

## **Bobby Thomson (ES)**

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interviewer Tom Harris, NJ

*This is Tom Harris. I'm interviewing Bobby Thomson at his home in New Jersey. Today's date is September 26, 1993. I wanted to briefly ask you Bobby, you were born in Glasgow, Scotland. Just tell me how many brothers and sisters you had and what it was like growing up, when you got over to the west, and how it came about.*

BT- You're right, Tom. I was born in Glasgow, Scotland back in October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1923. I was the youngest of six children. I have four sisters and a brother. We came over to this country, I imagine, when I was just between two and two-and-a-half years old. Of course, my older brother was nine years older than I and when I look back at it, I'm sure that he was the one that got me started playing with a baseball in the backyard because he played baseball. I remember he bought me my first glove. He was working at Sears, Roebuck at the time and he came home with a glove for me and boy, that was just like Christmas. You know, I was really thrilled to get this brand new glove. So really, that was the beginning of it getting me out on the sandlots with a bat and a ball and a glove. Of course, my dad, he was used to the soccer, as they call it over there, football. But he came to this country and he took to baseball right away. He was a Dodger fan. He became a Dodger fan. As it turned out, my brother was a Yankee fan and I took to the Giants. But, I guess I started playing, getting out and throwing the ball around when I was seven, eight years old. You know, when you first pick up a bat and it's too heavy for you. But, in around that time was when I started and it just went on from there. I continued to play Police Athletics League ball and then as I got into high school and played for the team and kind of played what they called semi-pro ball on Staten Island. This was all on Staten Island because that's where we landed in New York. But, we lived, I was brought up in Staten Island for I guess, up until, how old was I, I was probably about thirty-two years old when I finally moved to New Jersey.

*You said you were a Giant fan growing up. Did you go see them play at the Polo Grounds when you were at Staten Island?*

BT- Nope, nope. I never did go and watch the Giants play but I followed them on the radio and my dad, I remember, he took me to a couple of games over at Ebbets Field. He was a great Dolph Camilli fan. But, he was a typical Scot, not a very demonstrative type of a person, but I'll always remember when Dolph Camilli hit a home run this day. He jumped up and raised his fist in the air and I really got a kick out of it. I may as well throw this in for what it's worth, this time, I lost him before I graduated from high school. So, as much as he was right there with me at all the ballgames and loved to go to ballgames, he never did live long enough to see me play in the big leagues, which was a little bit of a tough one. But, as a youngster, on Sundays, in Staten Island, there was always a ballgame someplace and he and I would walk for miles. We didn't have a car when we first came over to this country. We walk for miles just to see a ballgame, generally it would be on a Sunday afternoon.

*What high school did you go to on Staten Island?*

BT- Curtis. Curtis High School.

*After high school, what then?*

BT- Well, uh, after high school, the day after I graduated I signed a contract with the Giants.

*That must have been a big thrill, being a Giant fan.*

BT- Well, yes, to go to Class-D, playing Class-D baseball, signed for a hundred dollars a month. Of course, I had been, the Dodgers were very much interested in me. In fact, they showed more interest in me than the Giants did. They knew I, I guess I told them I wanted to go to the Giants because they asked me not to sign with the Giants before talking to them. They said they'd top any offer the Giants made. You know, as a young kid, back then, money was no object. I just said I was a Giant and that was going to be it.

*So you went to their Class-D club.*

BT- I went to their Class-D club and really, they had a good ballclub and I was just a scared, nervous kid and didn't get a chance to play much. I played in a few games but basically I really wasn't playing that much. Bill Terry, who happened to be in the front office at the time, so apparently they needed a third baseman in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. So, they shipped me out to Rocky Mount, North Carolina where I thought I'd get a better chance to play. Well, I didn't, they had a good third baseman there but he was called into the Army. So then, I moved into third and I finished out the season. But actually, I probably didn't play in more than fifteen or twenty games my first year away. That was 1942.

*What position had you played throughout high school and the other games, or leagues, that you were involved in?*

BT- Well, I generally played shortstop. That was it. Generally, the better ballplayers, you know, on kids teams, are playing shortstop where they can handle the ball more than the other players.

*Did you like shortstop?*

BT- Oh, sure.

*When you tried to play third, how did you feel about making the change to third base, at that point?*

BT- Oh, it didn't matter really. You know.

*Do you remember the name of the scout that signed you?*

BT- George Mack. George Mack actually signed me but there was a fellow from Staten Island that had a lot to do with my getting in baseball, professional baseball, that was Jim Molinelli. Of course, unfortunately he was killed earlier this year in an automobile accident, he and his wife, down in Florida. It was George Mack, the guy that first saw me playing on a Sunday afternoon when I was playing in this semi-pro league. I was just a high school kid but they were all older people. You might say, for my age, I was better than the average guy my age.

