



HOMECOMING

Every October, a group of Pirates faithfuls gathers in Oakland to bond over baseball on the anniversary of what was arguably the greatest home run ever.

436 FT

BY HILARY DANINHIRSCH

If you build it, they will come. And if you tear it down, leaving only two outfield walls, they will still come, year after year.

Each October 13, several hundred people gather at what remains of the old Forbes Field in Oakland to relive one of the most exciting events in baseball: Game 7 of the 1960 World Series between the Pittsburgh Pirates and the New York Yankees.

A group of volunteers calling themselves the Game 7 Gang leads the event—loosely termed Mazeroski Day—which features a

recording of the original radio broadcast, shared memorabilia, and reminiscences of one of the greatest days in sports history.

“Of all the sporting events that I have watched or attended, that game is the ultimate,” says Game 7 Gang leader and Squirrel Hill native Herb Soltman.

The game was particularly exciting because of the David and Goliath scenario: The Pirates, who had won two World Series—the last one in 1925—were the underdogs against the mighty Yankees, who had 18 World Series wins under their belts—includ-

ing one as recently as 1958—and such superstars as Yogi Berra, Whitey Ford, and Mickey Mantle.

“The Yankees were the team to beat,” says Soltman, noting that they continually outscored and outbatted the Pirates throughout the series. “In the series, the Yankees’ batting average was .338; the Pirates’ was .256,” he recalls.

On October 13, 1960, the series was down to its final game. The Pirates had won three games but lost spectacularly in three others. In Game 7, the lead changed hands

A banner featuring the World Series-winning 1960 Pittsburgh Pirates hangs each October 13 on the section of the Forbes Field outfield wall that remains standing today. The Oakland ballpark was demolished in 1971.



Herb Soltman, leader of the Game 7 Gang that organizes the annual tribute event, addresses the crowd at last year’s gathering. Draped on the podium is a section of banner that hung in Forbes Field during the 1960 World Series.

four times, and by the bottom of the ninth inning the score was tied at 9-9.

Then, at 3:36 p.m., second baseman Bill Mazeroski of the Pirates stepped up to the plate and hit a walk-off home run over the left field wall, clinching the win for the home team and indelibly inscribing that moment in the hearts and minds of fans everywhere.

“We’re always told that we cannot turn back the clock,” said Soltman when addressing the crowd at the start of last year’s event. “Nonsense! We can and sometimes should. Today we will again.”

The tradition began in 1985 with one individual, the late Saul Finkelstein, who sat alone at the base of the Forbes Field flagpole with a cassette recording of the Game 7 broadcast every October 13 until 1993, when local sports author Jim O’Brien learned of the ritual. As O’Brien spread the word to the media, more people began to congregate at the site each fall.

In 2007, the Game 7 Gang was formed to handle organizational details. In addition to Soltman, gang members are Steve Neumeyer, Dan Schultz, John Urso, George Skornickel, and Joe Landolina.

Finkelstein’s original cassette recording has now been transferred to an iPod, but the new technology does not detract from the sentimental feel of the day. “When they play the national anthem, everyone stands up and sings along with it, like we’re actually at the game,” Soltman notes. “[It’s] like old-time nostalgic baseball, sitting outside on a chair and listening to the game on a radio.” Folks can even buy hot dogs and drinks provided by The Porch at Schenley, located on nearby Schenley Plaza.



Members of the Game 7 Gang posed for this photo in 2012. They are (left to right): Steve Neumeyer, Joe Landolina, Dan Schultz, John Urso, George Skornickel, and Herb Soltman.



Above: A model of Forbes Field signed by Bill Mazerowski was among the items of memorabilia on display at last year's gathering.

Right: Herb Soltman gets a handshake from "Maz" during the 2010 event.

Vintage baseball cards, photographs, original tickets, and an actual piece of a banner that was in the stands on that day in 1960 are proudly displayed by visiting fans. "It's almost like show and tell at the wall," says O'Brien, whose published works include *Maz and the '60 Bucs* and *We Had 'Em All the Way: Bob Prince & His Pittsburgh Pirates*.

"This event, as best we can determine, is unique. It's the only one of its kind in the country, which annually celebrates a one-time sporting event," says Soltman.

According to his observations, the size of the crowd varies each year, averaging about 200-250 people, although he estimates there



Jon and Chris Turak, along with Lou Kourey, all attorneys with a firm in West Virginia, stopped to check out the festivities—and Jim O'Brien's book—while in town on business last year.

were as many as 1,600 attendees at the 50th anniversary of Game 7 in 2010. Mazerowski himself attended both the 40th and 50th anniversary gatherings, and other Pirates from the original 1960 team have made appearances over the years.

The annual observance attracts folks from all over the city and well beyond, from West Virginia to Washington, and many states in between. One former Pittsburgher from New Hampshire brings his elderly father each year.



An estimated crowd of more than 1,500 people gathered at the Forbes Field outfield wall for the 50th anniversary of the 1960 World Series win.



Lisa Slobodnyak of Oakmont (center) and Mike Woshner of Carrick (right) attend annually. Last year, Woshner's daughter, Lynn Woshner O'Donnell of the South Side (left), came with them.

Another regular is Lisa Slobodnyak of Oakmont, who says she wouldn't miss the event. "You meet so many new people," she observes. "Everyone has a story. It's amazing."

Game 7 was a game changer for some folks like Irene Abel, who met her husband during the post-game celebration downtown. They got engaged exactly one year later and were together until he passed away in 2014.

"My brother and I always say that if it wasn't for Bill Mazeroski hitting his home run, we wouldn't be here today," quips Abel's daughter, Lynne.

Soltman says he took his grandmother to that game—the only baseball game she ever attended. Her reaction? "You know, Herbert, it was most exciting."



Pirates faithfuls listen intently to the recorded broadcast of the winning Game 7.

And even today, with the final score a foregone conclusion, the ending is still exciting for those who gather to hear the anniversary broadcast. "Fans push right up to the speakers, on their feet, holding their breath on every word, as though unsure of the game's outcome," penned Soltman in a 2010 piece for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

When the winning homer takes place, according to Soltman, "the fans gathered at the wall erupt in cheers, back-slapping, jumping up and down—every possible emotion. The entire crowd is transported back to 1960."

But the occasion is more than just a trip down memory lane. "It's kind of the last pure event there is that is not ruined by corporate sponsorship," says gang member Landolina, who lives in Squirrel Hill. "It's totally created by fans for fans."

"They like to exchange stories, look at their memorabilia, and remember a simpler time," he notes.

Soltman agrees and ends his annual welcoming address with a call to "relax, revisit, remember, reminisce, and rejoice in the great moments of good old nostalgic baseball," adding "Beat 'em Bucs!" ^{SA}

If you are interested in attending on October 13, the annual event begins at about 12:15 at the old Forbes Field wall along Roberto Clemente Drive. In the event of rain, festivities move across the street to the Schenley Plaza tent.