Foreword

SOMETHING WONDERFUL HAPPENED in the world of sports in 1997. Amid the hoopla and commercial sensationalism that characterized much of the fiftieth anniversary celebration of Jackie Robison's historical debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers, Lester Rodney was rediscovered. To his neighbors in the Rossmoor retirement community in Walnut Creek, California, Rodney was known as a warm, friendly, former journalist who loved watching sports and playing tennis and who submitted occasional articles and opinion pieces to the *Rossmoor News*. Few knew that he had once been a well-known, indeed notorious, New York sportswriter or suspected the place that he held in baseball history. But as the Robinson commendations approached, a national spotlight began to shine on Rodney. He appeared as a featured speaker and participant at the milestone Jackie Robinson conference held at Long Island University and again at a symposium sponsored by the Society for American Baseball Research at San Francisco State University. The *New York Times* praised his coverage of the Robinson story as among the most accurate of the era. Rodney even appeared on CNN's *Early Prime* and several times on ESPN.

In part, Rodney's moment of celebrity was due to his longevity. Having survived into his eighties, he had outlived most of the other sportswriters

who had covered the integration beat. But, more significantly, the Rossmoor residents learned, Rodney had not simply been a commentator on the most significant sports story of the century but a catalyst. In the 1930s, when most sportswriters had remained silent about what Rodney had called "The Crime of the Big Leagues," he had launched a campaign that exposed the injustice and hypocrisy of baseball's color line to millions of Americans. Even more remarkable, they learned that Rodney had performed this service as the sports editor of the *New York Daily Worker*, the organ of the American Communist Party. Lester Rodney, a seemingly mild-mannered reporter, had been a "Red"—a Communist who had inhabited the New York press boxes and covered sports with a thoroughly professional and singular perspective—and in doing so had helped to transform not just baseball and American athletics but the broader society as well.

Perhaps no story from the world of sports is more familiar than the Jackie Robinson saga. The tale, usually told, justifiably credits Brooklyn Dodgers president Branch Rickey with the courage and inspiration to buck the baseball establishment and end the major leagues' long-standing ban on African American players. In 1945, Rickey tabbed Jackie Robinson, a former four-sport collegiate athletic standout at UCLA, to spearhead the integration of baseball. Over the next two seasons, first in the minor leagues at Montreal and in 1947 with the Brooklyn Dodgers, Robinson crafted one of the most enduring legends in American history, triumphing in his performance on the field and opening the gates for a flood of African American athletes not just in baseball but across the sports spectrum. The Rickey-Robinson alliance established an important precursor for the national Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

In most retellings of this saga, however, an important element is omitted; for the sustained campaign to integrate baseball did not begin with Branch Rickey in 1945 but nine years earlier in 1936, in the mind of Lester Rodney, a twenty-five-year-old journalist who had unexpectedly found himself the sports editor of the Communist *Daily Worker* newspaper. That Rodney, an inexperienced writer and non-Party member, raised in a Republican household, would become the paper's sports editor is surprising;

that the *Daily Worker* would even have a sports section is astonishing. These developments stemmed from a critical shift in Communist Party strategy in the midst of the Great Depression. In July 1935, the Communist Third International meeting in Moscow had urged party members worldwide to create a "popular front" with other forces on the political left in their respective countries. In the United States this meant recasting communism, in the words of party leader Earl Browder, as "Twentieth-Century Americanism." The *Daily Worker* itself had to be to reconceived from an organ that primarily addressed the party faithful to one that appealed to a broader mass of Americans who would be sympathetic to issues of radical social change. What better way to court a working-class readership than to highlight coverage of baseball and other sports that workers enjoyed?

Many of the ideologues who ran the paper, however, had little understanding or knowledge of American sports. Their earliest once-a-week efforts proved heavy-handed and propaganda-laden. Reading these dispatches prompted Rodney, a freelance (read unemployed) writer, to send a letter suggesting a different approach. Rodney had grown up in Brooklyn, an avid athlete and fan. In high school he had run track (well enough to be offered a scholarship to Syracuse University) and played on the basketball team. He had also played semi-professional baseball. And like most Brooklyn boys, he was an avid sports fan with a fervid devotion to the Dodgers, devouring daily sports pages and soaking up insights and information. Rodney believed that a sports page, even one in a Communist newspaper, must not only critique the flaws of capitalist athletics but also convey the love of the games that drew fans to them. To Rodney, sport was not an "opiate for the masses" but an important component of people's lives and culture. His enthusiasm convinced the editors of the *Daily Worker* to entrust him with responsibility for a new daily sports section.

