Baseball Special

What happens to stars when the cheers stop?

Bobby Thomson fortunate

What happens to baseball stars at the end of their careers? "When The Cheering Stops: Former Major Leaguers Talk About Their Game & Their Lives," by Lee Heiman, Dave Weiner and Bill Gutman (Macmillan), provides first-hand accounts. Here is an excerpt from this newly published book:

BOBBY THOMSON hit what may be the most famous home run in baseball history. His dramatic blast won the 1951 National League pennant for the New York Giants over the Brooklyn Dodgers. It's known as "The Shot Heard Round The World."

Thomson was a fine all-around ballplayer in the 1940s and 1950s. An outfielder, his career batting average was .270 — with a total of 264 homers. He drove in more than 100 RBIs four times. He retired in 1960.

Now 66 years old, Thomson works as a sales manager for Stone Container, Inc., in Watchung, N.J.

Looking back, Bobby Thomson says:

I CAN REMEMBER feeling as if time was just frozen when I hit my big home run for the Giants at the Polo Grounds in 1951. It was a delirious, delicious moment. When my feet finally touched home plate, and I saw my teammates' faces, that's when I realized I had won the pennant with one swing of the bat. And I'd be a liar if I didn't admit that I'll cherish that moment till the day I die.

Yet when I think about it today, I often have the feeling that while the homer put me on a pedestal — a kind of jumping-off place — it was something that I never fully took advantage of.

I was with the Giants two more years after 1951. They weren't bad years, but I think the Giants were a little disappointed in me. Maybe they expected more, and maybe I expected more of myself — even though I hit .288 with 24 homers and 106 RBIs in 1953.

My broken ankle in 1954, when I was with the Milwaukee Braves, really screwed me up. I tried to come back too soon. So, the next year my leg was worse. It really took me a couple of years to get over that.

Toward the end of my career, I also played for a few more teams.

Eventually, I lost my confidence. I remember letting a fly ball go over my head in left field. Hell, I could play the outfield as well as any of them. And that's bad. It really starts to get into your mind. And I really knew it was over when I didn't even look forward to going to spring training.

What next? Well, this is where I think my Scottish heritage came in. I'm a stubborn guy, and I knew what I had to do. I had to go out and make a living. And I wanted to do it my way, get my own job.

But I didn't have any real education, so I went to Stevens Institute and took a battery of exams to find out if I should get back on the coaching lines or what. But the results indicated sales capacity.

So, I used some good common sense — and my wife, Wink, assisted me in my judgment. I took my time interviewing. Every week, Wink would ask me if I got a job. But I told her I was going to take my time. It took a couple of months.

We didn't worry about the money running out, but we were concerned. After all, I was starting from scratch at 36 or 37.

And I finally came home with a job and went out into the working world. I got up every morning and realized that a sense of humor is all it takes to hang onto those subway straps with all those other people.

My job was as a salesman with the Westvaco Co. involved with national accounts. Stone Container eventually took over the company, and I'm still with them as a sales manager. I'm also involved with a "Just Say No to Drugs" program in the schools as part of the Optimist's Club in New Jersey.

In a way, I'd have to say I'm still a little disappointed in my career. I felt I had the ability to do more than I did, maybe hit closer to .300 and drive in a hundred runs on more occasions.

Looking back on it and then looking at who I am now, the person I've become and the growth I've made within myself, well, it's something that didn't happen until I left baseball.

My wife says I'm a more forceful and aggressive person today, so maybe if I had been that way when I played....

But there are certainly memories. How can I forget watching great hitters like Ted Williams and Stan Musial, or a guy like Willie Mays? There were tough pitchers, too, like Ewell Blackwell and Don Drysdale.

Whenever I talk baseball, though, it usually comes back to the home run.