*So you then eventually made it to the Giants. A lot of your career has been documented already. I know you've spoken at length about it, to many people. I wanted to ask you a little about your move to third base in '51, how it came about, and there it was, and how it was presented to you.*

BT- Well, I had been playing center field. Actually, I started off the season playing second base for Mel Ott, but I think that's the most interesting part of it.

*You started at second that year, in '51?*

BT- I went to spring training in 1947 to play third base. Now, they just happened to have a new rookie, Jack Lohrke, that they had signed. So, Jack Lohrke and Sid Gordon, the veteran, the holdover and myself and Mel Ott had given each of us a chance to play every third day. Well, heck, we were barnstorming back east with the Indians. A week out of New York where we were going to end up to play a weekend series with the Indians, Mel Ott apparently was dissatisfied with the play of our second baseman, Buddy Blattner and asked me if I'd try second. Heck, I wanted to play ball and that's the toughest position for an inexperienced guy to play. But anyway, I opened up the season there. I missed a double play the first time around, my first opportunity, but I started to feel my way around and felt comfortable at second. But then I was moved to center field because they were having problems in center field, so Mel Ott moved me to center. I played center, to get to your question, in 1951, I played center field until they brought up Willie Mays. Durocher immediately put him into center field and moved me to third. Again, I was just happy to stay in the lineup and play someplace. I didn't have a problem with it. You know, I hadn't had the experience fielding balls and making plays but I was a natural and a ballplayer. I remember Durocher hitting me ground ball just to try me out there. He hit me about eighteen or twenty ground balls and I just jumped around and fielded them and I remember his remark. He says, "You can't play third any better than that. Don't worry about him. He's all right."

*So, it was really the arrival of Willie Mays that triggered your move. I believe you batted over .350 after you moved to third for the balance of the season.*

BT- Apparently, yes, I heard something like that.

*Did you feel like you were hitting well? I mean, you must have, but, do you think it was the move to third base, or coincidental?*

BT- I think Durocher worked on my stance. He had me crouching over, in other words, to make me more aggressive. I was always pretty much of a standup guy at the plate. You know, without crouching. So I think that crouching just got me more aggressive and got me into the ball more. I had pretty good success with it that year.

*What was the mood in spring training in '51? What kind of season did either you or the team in general feel you were going to have?*

BT- Well, we thought our club looked pretty good. We got some very strong, dependable players, strong down the middle. You know, I was able to do a job in center field and Stanky and Dark were a very experienced double play combination. We had a big, strong guy in left in Monte Irvin and Whitey Lockman. I guess Whitey, was he in the outfield at the time when Irvin was on first base. I think there were a lot of changes that year. They all seemed to work. So anyway, we had enough good players and we had some good pitching with Jansen and Maglie, among others, Koslo and we just felt we were strong enough to make a good run for it.

*You sure did, winning sixteen games in a row, later on in the season.*

BT- Well, of course, we started off, we won the first game and they lost about the next eight or nine in a row, but when we finally got it going, yeah, we did get on that winning streak which made an awfully big difference.

*Tell me about the Polo Grounds when you first came there and what it felt like.*

BT- Well, of course, when a young guy first steps onto a big league ballfield in a big league uniform, you know, it could be any field and you be thrilled. But, the Polo Grounds belonged to the Giants and so, to me, it was a unique ballpark. It was built more to play polo or football, really. So obviously, it had short foul lines and then it stretched out in left and right center and dead center a long way, much further than the average ballparks. But, you had to learn how to play those caroms off the outfield walls in right and left. But, I got there and to me there was a lot of Giant tradition going back to John McGraw's time and Bill Terry. You know, I just felt very good and very happy to be there.

*Do you remember your first game well?*

BT- Well, my first game was the year before. In 1946 they had brought me up. It my first full year in organized baseball, 1946. I had been in the Army for two years and I made the New Jersey City Giants Triple A team in '46 and the Giants brought me up at the end of that year in the last month of the season. I hit a couple of home runs. I don't really remember my first time at bat with the Giants. I think I hit a home run but frankly I don't remember that whether it's true or not. But, opening day in 1947, I hit a home run besides missing a double play ball at second. But, we won that game. That's what counts.

*I want to go ahead and ask about a couple things. A celebrated year in '51, a lot of excitement. A couple of years later you're traded to Milwaukee. How did it feel at the time? Did you feel rejection or did you feel that somebody wanted you? How did it feel and how were you notified?*

BT- You know, I was an every other year player, apparently. You know, I mean, I was inconsistent. So after the 1953 season, you know, I didn't live up to expectations, although, I think, I recall my statistics a little bit, and today, the same statistics would be worth three or four million dollars. I knocked in a hundred and six runs. Somewhere around there. I just happened to listen and discuss, but I don't remember. I hit something like .272 and knocked in 26 homers or something like that, but it just wasn't what the Giants were looking for. So, I began hearing through the media, you know, Thomson's days are coming to an end with the Giants. Of course, with a young Willie Mays to look forward to playing center field for the Giants. They had the opportunity. They needed some help in pitching and they thought I was worth something to other teams in the marketplace so they made a smart move and they used me to get a pitcher which, without whom, they'd never have won it all the way they did, beating Cleveland in the World Series—Johnny Antonelli. He had a great year for them and he made the difference.