The *Daily Worker* sports page, however, would be different from those of the more mainstream dailies. Although Rodney attended and covered sporting events assiduously and wrote lively accounts of the games, he emphasized not so much their results but the social issues that surrounded them. And Rodney immediately recognized that one issue above all others could simultaneously attract readers, advance the interests of social jus-

tice, and serve the needs of the Communist Party—the unconscionable exclusion of African American athletes from the ranks of organized baseball.

Although few people today would dispute the obvious inequity of baseball's color line, the ban was not a major topic of discussion in the mid-1930s. White sportswriters might occasionally comment on the matter; the black weekly press would more regularly rail against it. But most people accepted segregation as the natural order of things. Rodney saw this sociological vacuum as a remarkable opportunity. From the beginning of his tenure as sports editor in August 1936, the integration of baseball became the signature issue of the *Daily Worker* sports page. Like the Communist campaign to free the Scottsboro Boys, nine young African Americans sentenced to death in Alabama on trumped-up rape charges, baseball integration offered the Party a rallying cry that enabled it both to advance the cause of social justice and to attract positive attention to itself. On these issues, ignored by most others, the Communists unquestionably held the moral high ground. Rodney can honestly state in retrospect, "I was in it because I wanted the damn ban to end, to bring elementary democracy to the game I loved, and to see the banned players get their chance to show they belonged." At the same time, the Communist Party gained a platform from which to attract members and enhance its visibility in what they hoped would be the fertile recruiting grounds of African American communities.

The campaign begun by Rodney, and inherited by writers like Bill Mardo and Nat Low when Rodney marched off to fight in the Pacific in World War II, consisted of equal parts confrontation and education. *Daily Worker* correspondents forced baseball officials such as Commissioner Kennesaw Mountain Landis, National League president Ford Frick, and numerous owners to deny—despite all evidence to the contrary—the existence of a color line. They asked players and managers for their opinions and trumpeted their positive responses in blaring headlines. Of added significance, the *Daily Worker,* alone among the non-African American press, publicized the exploits of players in the Negro Leagues, the existence of which was often just a rumor to most whites. Rodney's accounts and an-

nouncements of Negro League games and his focus on the injustice of excluding such players as Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson shone a needed light on black baseball. The *Worker* also spearheaded a drive to amass petitions, eventually signed by more than 1 million people, protesting black's exclusion from the game.

Why has this facet of the integration of baseball, so painstakingly described in *Press Box Red,* generally been ignored in the standard recreations of the Robinson story, particularly in its earliest versions? Dodgers president Branch Rickey, not only the architect of baseball integration but, along with Robinson himself, the primary creator of the legend that surrounds these events, vehemently rejected any suggestions that political agitation had influenced him. In 1945, Rickey, a staunch anti-Communist and skilled self-promoter, authorized sports writer Arthur Mann, a close friend, to write the first official version of the Robinson signing for publication. In the draft manuscript, Mann expressed his eyewitness perception that on arriving in Brooklyn in 1942, "Rickey was besieged by telephone calls, telegrams and letters of petition on behalf of black ballplayers," and that "this staggering pile of missives were so inspired to convince him that he and the Dodgers had been selected as a kind of guinea pig." Rickey, in a strongly written marginal comment, adamantly instructed Mann to remove this assertion. Robinson, who increasingly allied himself with anti-Communist forces (and who was not part of the New York scene in the years before his signing), also never credited Rodney or the Communists. Since the Robinson story played itself out against the backdrop of the post-World War II Red Scare and repression of the Communist Party, suppressing the Party's role in the integration campaign proved relatively easy, and even desirable, for those who portrayed this story as a harbinger of future racial progress.

Others, however, readily recognized the significance of the almost decade-long agitation. Larry MacPhail, an owner of the New York Yankees, repeatedly blamed "certain groups in this country including political and social-minded drumbeaters," who "single out baseball for attack because it offers a good publicity medium," for forcing the major leagues to confront what he dismissively called "the Race Question." Dan Dodson, a

sociologist who worked with Rickey on planning baseball's great experiment, admitted that political pressure groups "contributed to the initiation of the venture and the venture was far less difficult" due to this reality.

