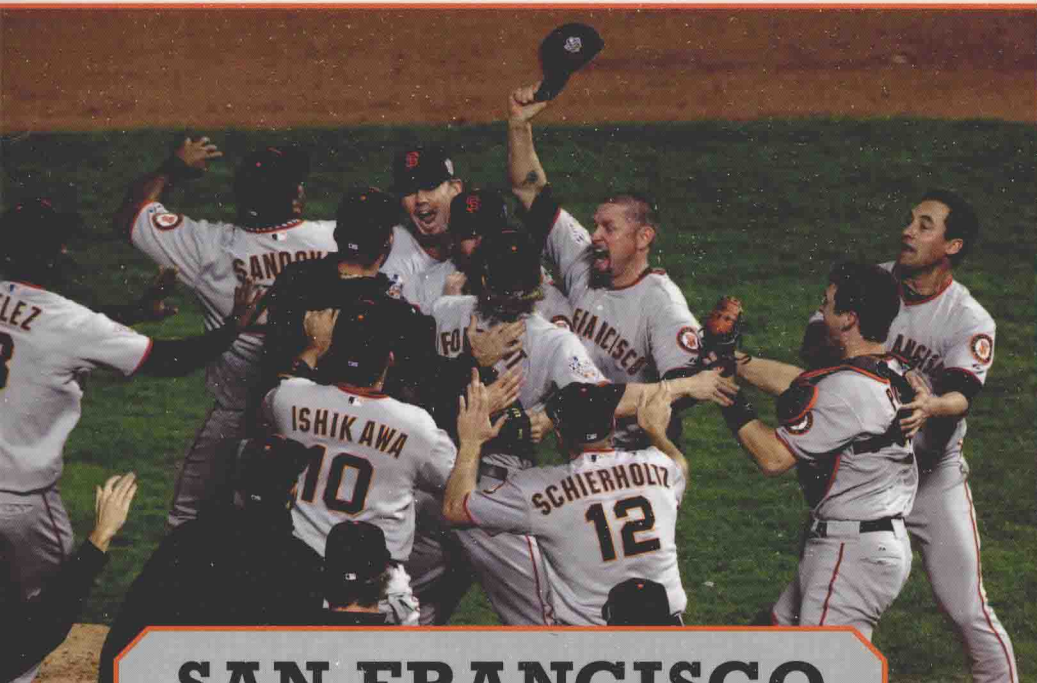


GAME OF MY LIFE



SAN FRANCISCO

GIANTS

MEMORABLE STORIES OF GIANTS BASEBALL

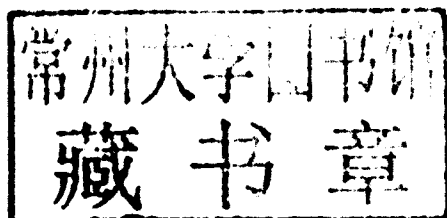
MATT JOHANSON
FOREWORD BY BRUCE MACGOWAN

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MATT JOHANSON

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GAME OF MY LIFE

SAN FRANCISCO

GIANTS

*To all the friendly faces, both in and out of uniform,
who helped along the way.*

FOREWORD

BY BRUCE MACGOWAN

ASK ANYONE WHO IS a baseball fan about a favorite memory of a game, and you're going to get some distinctive and varying responses. My father told me how he went to his first game with his dad in 1927 and saw Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and the New York Yankees at Yankee Stadium. The thing he remembers most about that game was that he caught a foul ball off the bat of a back-up player named Cedric Durst. What a memory for a seven-year-old!

My own personal favorite concerns a Giants game I went to with my mom, dad, and brother at old Seals Stadium back in 1959. By the time kids are six or seven, they usually start paying a little closer attention to what's going on during the games, and so it was with me as I have little recollection of minor-league Seals games I attended with my dad in earlier years. But I remember this particular game: my dad took us out of school on that cool, overcast September afternoon to see the Cubs and Giants play in a key game that had pennant implications. Fighting for their first National League championship in San Francisco, the Giants were racing the rival Dodgers and needed every win they could get. The game I attended with my family that day turned out to be a glorious one for Giants fans. Playing for Chicago, Bobby Thomson (yes, *the* Bobby Thomson) hit the first major league home run I ever saw in person. But the Giants' young southpaw Mike McCormick limited the damage from that point on, going eight and a third strong innings before turning it over to the bullpen. Then San Francisco's "Sad" Sam Jones gave up a pair of RBI singles, and the game went into the bottom of the ninth tied at 3-3.