*How did that feel, when you were in Milwaukee in '54 when the Giants were winning the pennant and subsequently the World Series? Did you feel some anguish?*

BT- Well, I guess to get back. Maybe, I didn't finish your first question properly. So now the Giants go on and win the pennant that year. Sure, it was tough. I look back and I got traded off a World Championship team. I'd like to have been there but I was kind of realistic. I'd like to have been there, but that's baseball. I couldn't blame anybody but myself. Now, that last question. You're moving on to Milwaukee now?

*How were you notified of the trade? How you were told? Did somebody call you?*

BT- The Giant trade?

*Yes, how were you notified?*

BT- I think it was a phone call. You know, the Giants treated me very well. You know, I couldn't ask for any more and I remember I wrote Leo Durocher a letter and told him it was a pleasure playing for him because I've got stories where Leo and I had our run-ins, we had our little things off and on but Leo was the kind of guy, you know, that would open up his mouth, and shoot right from the hip and if you had something to say, you were allowed to say it.

*He encouraged you?*

BT- But, then it was over the next day. We didn't hold grudges or anything like that. If you had something to say you got it off your chest. You know, Leo was quite a guy to play for.

*How was your time in Milwaukee? Did you feel comfortable in Milwaukee and after being traded, now this is what I really want to understand, when a ballplayer is being traded. You had a home, I assume, in the New York area with the Giants.*

BT- I had just been married and was living on Staten Island.

*So now you had to go to Milwaukee. What was that like?*

BT- Well, I didn't own the home. I was renting it. It was almost like a honeymoon cottage on Staten Island. Well, what my wife and I did was we put all our stuff in storage and we moved out and we spent a year in Milwaukee. You know, we rented homes out there. So, you know, when I heard the news, Milwaukee, of course, Milwaukee, I felt had a very good team and they had a big guy named Gene Conley and I thought, gee, I'm glad I'm on his side because he was a hard-throwing basketball player, six-foot-eight, whatever it was. He had stuck me once on the side of my leg and I thought he was a guy that threw from the side. You know, you had to hang in there against him and if he got a little wild inside, well, it was too bad. So I thought, well, I was glad to be on his side. But, I went on to Milwaukee, it's part of baseball and I disappointed myself there. I never really felt comfortable there. It wasn't until the last year I was there that I just started for the first time. Well, I broke my leg, of course, in spring training.

*Was that in '54 in spring training, you broke your leg? You didn't play much in '54.*

BT- Yes. Then I came back too soon and heck, it bothered me through the next season, '55, and when was I traded?

*So, during the year they were winning the pennant you were traded back to the Giants.*

BT- And it's funny, I started off slowly that year but I just started to find myself and I was hitting the ball well in Philadelphia when I got the news I was traded. Then again, the Braves made a good move. They needed a second baseman to kind of anchor down their infield and he was just the man that they were looking for. So, when I say I helped the Braves win a World's Championship too, by getting traded!

*How did it feel to go back to the Giants, then?*

BT- Oh well, the Giants thing. All the luster had gone out of it and it was so, it was just baseball.

*OK, it wasn't anything special. You didn't go back there and feel rejuvenated or anything?*

BT- No, I'd lost all that early young person feeling, excitement about playing for the New York Giants. I'd lost that. I had grown up and married and baseball had now become a business. It wasn't a plaything like it was when I started.

*Then you were traded to the Cubs then, after that. Very quickly.*

BT- Yeah, then they really surprised me and traded me to the Cubs and that was a bit of a shocker. Right in spring training because my wife, certainly she was looking forward to going out to San Francisco. You know, and I was looking forward to going out to San Francisco, too. A change of scenery, certainly. So, when I got traded to the Cubs, it was a shocker but of course, you know, I went over to the Cubs and had spent two of the most fun years in my life in baseball. For one thing, Al Dark had been traded that same year and the Cubs had been finishing in last place and that's the part that didn't sound so hot. But, anyway, Al Dark and I went over there and we felt we contributed pretty well to help them get into fifth place the following year. And, of course, it was day baseball and it was, you know, playing day baseball and living like a human being, going home and having dinner at night. It was a great thing.

*I bet it was. So, you enjoyed Chicago?*

BT- Oh, I enjoyed Chicago very much. The fans were great.