Some have questioned how influential the *Daily Worker*, with its limited circulation, could have been. But the impact of the *Worker* extended far beyond its immediate readership. Based in New York City at a time when interest in communism was at its peak, the newspaper had wide visibility. In addition, other elements of the Party apparatus picked up on Rodney's campaign, publicly picketing ballparks, collecting signatures on petitions, and spreading the issue through the trade union movement, where Communist organizers had considerable influence. Rodney also worked in concert with sportswriters from the black weeklies, who increasingly in the late 1930s and 1940s stepped up their agitation. Rodney and Wendell Smith of the *Pittsburgh Courier* and other black reporters exchanged information and reprinted each other's scoops, giving them wider exposure and providing Smith with an outlet in the all-important New York market. In addition, mainstream newspapers sometimes publicized Rodney's stories —most memorably in 1942, when the *New York Daily News* divulged his interview with Leo Durocher, revealing the Dodgers manager's acceptance of black players.

Rodney's greatest contributions stemmed from the integration campaign, but his singular role as a Communist sportswriter (Rodney did quickly become a Party member) extended beyond this single issue. The very notion of a Communist covering sports conjures up images of a furtive figure, skulking around the field and press box, spouting propaganda at unsuspecting athletes and spectators. Rodney, however, defied this stereotype. He was a regular working journalist, a full-fledged and accepted member of the Baseball and Basketball Writers' Associations. Everyone knew that he worked for the *Daily Worker* (although some athletes did not realize that this was a Communist journal). Rodney won acceptance and respect from players and fellow sportswriters for his broad knowledge of sports and his reportorial skills and honesty. His modesty, good nature, and humor made him a welcome figure at ballparks and arenas.

Baseball dominated sports coverage in the *Daily Worker*, as it did in most newspapers of the era. But Rodney reported on other sports as well. He wrote on boxing, tracing the careers of fighters such as Henry Armstrong and Joe Louis. At Louis's training camp before the boxer's famed rematch with German Max Schmeling, he arranged a meeting between Louis and African American novelist Richard Wright. Wright's view of the historic fight and its impact on black America appeared in the *Daily Worker* and is excerpted in these pages. At the fight itself, Rodney sat in the press section at ringside as Louis demolished both Schmeling and Hitler's myth of Aryan supremacy. He returned from the army in time to witness Robinson's 1947 debut with the Dodgers and to cover the fabled Boys of Summer in their heyday. In the early 1950s, Rodney emerged as one of the most astute commentators on college basketball's point-shaving scandals, focusing his ire not so much on the players as on the athletic system that had manipulated and victimized them.

The recollections that comprise this volume, lovingly assembled and edited by fellow former Communist Irwin Silber, capture the essence of Lester Rodney as sportswriter and humanitarian. Even in his nineties, Rodney remains an astute observer, his sharp social conscience tempered by his gentle, self-deprecating manner. Like most good sportswriters, Rodney is at heart a great storyteller. Witness his accounts of the Brooklyn Dodgers cutting down a runner at home plate or Joe DiMaggio facing Satchel Paige in a 1949 showdown. But Rodney always adds an analytical dimension that enriches our understanding of the moment. His insights into the famed athletes that he observed and often befriended—DiMaggio, Paige, Robinson, Roy Campanella, Joe Louis, Henry Armstrong and Nat Holman (Original Celtics basketball star and famed coach of CCNY's "Cinderella" team), among others—offer fresh perspectives on their careers.

Nor is Rodney blind or sparing toward his own early faith in Communism as a panacea for the ills of the world. He disparages many Party members, not excluding himself, as "rigid simpletons" and "victims of do-it-yourself brainwashing" for their naïveté, obtuseness, and unwillingness to confront the realities of the Soviet Union. Following Nikita Khru-

shchev's 1956 report revealing beyond any possible doubt the evils of Stalinism, Rodney and other *Daily Worker* employees sided with reformers who sought to wrest control of the Party from traditional hardliners. When the old guard prevailed and shut down the *Worker*, Rodney resigned his membership.