GAME OF MY LIFE: SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS

Batting with one out was Jackie Brandt, an unremarkable player who briefly patrolled right field for the Giants. The soft-spoken Nebraskan, however, would enjoy his moment in the sun on this memorable afternoon. Brandt broke up the contest and sent everyone home happy by belting a low line drive over the right center-field wall. The home run capped an exciting 4-3 win for San Francisco.

Brandt was later traded to the Baltimore Orioles in a deal that brought San Francisco two pitchers, and he finished off his career in 1967 as a back-up outfielder on a bad Houston Astros team. But on that day, Jackie Brandt was the hero of at least one little seven-year-old baseball fan. Out of thousands of games I've seen as a fan and broadcaster, this favorite memory still stands out sharply to me.

Readers will enjoy the many great baseball tales told in this fine book by Matt Johanson, focusing on the special memories of Giants players. Together the games and stories of the players who starred in them comprise an enjoyable history of the team, from an author who, like myself, knows how enjoyable baseball history is.

Bruce Macgowan is a longtime Bay Area broadcaster and sports historian.

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1

ORLANDO CEPEDA

"A DREAM COME TRUE"

POSITION: first base, left field

SEASONS WITH GIANTS: 1958–1966

ACCOMPLISHMENTS: seven-time All-Star; won National League Rookie of the Year award in 1958; led National League in doubles (38) in 1958; led National League in RBIs (142) in 1961; inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1999

GAME OF HIS LIFE: April 15, 1958, versus Los Angeles Dodgers

SHORTLY BEFORE THE HISTORIC game started, two of the men who made it possible treated the crowd to a bonus contest. San Francisco's mayor, George Christopher, took the mound to pitch to his counterpart, mayor Norris Poulson of Los Angeles, and the leaders quickly showed amused spectators why they entered politics instead of sports.

Christopher's first throw—it was not a pitch—nearly hit Poulson in the head. The "wild in the wing" mayor then heaved a ball behind his opposite number, and bounced the next one over the plate. When Poulson finally connected, he rolled a dribbler across the infield and tore out of the batter's box at full speed. But instead of running to first base, he gleefully sprinted straight to third.

Roaring in laughter were 23,448 delighted spectators, enough to fill every seat and standing space in Seals Stadium.

GAME OF MY LIFE: SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS

Baseball was hardly new to the “city that knows how.” Such immortals as Lefty O’Doul and Joe DiMaggio called San Francisco home. The Seals, winner of fourteen Pacific Coast League pennants, had played there since before the great earthquake of 1906. For a time, the city also hosted the San Francisco Sea Lions, a Negro League team.

But San Francisco and the entire west coast had waited decades for big league baseball to follow in the Lewis and Clark expedition’s 154-year-old footsteps. When it finally arrived on April 15, 1958, fans in and out of the park were determined to enjoy every minute of it.

