the fifth, I again retired the Dodgers in order.

We were not able to get anything going against Newcombe early either, although we had four runners reach base on three singles and a walk in the first five innings. Nobody, however, got beyond first.

In the top of the sixth, Waitkus and Ashburn both grounded sharply to Dodger first baseman Gil Hodges, who tossed to Newk covering for the putouts. But with two outs Sisler stroked a hit between first and second that Hodges could not get. Del Ennis, our home-run leader and right fielder, followed with a Texas Leaguer to center that Snider, playing deep because of Del's power, could not reach. Our peerless third sacker, Willie "Puddinhead" Jones, then delivered a clutch single to Reese's left to bring in Sisler with the first run of the game. Shortstop Granny Hamner flied deep to the scoreboard in right, but Furillo was able to grab it and prevent any further damage.

Unfortunately, our lead was short lived. In the bottom half of the sixth with two outs, Reese, who was a thorn in my side all day, hit a line drive near the right field foul line, which was only 297 feet from home plate. The ball hit the screen and dropped down to a six-inch coping, where it stayed. Although the ball was in the field of play, it was unreachable and Reese, instead of a double, had a freak home run. For the rest of the game, the ball lay on that ledge, a constant reminder of why the score was tied.

Through eight and a half innings the score remained 1-1. We had managed a base runner against Newk in the seventh, eighth, and ninth innings but were unable to score. I had given up only three hits, including a single to Dodger catcher Roy Campanella in the eighth, while we had eight scattered hits against Newcombe.

When I trudged out to face Brooklyn in the bottom of the ninth, I knew that if the Dodgers scored we would very likely lose not only the ballgame but also the pennant. My wife Mary and I had planned on taking a vacation in Florida after the season with some of my World Series money, and I remember for a brief moment thinking, "If we don't win this ballgame, we're not going to get to Florida."

Cal Abrams led off the inning and I went to a 3-2 count on him. I thought the next pitch was a strike on the inside corner, but umpire Larry Goetz called it ball four. Now Goetz was an outstanding umpire, probably along with Al Barlick the finest in the league. In fact, Goetz was such an outstanding ball-and-strike umpire that National League President Warren Giles had called the umpiring crew and told them to put Goetz behind the plate again even though he had been the home plate umpire the day before. In any event the pitch, which was so important at the time, was very close, the kind that looks like a strike from the mound and looks like a ball at the plate.

Reese was next and tried to bunt Abrams over. I threw high and hard, which makes it tougher to bunt, particularly if your fastball has a hop on it, and Pee Wee fouled two off. With two strikes, I thought he might try to go to right field and I tried to throw in on him. I either did not get it far enough inside or Pee Wee guessed with me because he hit a rope to left field, his third hit of the game, putting runners on first and second with no one out.

I was now in real trouble. Sawyer had Jim Konstanty, our ace relief pitcher who would win the National League's Most Valuable Player Award, warming up, but Eddie left me in.

Duke Snider was the next batter. Although Duke was a very good hitter (his 1950 stats were a .321 batting average, 31 home runs, and 107 RBIs), I assumed that with the game on the line and no one out Duke would try to bunt the runners over. As a result, I popped the first pitch in there, thinking of nothing but breaking to cover the third base line to try to force Abrams at third when Snider bunted.

Well, Snider was not bunting. He ripped that first pitch right over my left shoulder on the second base side to center field. The ball was a low line drive, and as I turned to watch it I could see Abrams at second hesitate a moment to make sure Mike Goliat, our second baseman, could not get to it. Our center fielder, Richie Ashburn, was not known to have a strong throwing arm and the Dodgers often ran on him. Milt Stock, the Dodgers' third base coach, took a chance on Richie's arm and sent Abrams home to try to score the winning run. But Richie caught the ball on the first hop and threw a strike to Stan Lopata, our catcher, and Abrams was out at the plate by 15 feet.

Although Richie's throw was huge, we were still on the brink of disaster. Reese and Snider had each moved up with the play at the plate, meaning the Dodgers had runners on second and third with only one out. Eddie Sawyer came out to the mound to tell me to walk Jackie Robinson intentionally and pitch to Carl Furillo. So I walked Robinson to load the bases, bringing up Furillo, an excellent right-handed hitter who already had 106 RBIs to go with a .305 batting average.

When Eddie came out, he reminded me to be sure to keep the ball down on Furillo, who liked high fastballs. Well, my first pitch to Carl was about eye high, but it must have had something on it because he popped it up to Waitkus at first in foul territory. Although much in baseball is made about how precise pitching is, sometimes luck is involved. If I had thrown Furillo a low fastball, who knows, he might have slapped it up the middle.

Next was Gil Hodges, Brooklyn's first baseman and a dangerous clutch hitter who had already knocked in 113 runs that year. Gil took a strike and a ball and then hit a soft fly ball near the front of the scoreboard in right field, which was a short porch in Ebbets Field. Del Ennis in right field went back for the ball and had to battle the sun all the way. He stayed with it and caught the ball against his chest, getting us out of the inning unscathed.

I did not have much time to relax after the ninth because I was the leadoff hitter in the top of the tenth. Eddie told me to go ahead and hit, which was fine with me. He often let me hit in late innings in close games when I was pitching. I really did not feel tired, even though I had pitched a lot. I was young and charged up, and getting out of that last inning had not hurt any.

Normally, I lunged a lot at the plate because I had dreams of hitting the ball a long way, but in this type of situation I just tried to make contact. I took a ball from Newcombe, who was also still in the ballgame, and then swung at the next pitch and hit a bouncer up the middle for a base hit. I did not hit the ball very hard but it did get through the infield.

Eddie Waitkus, our leadoff batter, followed. On his way to the plate, he conferred with Sawyer about whether to try to bunt me over. He bunted the first pitch foul along the third base line and then squared away again and had to quickly dodge a high inside pitch from Newcombe. Sawyer then took the bunt off and Waitkus looped a Texas Leaguer in front of Snider in center. I easily made second since I could see that it was a base hit.

We now had runners at first and second with no outs and Ashburn coming to the plate. Richie bunted the first pitch along the third base line and I busted my tail to get to third, even sliding head-long into the base. But Newk made an excellent play on the ball and threw to Brooklyn third sacker Billy Cox to just nip me. If Newcombe had hesitated or bobbled the ball at all, I would have been safe and the bases would have been loaded with nobody out.

We still had runners on first and second with one out and Dick Sisler, a left-handed batter, coming up. Dick had had a good year at the plate with close to a .300 batting average, 12 homers, and 80 RBIs. He already had three hits against Newk, and we were hoping against hope that he could drive Waitkus in from second to give us the lead. Ashburn at first had great speed and had an excellent chance to score on an extra base hit.