Rodney's remarkable life illustrates the impulses that drew men and women of intelligence and conscience into the Communist Party during the maelstrom of the Great Depression, their rejection of the racism so prevalent in that era, and their commitment to social justice. The sins of the American Communists were deep and numerous; but their virtues and contributions were also manifold. Lester Rodney embodies the best of this heritage. Today more than sixty-five years after he launched the campaign that helped end Jim Crow in baseball, he maintains his values and his resolution. Rodney's memoirs remind us that the never-ending battle for a more just society can be effectively waged from even the most unexpected vantage points.

Jules Tygiel

Chapter 1

The *Daily Worker* Starts a Sports Section

HOW DID THE *DAILY WORKER*, a small, radical newspaper published by the much-maligned U.S. Communist Party, come to play a major role in ending the color ban in baseball?

This unlikely story begins in 1936, when the Greenwich Village campus of York University (NYU)—like most other colleges and universities in New York at the time—was awash in radical newspapers and left-wing pamphlets. Despite three years of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the Great Depression remained a somber reality for the country at large, and there was no shortage of Communists, socialists, Trotskyists, anarchists, and sundry radicals to hawk newspapers and hand out leaflets explaining what they believed were the causes of America's economic woes and offering revolutionary solutions.

One evening in the early winter of 1936, an energetic member of the Young Communist League (YCL) managed to shove a copy of the *Daily Worker* into the hands of Lester Rodney, a twenty-four-year-old NYU night school student from Brooklyn who had never paid attention to a Communist newspaper before. Glancing through the paper with a curiosity enhanced by the charged campus political atmosphere, Rodney discovered that the *Daily Worker* had a once-a-week sports section—but one like no

other he had ever seen. Little did he know that in less than a year he would be the paper's sports editor, let alone that he would hold that position for more than two decades and, in the process, play a seminal role in changing the face of American professional sports forever.

Although prior to 1936 the *Daily Worker* carried only the occasional sports piece, the Communist Party itself paid considerable attention to the subject. Until the early 1930s, the Party's membership was made up largely of European immigrants who had brought with them a tradition of workers' sports associations, organized principally by socialist and Communist parties. In some Central European countries, membership in such organizations numbered in the hundreds of thousands. The main sports these immigrants enjoyed playing and watching were soccer, volleyball, gymnastics, and track and field.

In 1927, acknowledging their own members' interest in sport and trying to reach out to others of similar national background, the U.S. Communist Party helped establish the Labor Sports Union (LSU), whose purpose was "to encourage athletic activism by workers and win them away from the bosses who utilize the Amateur Athletic Union and similar bodies to spread anti-union activity" (Naison 1979, 49). While the *Daily Worker* occasionally reported on the LSU's activities—one can find there the announcement of an "Eastern District Wrestling Meet" and a "Workers' Table Tennis Meet," along with the standings of the Metropolitan Workers' Basketball League and the schedule of the Metropolitan Workers' Soccer League (February 3, 1933)—regular Communist coverage of sports was to be found only in the pages of the Young Communist League's monthly newspaper, the *Young Worker*.

But while the *Young Worker* was anxious to reach into the ranks of the vast majority of American workers whose interest in sports had more to do with baseball, boxing, basketball, and football, its view of sports was strictly traditional party-line. "It is the American workers who are mostly the victims of bourgeois sport, commercialism, professionalism, and corruption," the *Young Worker* proclaimed, "and [it is] among them that the work must be carried on." What the paper meant by the "work" was typified by an article on the 1928 World Series, whose theme was the following: "Through the means of this professional capi-

talist 'sport,' the capitalists were able to hoodwink the greater part of the American workers to eat, sleep and talk nothing . . . but baseball for a week. . . . Baseball is still a method used to distract workers from their miserable conditions." The paper's view of boxing was no different. Boxing champions and contenders were "Dope Peddlers" who were "tools of the bosses in doping the workers to forget the class struggle" *(Young Worker*, May 1930).

Writers for the *Daily Worker* were no less dogmatic. One summer day in 1933, staff writer Ben Field ventured out to report on a Dodgers-Giants game at Brooklyn's Ebbets Field. Noting the typically raucous comments of the fans as they responded to the ebb and flow of the game, Field wrote: "Are these 'bad elements?' Many are workers who have so identified themselves with their team that they cannot sleep or eat when the team loses. The leanness of American life under capitalism drives them to this fever." Nevertheless, Field did make a certain kind of history when he wrote: "You spot a few Negro fans. Negro workers make good athletes. But where are the Negroes on the field? The Big leagues will not admit Negro players. There is something else to chalk up against capitalist-controlled sports." It was the first time that the *Daily Worker* highlighted the issue that, a few years later, would become one of the hallmarks of its sports section (*Daily Worker*, August 29, 1933).