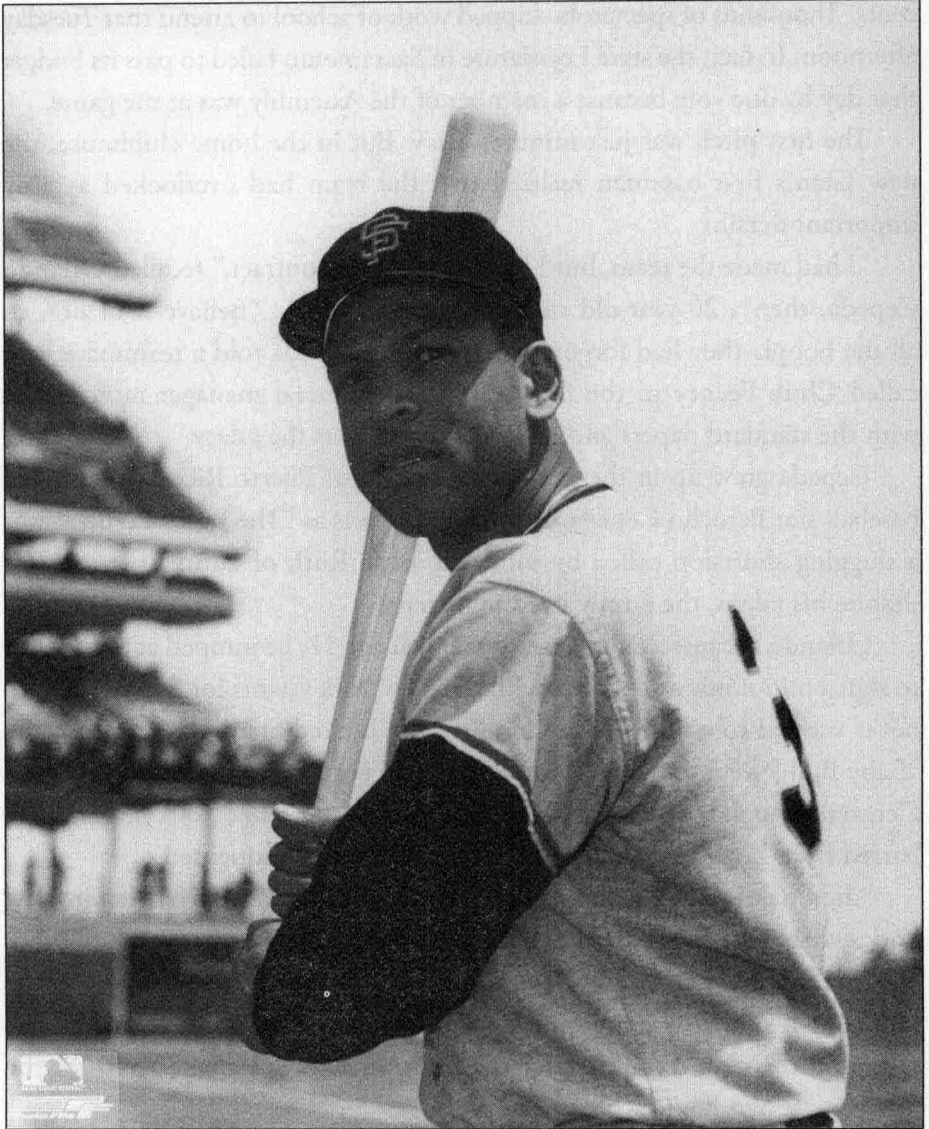
“We are going to miss the Seals,” Christopher said. “They gave us some great ball clubs, teams that would have held their own in either of the big leagues. But the Seals are gone now, leaving behind a tradition of hustle and fight matched by that of the Giants.”

The arrival of the Giants put the city in a frenzy. To welcome their new team, more than 100,000 people attended a downtown ticker-tape parade, wildly cheering the players who drove down Montgomery Street in open convertibles. “Welcome SF Giants. Swat Them Bums,” read billboards that sprang up around the city. A downtown clothing store gave women booklets explaining baseball rules and advising them about appropriate ballpark attire. Giants uniforms graced the mannequins of Macy’s store windows.

San Francisco raced to adopt a plan to build the team a stadium at Candlestick Point by the 1960 season. In the meantime, Seals Stadium at 16th and Bryant streets underwent a \$75,000 upgrade and added 2,600 seats in left field. The flags of the eight National League teams were raised. Tickets sold briskly, starting at 90 cents for the bleachers and reaching \$3.50 for box seats. For Opening Day against the equally new Los Angeles Dodgers—the first-ever major league game east of Kansas City—scalpers marked them up to a scandalous \$15.

As the mayors performed their comic act and dignitaries shook hands on the diamond, fans in the packed house feasted on concessions. Peanuts, soft drinks and coffee sold for 15 cents. Hot dogs went for a quarter, beer for 35

ORLANDO CEPEDA



Orlando Cepeda signed his contract just minutes before the Giants' debut game in San Francisco. *Photo file/MLB Photos via Getty Images*

GAME OF MY LIFE: SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS

cents. Thousands of spectators skipped work or school to attend that Tuesday afternoon. In fact, the state Legislature in Sacramento failed to pass its budget that day by one vote because a member of the Assembly was at the game.

