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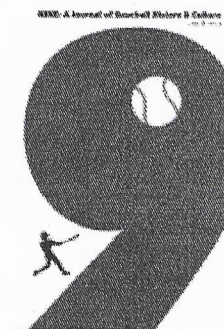
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**Still Perfect after Fifty Years**

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**NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture, Volume 16, Number 2, Spring 2008, pp. 117-118 (Article)**

Published by University of Nebraska Press  
DOI: 10.1353/nin.2008.0006



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## Still Perfect after Fifty Years

richard zitrin

I was there. A nine-year-old boy with a Dodgers cap in the enemy camp: Yankee Stadium, upper deck section 22, box 74A. October 8, 1956, Game 5 of the World Series, the day Don Larsen broke my heart and pitched a perfect game. Pen and scorecard in hand and not yet knowing the special language of baseball scoring, I recorded each Dodger's turn at bat with one simple word—"OUT"—three outs an inning in each column, nine columns, one for each inning, twenty-seven "Outs" in perfect symmetry across the scorecard.

To me, Larsen's last pitch to Dale Mitchell was high and outside. But when Yogi Berra leapt into Larsen's arms, it was over. Tears filled my eyes, but the man in the seat next to me knew better: Dad knew what we'd seen, knew that over time I would no longer see the game with a nine-year-old's eyes as a tragedy but as the incomparable event that it was.

As the years passed, I adopted the Mets and stood on the Shea Stadium field with my best friend after their stunning 1969 championship. Like many others, I followed the Dodgers and Giants to California. Unlike my boyhood idols, I settled in San Francisco, where the Giants, never having been enemies like the Yanks, became my team.

After two more trips to the World Series in '57 and '58, I don't think I ever went to a ballgame with my dad again. We went to Ebbets Field for my benefit, not his; he would rather have been playing golf. But my love of the game was a gift from my dad.

My two sons became my ballgame companions, each developing his own love for the game. They grew up with our story of The Perfect Game and with the memorabilia my father had insisted so long ago that I preserve: the program with Casey Stengel and Walt Alston on the cover. The two tickets (\$10.50 each). A Larsen card stapled to the program. Writing in a child's hand on the program's cover announcing that the Dodgers had had "no hits, no runs, no errors" and "no men left on."

I coached both my sons, one a pitcher and shortstop, the other a third baseman, and our baseball bond grew. We saw the Giants at Candlestick—my younger son was with me when the earthquake hit during the 1989 World Series—and then at China Basin. We made pilgrimages to California's Central Valley to soak up the purity of Class A minor league ball. My elder son became a star for his high school team and once threw a 1-0 no-hitter with first place on the line. There were times when baseball was my strongest tie to my sons.

Every once in a while, my father would say to me, "Rich, you ought to get hold of Larsen. We really ought to meet him and get him to sign your program." Busy with work, busy with kids, busy with life, I never got around to it. Then one day in 1993, my dad called from New York. He was heading to Monterrey for a conference. We knew Larsen worked in Silicon Valley south of San Francisco. More insistent than ever, Dad asked why we didn't finally get hold of Larsen. After all, my dad, then seventy-five, wasn't getting any younger. In fact, neither was Larsen. Come to think of it, neither was I.

We found the paper products company where Larsen worked as a sales rep, but when I called they said he'd just retired and wasn't available. My dad refused to accept that. Back in New York, he called the Yankees and asked if they might "do a favor for an old man." They made a phone call, and a few days later we got word that Don would meet us at the company's offices, where he was cleaning things out before moving to Idaho.

We took the boys with us to meet him. Larsen looked fit enough to go nine innings. He was kind and patient as we told him our story, any reluctance to meet us gone in the face of our enthusiasm. We spent almost two hours talking baseball, with Don's friend taking photographs. Trying to impress, I reminded my sons that Don had been a first-rate hitter and that he had pioneered the "no-windup" delivery. But Don barely acknowledged that "insider" stuff. He never really got animated until my older son mentioned his own high school no-hitter and asked Don what it felt like for him. Larsen's whole demeanor changed, and his eyes brightened: "It was the greatest feeling in the world."

Another thirteen years have passed. My sons and I still go to ballgames—the younger one's a law student, the elder a baseball coach and grad student in sports management. Don Larsen is happily retired, fishing in Hayden Lake, Idaho. And my dad, now eighty-eight, is still an active physician, hardly slowed by time. When I tell friends where I was on that October day, many don't believe me. So I pull out the worn program along with a picture of the five of us—my dad, my kids, Don, and me. Then I turn to the scorecard page, now adorned with Don Larsen's signature, the word "Out" written a perfect twenty-seven times in a child's imperfect hand.