Six months later, after a reader criticized the *Daily Worker* for "creating radical propaganda in a sports column, "Simon Gerson, writing on behalf of the editors, responded:

> It is unquestionably true that American workers are greatly interested in professional sports, far too much, in fact, for their own class interest. Does this mean that the *Daily Worker*, a Communist newspaper . . . that must be the agitator and organizer of American workers and farmers should report professional sports in the same fashion as the capitalist press? That would mean . . . to accept the theory that sports are "neutral," "above classes," to accept the theory of the "democracy of the gymnasium." Do you honestly believe that you and I are "equals" of J.P. Morgan once we all put on gym shorts?

> I don't believe that Blondie Ryan [of the Giants], for example, is a conscious agent of the capitalist class seeking to dope the workers with his swell in fielding. That would be the sheerest nonsense. But when a couple of dozen Blondie Ryans and Bill Terrys, with the aid of hundreds of sportswriters, rivet the attention of millions of workers upon themselves rather than upon unemployment, wage cuts and wars, then we can draw the conclusion that Ryan, et al, unconsciously serve the purposes of the ruling class. (*Daily Worker*, January 2, 1934)

But this classical doctrinaire view—not just about sports but about popular culture more generally—was about to change. On July 25, 1935, at the historic Seventh World Congress of the Communist Third International (Comintern) held in Moscow, the assembled seventy-six Communist Parties of the world adopted a major shift in political outlook. Spurred by the growth of fascism and the rise of Hitler in Germany, the Comintern dropped its previous focus on the promotion of world revolution in favor of building in every country a broad-based Popular Front against war and fascism. Unstated but implicit in this sea change was a tacit acknowledgment that the concept of a world socialist revolution led and orchestrated by the world's Communist Parties—the Comintern's principal founding goal—was not then a viable proposition. More explicit in the new approach was the view that Communist Parties should no longer divorce themselves from their respective national traditions and culture. For the U.S. Communist Party in particular, it meant a new and heightened emphasis on what was already a nominal goal—the Party's Americanization.

One of the first to realize the significance of this change in the Party's view of sports was the novelist and *Daily Worker* columnist Mike Gold. (Gold's novel, *Jews without Money*, had made him a celebrity not only in Party ranks but also in broader literary circles.) Barely a month after the Comintern Congress, Gold turned his fire on those *Daily Worker* readers who had registered opposition to the idea of instituting regular sports coverage in the paper.

> Many of them seemed to think that with the NRA breaking up [the National Recovery Act was one of the first measures taken by the

> Roosevelt administration in 1933 to combat the depression] and with war and fascism on the horizon, it was a waste of time and valuable space to discuss baseball. Snobbism! In the circles in which these comrades move, they never meet anybody who is interested in baseball. It happens, however, that baseball is the American national game. I would say that nine out of every ten American workers follow it intensely, as well as other sports.
>
> You can condemn them for it, if you are built that way, and you can call baseball a form of bourgeois opium for the masses. But that doesn't get around the fact that . . . the vast ocean of Americans of whom we are as yet a minority, adore baseball. What are we going to do, insist that they give up this taste? Are we going to maintain our isolation and make Americans stop their baseball before we will condescend to explain Communism to them? When you run the news of a strike alongside the news of a baseball game, you are making American workers feel at home. It gives them the feeling that Communism is nothing strange and foreign. . . . Let's loosen up. Let's begin to prove that one can be a human being as well as a Communist. (*Daily Worker*, August 31, 1935)

One spin-off of the turn to Popular Front politics was a decision to begin a weekend edition of the *Daily Worker* that would be aimed at reaching a broader audience than the daily paper did. The editors then solicited suggestions from readers on what they would like to see in the new edition. Reflecting the changing nature of American communism was an outpouring of ideas emphasizing the need for a popular writing style and a focus on such topics as movie and book reviews, cartoons, a woman's page, and human interest stories with a political slant. Particularly noteworthy was a pronounced sentiment in favor of a sports section.