The first pitch was just minutes away. But in the home clubhouse, the new Giants first baseman realized that the team had overlooked a fairly important detail.

"I had made the team, but I had yet to sign a contract," recalled Orlando Cepeda, then a 20-year-old rookie learning English. "Believe it or not, in all the hoopla they had forgotten about me." Cepeda told a teammate who called Chub Feeney in the front office. The general manager raced down with the standard papers and \$7,000 written in as the salary.

Cepeda grew up in the ghettos and slums of Puerto Rico as the son of baseball star Perucho Cepeda. Known to his fans as "The Bull," Perucho was a slugging shortstop called by some the Babe Ruth of Latin America. But despite his talent, the family lived in poverty.

Orlando became a ballplayer, too, and at age 17, he jumped at the chance to sign a minor league contract with the New York Giants for \$500. The Bull never wanted to grapple with racism in the United States, but his son, the "Baby Bull," went to America in 1955. Three years of minor league ball took Cepeda through the segregated South where he and other black players were barred from hotels and restaurants their teammates frequented.

After making the big club, Cepeda had looked forward to playing in New York, where his sister and other relatives lived. He admits that owner Horace Stoneham's decision to move the team to California initially disappointed him. But it didn't take long for Cepeda to change his mind thanks to the reception the club received. It started as soon as the Giants arrived for the first time at San Francisco Airport.

"When I got off the plane some Puerto Rican people were waiting for me," Cepeda remembered. "Some were waving Puerto Rican flags. About 400 fans were awaiting the team at the airport. I was so touched. It was something I had never expected."

ORLANDO CEPEDA

Late one night around this time, half-asleep, Cepeda believes he saw his father, who put his arms around him and smiled. The vision comforted the young man far from home and cemented his confidence. "I knew then that things would be just fine," he said. "I was a major league baseball player."

When Cepeda signed his last-minute contract, he began what became a 17-year big league career. The Giants started him along with fellow rookies Jim Davenport and Willie Kirkland in the opener against the Dodgers. Taking the mound for the Giants was Ruben Gomez, also Puerto Rican. Though Los Angeles threatened with two hits and three walks in the early innings, the pitcher baffled the Dodgers with his screwball in the clutch. Thanks to timely strikeouts and ground balls, he escaped without damage.

Los Angeles started ace Don Drysdale, the side-armed sinkerball pitcher who won 17 games in 1957. He quickly dispatched the first six Giants batters, though Cepeda nearly collected the first San Francisco Giants hit in the second inning.

Drysdale started the nervous rookie with an inside fastball. "Drysdale wouldn't give you an inch," Cepeda said. "On more than one occasion, he had me hitting the dirt." This time, the Giant scorched a ground ball to Dodgers third baseman Dick Gray, who robbed him with a clean pick and a rifle shot to first.

In the third, San Francisco loaded the bases on two walks and a single. Ironically, it was Gomez, that day's starting pitcher, who cracked the home team's first hit at Seals, an infield single to third. That brought up the club's new third baseman, Davenport, who would spend a lifetime with the Giants as a player, coach, scout, and manager. On this day, he knocked in the team's first run in its new home with a sacrifice fly to right. Then left fielder Jim King delivered an RBI single.

The Giants might have scored many more in the third but for an amazing play by a San Francisco-born Dodger. Kirkland hit a fly ball high and deep to center. Racing under it was Gino Cimoli, once a star at the city's Galileo

GAME OF MY LIFE: SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS

High School. The center fielder stumbled but, on one knee, reached out and caught the ball, and San Francisco settled for a 2-0 advantage.

Giants shortstop Daryl Spencer hit San Francisco's first homer in the fourth, and Willie Mays later hit a two-run single in the rally. Mays lost his cap chasing down a fly ball in the fifth, thrilling the spectators who before then had only read about his prowess. Only years later would the center fielder admit that he purposely wore caps a little too small to produce the flying-cap effect.

By the time Cepeda batted in the fifth, the Dodgers had sent Drysdale to the showers and brought in Don "The Weasel" Bessent from the bullpen. Cepeda worked the count to 3-1, and then attacked the pitch he wanted. The ball flew high over the right-field wall. The crowd cheered madly as Cepeda trotted the bases. "The home run did it for me. It established a love affair with the city of San Francisco," he said. "I had not known anything like this before."