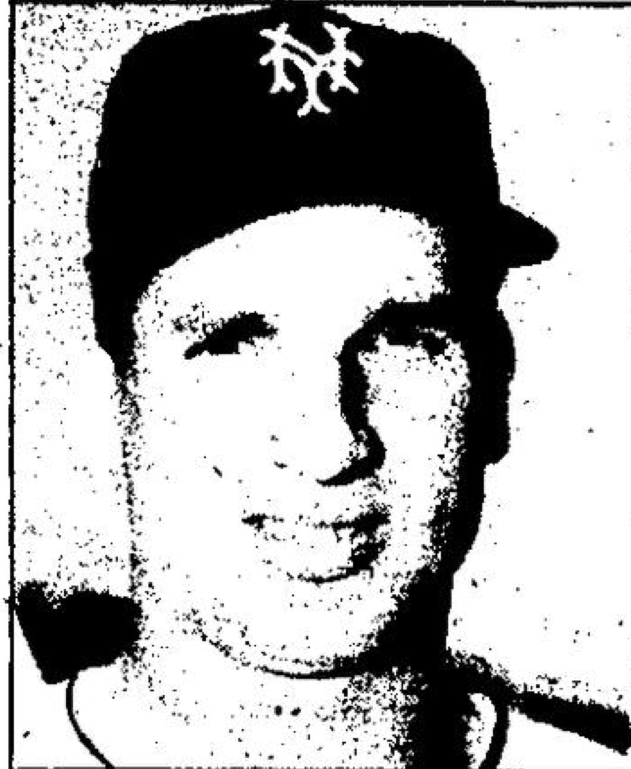
(Dodger pitcher) Ralph Branca and I weren't really close over the years. If he and I had gotten together and gone out on speaking engagements, we could have made a few bucks. But he always took his side seriously — and I guess I was the fortunate one.

Then about a year ago (sportswriter) Mike Lupica wrote a pretty nice article about us. It came from a little different direction and made me see Ralph's side of it a little better. Now we're out together more often, going to card shows and things like that.

I guess things are different today. My wife has often said that if it happened today, it would really be an incredible thing for us. I guess she's right.

Funny, but I can still remember in the spring of '52 (Giants manager) Leo Durocher saying to me, "Bobby, I feel you're going to hit one out every time up." Now that's a lot of pressure.

But it's in the books and it will stay there. So, what the hell.



Bobby Thomson (1950s)

Bobby Thomson (today)

Ed Kranepool lost something

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ED KRANEPOOL came to the big leagues at the age of 17, seeing limited action with the New York Mets in 1962 — the year the franchise was born.

He returned to the majors to stay in 1963 and remained with the Mets throughout his 18-year career. Known as "Steady Eddie," he was a first baseman who could also play the outfield or pinch hit.

Kranepool retired in 1979. He had a career batting average of .261 and a total of 118 homers. He averaged slightly more than 100 games per season during his career. His one-year peaks: 16 home runs (in 1966); 58 RBIs (in 1971); and a .323 batting average (in 1975).

Now 45, he is part owner of Madison Triborough Group, a Jamaica, N.Y., manufacturer of point-of-purchase displays.

Looking back, Ed Kranepool says:

NOBODY takes care of you when you leave the game. You make your own way in business and you do your own thing. Nobody ever called me from the club and offered me anything. Even if they had, there's a question of whether I would have done it or not. And that's really besides the point.

But I had a very sad parting of the ways with the Mets. To be honest about it, I went out on a pretty low note, spending my final five years or so with a last-place club. During that period, the franchise management changed.

I really felt very sad about it, having played 17 or 18 years and suddenly being treated like a piece of furniture. Of course, I knew that many players were treated the same way. That's why I don't blame guys for holding out and getting whatever they can.

I was only 34 at the time and felt I could still play. But I hadn't seen much action in 1979, and it was frustrating being on a bad ballclub and watching mediocrity. By the same token, I didn't want to be traded, didn't want to leave New York. It just wouldn't have paid.

Back in those days, the thinking of the owners was different. They figured a 34-year-old man was ready to be pensioned off. Now they got guys with long-term contracts, so they stick with them. But because of the way it was back then, I just felt that to go to another city for a year or two wouldn't pay.

Believe it or not, I even tried putting a group together to buy the Mets because I knew the team was going up for sale. But the Doubleday group offered a richer deal and they got it.