The first issue of the new Sunday edition of the *Daily Worker* appeared January 12, 1936, and surely must have startled regular readers. Opening its new tabloid-size pages, they found cartoons, comic strips, catchy headlines, new bylines (along with some old ones), and features that undoubtedly caused many to look at the front page to make sure they were reading the *Daily Worker* and not the *Daily News*. In addition to three full pages of

movie, theater, and music reviews, there were feature articles dealing with great moments in American history, a woman's page featuring household hints, recipes, articles on parenting, and short fiction with a working-class bent.

Most astonishing of all, perhaps, were the two full pages devoted to sports. Gone were the ponderous dismissals of professionals sports as nothing but an ideological tool of the bosses and the patronizing comments about the fans who came out to the games. It was probably one of the first issues of this new weekend edition of the *Daily Worker* that Rodney found himself thumbing through on a January winter's, night on the NYU campus.

Lester Rodney: By the time I got to NYU in the thirties, I still didn't know much about communism. I was working odd depression-type jobs by day and going to NYU at night. I wasn't looking for a degree or anything, just picking a few course that interested me: journalism, sociology, political science. But you couldn't avoid the political discussions that went on everywhere. I used to argue with the Communists at first. I'd use the same arguments that people later used against me, like "You can't change human nature." Things like that.

I think the stock market crash of '29, which instantly wrecked my family's placid middle-class existence, began to make me a little more open to radical ideas, though the word *communist* was still completely off my radar screen. What you might call my political epiphany came one day when I was walking along Forty-second Street near Grand Central Station. There, just beneath the overpass, was a guy on a little platform making a speech. He was a Communist. But he wasn't at all like the popular image I had of Communists. He must have been in his early thirties, kind of tweedy, and he wasn't shouting. The way he talked was more like chatting with a circle of maybe thirty or forty people around him. He was saying something along the lines of "Don't you think it's ridiculous for a country as rich as ours to have so many people out of work? We Communists believe there are reasonable alternatives to the callous capitalism that benefits the few and keeps creating wars and economic crises. Do you know what socialism is, what it proposes?" That kind of talk.

When the speaker stepped down, I went over and asked him some question; I don't even remember what it was. I guess he saw me as a prime, young potential convert because he said, "Let's have some coffee and cake at the Automat and we can talk some more." We talked for a half hour. What impressed me especially was the patient way he answered all my questions about the Party, never pushing mo or trying to sign me up.

I've thought of him often since then, but I never saw him again. Never even knew his name. What on asset he must have been to the Party. I suppose it doesn't follow psychological patterns to say that one person, or one incident, can give you a decisive push in a life-changing direction. But I think he did. Maybe it shows I was ready to be pushed.

Anyway, from then on I began seriously examining the political ideas I was encountering. Then I began reading more. That's when I read the *Daily Worker* for the first time. Some of the language was pretty heavy-handed, but I kind of liked what they were saying. I guess it stilted up some latent anti-capitalist feelings in me.

Rodney wasn't nearly as enthusiastic about the *Daily Worker's* weekend sports section. When Rodney told the paper's news hawks on campus what he thought, they suggested he pass his opinions on to the editor.

LR: The writing at the time was kind of stilted, certainly as compared to the breezy style of the usual sports page.

Part of the problem was the limitations of writing about sports just once a week. They couldn't really cover events. And when they did feature pieces and analysis they sometimes slipped back into the denouncing-the-system mode. They seemed uneasy about sports, as though they'd be criticized by some Party higher-up if they really got into it.

There was a certain amount of that, but it's been exaggerated. There were sensible people there with mixed feelings about sports or who were secretly sports fans. Real sports fans. And sometimes you don't even know who they are. Like the Party leaders. For instance, William Z. Foster. Rigid sectarian. "Towards a Soviet America." And there's Earl Browder, "Commu-

nism is Twentieth-Century Americanism." Who'd you think would be the sports fan? If I got in the elevator with Foster and he's going to the ninth floor [where the top leadership had their offices] and I was going to the eighth floor [where the *Daily Worker* was located], he'd immediately start chatting baseball with me. What'd you think of that catch last night? Do you think St. Louis is the best team you ever saw? That's William Z. Foster. Earl Browder, he'd stand there, tap his foot, lips pursed, unapproachable. He had no interest in sports. Never spoke to me. Isn't that funny?

And they also had some good writers. The best was Charlie Dexter, who was fifteen or twenty years older than me. He was the culture and feature editor then. The main thing, though, was he knew sports. His hand kept them in the real world. In fact, he wrote so many of the articles he had to use a couple of different names.