After hitting loud outs all day, Kirkland finally got his due in the eighth with a run-scoring single. Leading in the ninth, 8-0, the Giants' only remaining suspense was whether Gomez could complete the shutout.

After two outs, Los Angeles put two men on base with a walk and a single, bringing up future Hall of Fame shortstop Pee Wee Reese. But Gomez caught him looking at a called third strike. The Giants had started their San Francisco history with a lopsided win over their greatest rivals, to the elation and long-lasting pride of their new hometown fans.

The Game of My Life

By Orlando Cepeda

My first major league game was a dream come true. As a kid, I dreamed that someday I would be a big league ballplayer. To find myself on the field with

ORLANDO CEPEDA

so many great players, that's a day I will never forget. I was a little nervous, pinching myself, thinking to myself, "Is this for real?"

This used to be a minor league town, and here we are playing the Dodgers in the very first game on the west coast. The people were going crazy, in the city, in Oakland, San Jose, all over the Bay Area. If we had 60,000 seats in the ballpark that year, we could have filled the park every single day.

Drysdale's [first pitch to me] wasn't too nice. It was a mean first pitch. He didn't mess around, and he let me know, "Welcome to the bigs." Bessent fed me a change-up, and I was ready. I got good wood, and the ball sailed 390 feet over the right-field fence. When I hit the home run, I was so happy inside that I didn't hear the fans or anything. I ran the bases like I was rolling. It was incredible.

At that moment, I didn't know the meaning of it, to come here and play ball in '58. But now looking back, that was very nice to participate in the first game on the west coast. I love San Francisco, the Bay Area and the organization. Everyone here has been great to me.

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Dodgers	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	1
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Cepeda: 5 at-bats, 1 run, 1 hit, 1HR, 1 RBI

More than 100 sportswriters covered the opener, the most ever for any Giants ballgame besides World Series or All-Star games.

"WE MURDER THE BUMS," screamed the *San Francisco Chronicle* the next morning. The papers documented every conceivable aspect of the contest, from the celebrity attendees' fashion choices to the quality of the hot dogs: "large and tender," wrote Prescott Sullivan, with "mustard a notch above Pacific Coast League standards." Reporting for the *Examiner*, Sullivan also complimented the fans for their "thorough understanding of baseball and

GAME OF MY LIFE: SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS

with it the good judgment to reserve their excitement for the exciting plays.” One writer praised Cepeda for guarding first base “like a tough marine.”

Giants manager Bill Rigney commended Cepeda and fellow rookies Davenport and Kirkland for delivering in their debut. “How about those three!” he exclaimed. “Playing like that in their first big league game, it was just tremendous.” Together the young trio combined for four hits and three RBIs.

“It was a remarkable opener,” recalled Lon Simmons, who debuted himself that day as a big league broadcaster. “It couldn’t have been any better than beating the Dodgers and shutting them out and putting on a big show.”

Among the only complaints was a scarcity of beer vendors in the upper deck. Also, a two-by-four fell from the roof of the just-remodeled press box, hitting the head of a sportswriter from Eugene, Oregon. But he wasn’t badly hurt, and stayed for the game.

As memorable as the game was to the Giants and their new hometown fans, it was equally forgettable for the new Los Angeles Dodgers.

“Outside of getting beat, 8-0, I don’t remember very much about that first game,” Drysdale later said. “I couldn’t worry about the pageantry. I had to pitch.

“Oh, I do remember looking up at the big Hamm’s beer glass on the brewery next to Seals Stadium and watching it filling up again and again,” the Dodger said. “I was kind of intrigued by it. After the game I had, I could really have used a beer.”

Perhaps even more disconsolate were the deserted fans both clubs left behind in New York. A city that used to enjoy three teams was left with only one. Like countless others, television personality Happy Felton was anything but overjoyed.

“I’m heartbroken. I’m sick,” he said. “Do you realize that on July 4, with the Yankees out of town, there won’t be a major league ballgame in New York?”

The Polo Grounds, the Giants’ former home, housed the New York Mets in future years. Ebbets Field, the Dodgers’ old park in Brooklyn, hosted college ball, circuses, rodeos, and boxing. Within seven years, both stadiums were demolished.