

**HOW JIMINY CRICKET HELPED ME EVEN THE SCORE
WITH THE DODGERS**

**By
Robert Anthony Natiello**

I leap to the grating sound of the rising entrance-gate beneath the Ebbets Field grandstand. Before that rippled steel, overhead door has time to ratchet up a single inch, I break from my circle of card-playing teen companions and race to position myself in front of it. I aim to be the first to greet the emerging hiring boss.

He ducks through the opening, rises to his full height, and announces to the engulfing crowd. “I need a dozen kids to work today’s game.”

It’s baseball season in Brooklyn and I want one of those jobs. For a fourteen-year old like me, there’s no better work in the entire borough. As a stiletto boy, I’ll make fifty cents and have the right to see the game from the second inning on. The trick is to get hired. There are always more kids than openings.

Since school let out, I've shown up to work at every Dodger home game, but no luck. Experienced kids get first preference. They neither shout nor wave. Confident and undemonstrative, they're sure their name will be called. We first-timers jump and plead, "Me. Me."

It doesn't work. The experienced kids stride in like favorite sons, and the hiring process ends quickly. All the jobs are filled, and, once again, I'm outside Ebbets Field looking in. The gate cranks down while I stand rejected and disappointed.

Too bad--the Dodgers are my heroes. So what if they're a team of wartime ballplayers, too old, too young or physically unfit to serve in our armed forces. We do have Dixie Walker. He leads the league in hitting. And my best friend, Ben Rogers, insists the Dodgers are in first place. "Just make sure you read the paper upside down," he explains. But until Peewee Reese, Gil Hodges and other stars return from fighting in far-off lands, my only choice is to accept the 1944 Brooklyn Dodgers as my idols.

Now, brown lunch bag in hand, I curse my predicament and shuffle away. Looming ahead, another summer day in the hot city with nothing to do.

Without warning, the familiar grind of the rising gate catches my ear. Hey, they're lifting it again.

With a rush of renewed hope, I whirl and race back, shouldering myself into a front position. The hiring boss steps into the sunlight. Does he need another boy? An unfamiliar, open-collared redheaded man, standing by his side, answers my question. He cups his hand around his mouth and shouts, "I need one kid for the bleacher gate." I join the crowd, jumping, waving and yelling, "Pick me. Pick me."

The big redhead ignores our pleas. "I want an Irish kid," he barks, searching our faces. "Who's Irish?"

I turn to size-up my competitors. They represent every ethnic derivation only New York City can give birth to: Black, white, Asian, Greek, Jewish, German, Italian. Not an Irish face among them. One of my teachers, of Irish heritage, has nicknamed me Murphy, though he knows my last name is one hundred percent Italian. I assume it's his way of acknowledging the looks I inherited from my Irish grandmother.

Should I try to pass? I take a closer look at Red. Not only is his hair red, so is his face. It's clear he's a drinker. Maybe his vision is so bleary I can get by on looks alone--without revealing my last name. It can't hurt to chance it.

"Me. I'm Irish," I shout back.

"Yeah, you look Irish," Red says.

I'm overcome with excitement. The hiring boss waves me in while I tuck my brown lunch bag under my arm, ready to work. But before I can step from the

crowd, Red stops me in my tracks with a booming question. “What’s your last name, kid?”

Two authority figures, staring down at me with silent, stony faces, await my answer. On the basis of my looks, I believe I’ve convinced Red I’m Irish. But the moment he hears my last name, I know I’m finished.

On the top floor of my apartment building lives a family of four Irish spinster sisters. I often run errands for them. In an instant, I conclude they won’t mind my using their name.

“Brennan,” I say, an outright invention.

“Yeah, Brennan, that’s a good Irish name. C’mon.” I break from the crowd, walking past a card-playing buddy who knows my real name. He stares at me with saucer eyes and a mouth so wide it could easily accommodate the entire Macintosh apple inside my lunch bag.

Red likes the job I do at the bleacher gate. Next day, the hiring boss runs down his list and calls my name. “Brennan, right?” I saunter in with the experienced kids, proof that dare-deviltry pays off.

I soon learn that inventing a new name is easy. Sustaining it is hard. Friends who know my real name emphasize my fictional name at every turn. “How ya doin’, BRENNAN,” they shout, though only a few feet from my ears.

One late afternoon, a few hours before the gates open for a night game, I sit behind third base surrounded by row upon row of empty seats. The long rays of the declining sun stream through the supporting steel girders and warm my shoulders. Watching my supermen take early practice, I feel privileged. Surely I must be the envy of every kid in the borough of Brooklyn. Abruptly, a distant voice interrupts the crack-crack of batted balls. My eyes shift to focus on a fellow stile boy seated on the first-base side of the field. Although he's far across the stands, his voice reaches me, clear and crisp, "How ya doin', BRENNAN?" I feel scorned when his hollow laugh echoes through the nearly vacant grandstand.

Only a few anonymous aisle-sweepers are within earshot, yet I'm deeply embarrassed, as though the entire stadium is filled with fans and every one of them has learned of my deception. I grow angry with myself for changing my name. I realize I've done wrong, but I don't know how to correct my mistake. My self-esteem shatters and the moment's special pleasure pops like a soap bubble. I finish the baseball season as Brennan, but not before I'm involved in a worse form of deception.

After a half-dozen games, I consider myself a veteran stile boy. The routine is easy: Stand at my assigned entrance gate and turn the stile after each fan presents his ticket. The ticket taker tears the fan's ticket, returns the rain check and keeps the stub: One fan, one ticket, one click registered on the turnstile. To ensure the numbers agree, management employs a spotter at every gate.

I'm aware of the spotters. Red alerted me to the presence of the bleacher-gate spotter on my first day. "We gotta be on our best behavior, kid. There's a spotter behind us."