Still, the paper often gave the feeling of carping at the sports scene rather than showing a love and understanding for sports per se, which for me was not a contradiction with their general view of the world. You want a purer thing, a better thing that isn't tainted by money, but you still love dancing, let's say, for dancing's sake. You don't shy away from it as an opiate of the masses. So I wrote them a letter pointing out some ways they could improve their sports stuff.

But I made one mistake. I put my return address on the envelope. So a couple of days later a letter comes back from the editor, Clarence Hathaway, inviting me in. Hathaway was a hard-drinking guy from Minnesota. Broke a chair once over some socialist's head in Madison Square Garden. He wasn't the caricature Communist at all. So I go up to the *Daily Worker* building and Hathaway takes me right into his office. He was the first guy I spoke to.

Of course, I didn't say, "Here's an article the way I would write it." But I guess that was implicit in our conversation. What I said was something like, "I've begun to read your paper and I've become interested in what it has to say. But I cringe a little when I read the sports pages because I'm a sports fan." I made some specific suggestions, but the main thing I said was they needed a change in attitude. "You guys are focusing on the things that are wrong in sports," I told him, "And there's plenty that's wrong, But you wind up painting a picture of professional athletes being wage slaves

with no joy, no élan—and that's just as wrong. Of course there's exploitation, but the professional athlete, the professional baseball player, still swells with joy when his team wins. They hug each other. That's not put on. That's not fake. That's beyond all the social analysis of the game. The idea of people coming together, blending their skills into a team, getting the best out of each other—and winning. That's a remarkable feeling. That's a wonderful human thing. And you must never forget that. The way I would write about sports if I were writing for the *Daily Worker*, that would never be absent. Along with social criticism. They're not contradictory."

I felt they needed to see the fun side of sports and the beauty, too. I mean, what's more beautiful and symmetrical than a 6-4-3 double play perfectly executed, where the shortstop fields a ground ball and flips it toward second base in one motion, the second baseman takes the throw in stride, pivots, avoids the oncoming base runner, and fires it to first in time. And they do it time and again. Beautiful to see. Anyway, after we talked for a while, Hathaway said, "Why don't you write some stuff for our weekly sports section?" And that's how I came to the *Daily Worker*. I might never have wound up there if hadn't written that letter. Who the hell knows?

Once Rodney started writing for the *Daily Worker*'s once-a-week sports section, its tone began to change. His love for and knowledge of sports affected everyone on the staff, not only those who wrote sports. Readers loved it and wrote in to say so. It didn't rake Hathaway long to realize he had a winner going for him, and he soon proposed making sports a daily feature. The editors were pretty much all for it, but some in the Party hierarchy were opposed, considering it a waste of precious space in a mostly eight-page daily paper.

The most outspoken opponent was Betty Gannett, one of the Communist Party's main ideologues, who never got used to the sports page. "This is ridiculous," Rodney remembers her saying. "It's kid stuff. Does it make sense for a hard-pressed, radical paper to give one-eighth of its space to games?"

Finally the editors decided to poll the readers on the issue. A year earlier, just taking such a poll would have been unthinkable. But by now, Party leaders had already begun to see the positive results of the Popular Front: a

marked increase in young people coming into the Party; wider distribution of their press; a new respectability. Nevertheless, the outcome of the poll—6 to 1 in favor of a daily sports section—was an eye-opener. And so the die was cast. Nine months after its weekend edition started covering sports, the *Daily Worker* launched a daily sports section.

LR: Shortly after the poll, Hathaway called me into his office and told me they were going to start a daily sports section. By then that wasn't a big surprise. What was a surprise was when he asked me if I'd be interested in being the editor. By then I had emerged as the writing star of Sunday sports. But I wasn't a Party member. And it was just taken for granted that paid staff members would be Party members. So long as I was a volunteer, that was no problem. So it was very unusual to get a full-time writer/editor on staff who wasn't in the Party. Maybe because it was sports. I did get an informal ideological quiz. But it was all so new to me, and things were moving too fast. I wasn't against it, but I thought I should take my time, learn more about the Party. I finally joined a few months later. By then it was no big deal.

And I liked the people I met at the paper. I think the *Daily Worker* writers, on the whole, were among the least dogmatic people I encountered in the Party.