I never even formally announced my retirement. I just never went to spring training in 1980.

There is an emotional letdown. I won't pretend that there isn't. I was out of the game at 35 and had been playing baseball for two-thirds of my life. Cut the sport out suddenly and you lose something.

I was lucky because I always went to work. The day after the baseball season ended, I was working. I never knew the difference between the winter of 1979 and the previous winters. Only I never went back to spring training.

In the sense of working in the so-called real world, however, I felt I was ready — and consider myself fortunate in that sense. A lot of players can't make that adjustment, can't acclimate themselves to working. They've been pampered and catered to, and they're just not ready to go out and do things for themselves.

I think that's one thing baseball people are missing, that the players are missing. It would really help if there was some kind of severance pay for guys who leave the game. Maybe it could be a certain number of dollars for so many years of service.

It would help, because it always seems that guys flounder for a year, or a year and a half, often not knowing where to look or what direction to take. So, they stay home and don't get a job right away. And before they know it, any little nest egg they built up is gone. A number of players were wiped out financially because of that kind of scenario.

Today, of course, that's much less likely to happen. A guy like Don Mattingly is making two million bucks a year, so if he sits out six months or a year, it's really not going to affect him much at all.

But back in my time guys didn't make that kind of money. My top salary was $110,000 my last three years. Not bad for a kid from the Bronx who grew up pretty poor.

Perhaps the strangest thing about being out of baseball is the flashbacks. I'll watch bits and pieces of a game here and there and suddenly really relate to something. It's amazing.

At those times, I can't really believe I've been out of the game for 10 years already. It's almost like you were there last week. And when that happens you suddenly begin thinking you can still play.

Now if you put me out on the field and gave me a stress test, I probably couldn't run a hundred yards. Yet in my mind I think I can still go up there and pinch-hit.

You think of it as yesterday when you could do certain things. You loved the game and you miss it. It's something you did almost all of your life. And you still think in your mind that you can perform.

I don't know if that will ever go away.

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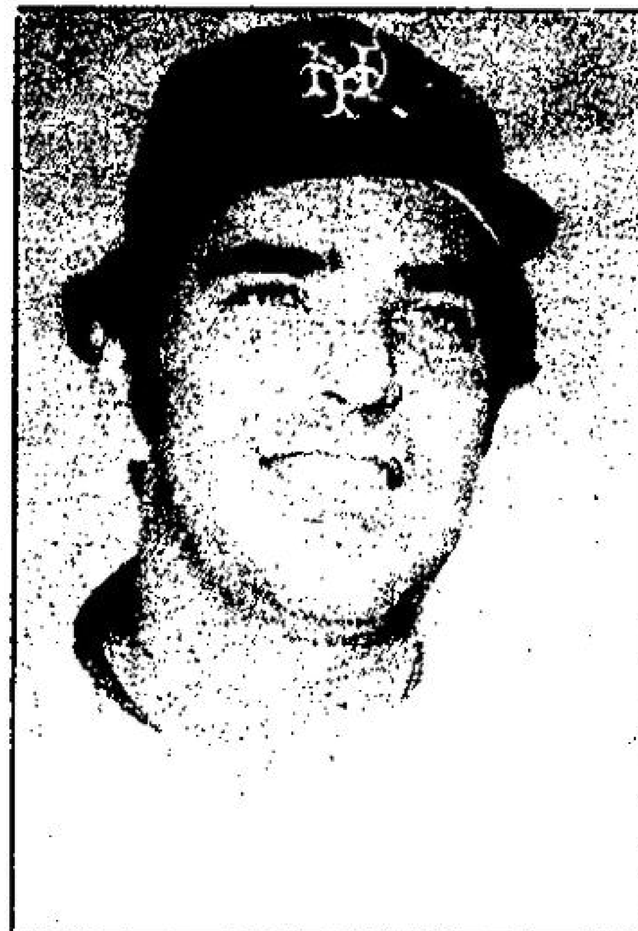

Ed Kranepool (1970s)

Ed Kranepool (today)

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