When I respond with a blank stare, he points to the stile, "After the game, my ticket stubs have to match the number on the stile. If they don't agree, we're gonna hear from the spotter," he says. "One ticket, one turn of the stile."

I'm past that now. I've reached the point where I know the spotters and why they're there. Watching their friendly but businesslike relationships with the ticket-takers, I have no idea one of them is part of a shady conspiracy. It never occurs to me that I might become part of it.

On a busy doubleheader Sunday, while tending my fast-turning stile for a steady stampede of incoming fans, I notice something different. Every so often, the ticket-taker squeezes two fans into one turn of the stile. The stile registers only one admission, yet the ticket-taker receives two tickets. The spotter ignores this obvious infraction. When the supply of retained tickets builds up in the ticket-taker's hands, I see him hand them to the spotter.

The spotter counts the tickets and walks a few feet to the back door of the ticket-seller's booth. "Hot in there?" he shouts. Even my inexperienced eyes recognize it as a signal that he's slipping the withheld tickets to the seller through a crack in the booth door. It's obvious they're up to something dishonest.

When we close the gate for the day, the ticket-taker says, “Meet me by the hot dog stand under the third-base ramp in half an hour.” I follow his instructions and don’t think twice about accepting the folded bills he hands me. “This is your share. Don’t let on where you got it,” he says.

It’s clear now. The ticket-seller resold the retained tickets and pocketed the money. Everybody, including me, gets a piece of the spoils. I’m happy to pick up an extra three dollars--six times my pay of fifty cents a game. I keep quiet and celebrate with a second hot dog.

It isn’t long before I’m involved in another ticket reselling conspiracy. This time, when the ticket-taker hands me my post-game share, he asks, “Does your mother know you’re stealing from the Dodgers?” His question fills me with guilt and lowers my self-respect, already at rock bottom for changing my name.

I’m torn between keeping the money a secret and telling my mother about it. She might give me some good advice on how to get out of this jam I put myself in. She might also tell me to give up my stile-boy career. I can’t do that. In addition to my game pay, I’ve built a fast friendship with the Dodger batboy. He allows me the privilege of helping him handle the Dodgers’ bats. After every game, I remove the bats from the bat rack, and transfer them to a large, blue trunk stenciled Brooklyn Dodger Baseball Club in white letters. With each trip down the dugout steps--weighed down by a half-dozen Louisville Sluggers--I ask myself how much of a privilege this really is. But these are the bats used by my heroic Dodgers, I tell

myself. I put on a stoic face and bear up despite buckling knees and stinging shoulders.

I build more confidence in my batboy friend, and he allows me in the dugout before the games. I hold pre-game talks on the team bench with Eddie Stanky and Bobby Bragan. I have no idea they will someday become major-league managers. I laugh when they make me the subject of a guessing game.

“How much you think he weighs?” Bragan asks Stanky.

“One-thirty,” Stanky replies

“One thirty-three.” Bragan says, looking at me for confirmation.

“About one-thirty,” I say.

“Damn, I hit it,” Stanky says, smacking his fist into the pocket of his glove.

I laugh harder while watching Bragan, a catcher at the time, imitate other catchers throughout the league. He mimics the Reds’ lumbering giant, Ernie Lombardi, by crawling after a loose ball on his hands and knees, baby like. Then he springs to a catcher’s crouch contrasting Lombardi’s sluggishness with the high-energy chatter of the Cubs’ Clyde McCullough.

It’s not long before I work my way on to the field, thrilled to play catch with one of the rookies, a marine just back from the Pacific. No, I can’t risk giving this up. I remain silent, bottle up the confusion inside and continue along my tortured path.

The days grow shorter and the baseball season winds down. I work the Press Gate now. I like it much better. The spotter is an old timer with the reputation of a loyal, veteran Ebbets Field employee. Even if stealing were to enter his mind, there is little opportunity for it at the Press Gate.

The last game of the season arrives. It's a cool September Sunday, and I leave before I learn the game's outcome. It makes no difference in the season's final standings, anyway. I know the 1944 Dodgers will finish an undistinguished seventh in an eight-team league.

I also know something about myself: I act out of character when I want something bad enough. Changing my name proved that. It's too late now, but had I told the hiring boss my real name on the day following that first bleacher-gate assignment, I feel pretty sure he would have kept me on.

I know something about life, too: it's easy to get swept up in stealing-- especially when everybody around you is doing it. Still, it isn't right. It weighs on your conscience for a long time.

April 2, 2008

**Frank H. McCourt, Jr., Owner
Los Angeles Dodgers Baseball Club
Los Angeles CA 90012**

Dear Frank,

With the passing of time, I've discovered there is no statute of limitations on conscience. To ease mine, the enclosed \$100 check, payable to the Los Angeles

Dodgers, should wipe the slate clean.

It includes a reasonable amount to cover six decades of accrued interest. I hope it's enough to atone for the six-dollar larceny that took place over sixty years ago.

For a full understanding, you might want to read the attached. It's a fast-paced story of how a name change won me a job with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

All good wishes to the 2008 Dodgers as they embark on their second half-century of success in Los Angeles.

Sincerely,

Bob Natiello, Former Stile Boy

May 11, 2008

Dear Bob,

Thank you for sharing your history with the Brooklyn Dodgers. I have no doubt the lessons you learned as that young boy have served you well throughout your life. Jiminy Cricket could have learned a few things from your example.

I have forwarded your generous refund to the Dodgers' Dream Foundation so that your good deed lives on to do good for others. Please consider yourself "caught up."

Sincerely,

**Frank H. McCourt, Jr.
Owner, Los Angeles Dodgers Baseball**

HOW JIMINY CRICKET ...

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THE END