You know, there's something in the very nature of newspaper work, even on a Communist newspaper, that keeps you in touch with life. You're in contact with the real world, not isolated in an office all day. You get impatient with those self-serving press releases you just know are bullshit. Af-ter a while you get to be somewhat skeptical about all official pronounce-ments. I felt this especially when the Party went into its convulsions in 1956 after the Khrushchev revelations, when the *Daily Worker* was way out in front of the rest of the Party in calling for real change. It was a good try, too, even though it was doomed. Years later, when I worked a few years with an ad agency, I really missed newspaper people, and it was a great relief to go back to newspapering and newspaper people.

Those first weeks and months at the *Daily Worker* were exhilarating. Everything was new—for them and for me. I'd written sports for my high school paper. And I'd gotten a few stringer assignments from the old Brook-

lyn *Eagle*. Now I'm twenty-five years old and it's my first paid job as a full-time newspaperman. I hadn't been nervous writing for the weekend paper. But this was different.

All of a sudden I've got a whole page all my own six days a week. And a pretty free hand to do what I want with it. This was a big, full-sized page. Eight columns across, like the *New York Times*, but with fewer pages. And I've got to fill it up. There's no ads on that page. Resources are limited. Mostly a few young volunteers who come in and out. At the beginning, most times I'd write the lead story in a hurry without even a byline. I'd listen to a Dodger or Yankee or Giant game on the radio and then I'd write the game story. I wouldn't put my name on a story like that.

We started in late September 1936, just before the World Series, which began first week of October those days. Yankees versus Giants. I remember my first headline: "Giant Power Threatens Yankees," in sixty-point railroad Gothic caps. I also remember thinking what fun it would have been if Cincinnati had won the National League pennant and the headline said, "Reds Power Threatens Yankees." But no one was gonna threaten the Yankees in 1936. They won in six. So much for Marxism in sports.

At the beginning I had a desk in a small room just off the traditional huge open city newsroom. I shared the space with Fred Ellis, a great guy, acerbic and fun-loving, who did the political cartoons. After a while I moved into the main newsroom because more and more they started calling on me to fill in whenever possible, like when someone had a day off. Do your sports work fast and be available for the city desk. Can you drop what you're doing and take this breaking story? We were always an undermanned newspaper. I had an enormous workload as a sportswriter. I could have spent all my days just filling the page without going to cover anything. But I felt impelled to show up at games. I had to get credentials. And to get fresh material on the page, firsthand stuff, interviews. There were times when I felt I had to be the hardest-working sports writer in the United States.

Nothing reflected the Communist Party's new popular slogan "Communism Is Twentieth-Century Americanism" more than the *Daily Worker* sports section. Although Rodney frequently wrote and carried stories that

had sports-related political overtones, it was still basically a sports page. Equally important, it was a page oriented to American sports. But old habits die hard.

In the period leading up to the launch of the *Daily Worker*'s sports section, a debate broke out over its focus. Rodney's position was that its main coverage should go to mainstream sports.

LR: It we were ever gonna be a paper beyond our narrow confines, I said to the volunteers and other stall members who were going to be writing for us, we'd have to begin acting as if we were already there. That meant we had to move into the sports arenas that most Americans are in.

One of our volunteer writers, Joe Smith, argued bitterly that we should concentrate on soccer, a scene he knew well. That's where Party people are, he said, and that's where our potential readers are—in the nationality groups. They're big soccer fans. I made the counterargument. I wasn't against following soccer, trade union sports meets, and the sports activities of progressive fraternal groups like the IWO. But in my mind those were secondary. I really wouldn't have been interested in being the sports editor if Joe's position had prevailed.

(Originally a split-off from the Workman's Circle, the IWO—the International Workers Order—was a left-wing counterpart to the many fraternal organizations characteristic of European immigrant groups in America. Organized principally along ethnic lines, it offered low-cost life and burial insurance to members. Many, including the IWO, had extensive sports programs and also operated children's summer camps.)

What Smith and some others had not yet grasped was that a major change in the Communist Party's demographics was already occurring. Not only was the Party growing, but the mostly Eastern European socialist-minded immigrants who made up the base of the Party in its formative years were rapidly becoming a minority. Replacing them was an influx of younger American-born men and women who were interested in popular culture and sports. Many were trade unionists who had been impacted by the Party's work in building the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Others were the children of immigrants more interested in becom-