*Wrigley Field, did you like that?*

BT- Oh, sure. I played center field in Wrigley Field.

*A couple of nice years with the Cubs and then you ended up in 1960 with the Boston Red Sox.*

BT- Yeah, then I agreed to a contract for the Cubs and they traded me off in the winter for a guy that was never heard of. So, I don't know what went on there. Maybe I signed for too much money that year but nowadays, it wouldn't be anything.

*It would be hardly anything I know it was the last year of your career when you played with the Red Sox and a few games I believe with the Baltimore Orioles. By the time you got to the Orioles, how did you know, how did you end up retiring, I guess is what I am trying to say?*

BT- The Orioles retired me. Oh, I was coming down to the end of the line. I didn't look forward. We have just bought a home in New Jersey. We bought a home and had moved to New Jersey and we left Milwaukee after spending one year out there. You know, we realized that we were really easterners and we wanted to get back to this area and as I say, we just bought this home and I didn't look forward to leaving for spring training which is always a bad sign. So, I just went up to Boston and they could feel the end coming down and they got rid of me. Obviously, I wasn't performing well enough. Then I got to Baltimore and that didn't work out and so...

*Did they release you?*

BT- Yeah.

*What did you do after that? Did you go home and work on your new career?*

BT- I came home and sat down and had a talk with my wife about where do we think we ought to go from here and she said, "Bob, it's been baseball all of lives, that's all we've talked about and worked at and what we try to find out what else is going on in the world?" So I, that's what I wanted to do. I went out and looked for a job. Well, first of all, I had only had a high school education. So I went to Stevens Institute and took a lot of aptitude tests and they pointed out the sales and that's what I've been doing and I went out and looked for a job. I interviewed at a lot of different companies and I had a lot of interesting experiences. People I've met. Presidents of companies and you know, had quite a few job offers but I finally settled down in the paper business and that was it.

*You had no offers to say in the game, coaching or otherwise, and you didn't want any?*

BT- No, I didn't have any feelings to stay in baseball.

*Do you think you were finished?*

BT- Yes.

*Did you have any offers?*

BT- No. Oh, no.

*None. Nobody offered a coaching job or...?*

BT- Well, I was offered to play out in the Coast League.

*PCL, Pacific Coast League?*

BT- Yeah, and I was offered, I had an offer from Japan to go over and play in Japan, but I guess my wife and I talked about it and of course, she was ready, she liked to travel and try out Japan. But, I guess I thought that we were just putting off the inevitable so I never really considered it.

*OK, I wanted to ask you a couple of other different things. Your favorite ballparks that you played in. Can you give me a couple of your favorite ballparks?*

BT- Ah, Chicago. I enjoyed playing in Philadelphia. I had some success there.

*Connie Mack Stadium?*

BT- Yeah, you know but other than that, there weren't any particularly great parks that I looked forward to playing in.

*Some hitters seem to do well in certain parks.*

BT- Yeah, but I wouldn't be able to tell you which park I did best in, but I enjoyed going to Chicago and playing in Wrigley Field, especially on weekends.

*Is there one player you could say, or point to, that you learned the most from?*

BT- Player?

*Teammate, or an opponent, or what have you.*

BT- Well, when I played for the Giants, of course, back in the days before we were flying around the country, to me people like Dark or Stanky or Larry Jansen or Whitey Lockman. We'd sit around and we'd talk baseball. So, I would say those fellows had as much of an effect on me as just anybody.

*Is there a pitcher, you recall, having the hardest time, you mentioned Gene Conley. Any other pitcher you had a real tough time against?*

BT- Well, Ewell Blackwell I've always said is the toughest pitcher. You know Drysdale, in later years, he was tough, but Ewell Blackwell, he had a snake-like delivery.

*Sidearmer, right?*

BT- Oh yeah, all moves and you know, he had a wicked sinker and a good changeup, curveball. There was a whole bunch of them that were tough.

*OK, I wanted to ask you about a few people that you played with.*

BT- Um hmm.

*When you come up with the Giants, Mel Ott was the manager. Can you tell me what kind of a man Mel Ott was? And how he was as manager?*

BT- Mel Ott was like I am. He was a gentleman. He wasn't a tough manager like Durocher but he was just a ballplayer that I rooted for and kind of an idol type of guy and you know, that was it. He was Mr. Giant.

*He must have been. I heard much about him growing up.*

BT- Oh, sure. Oh, sure.

*You also played with Johnny Mize.*

BT- Yeah, Big John. He could sit and he had great eyes. You know, he could take a ball an inch off the plate for ball four. As for me, I'd have to swing at it or else they were apt to call me out. He was a great hitter and had a great eye for the baseball and for the strike zone and of course, he could pump those home runs out there.

*Yeah, 51 in the late forties. You also played, I believe when you first came up, I believe Arnie Lombardi was on the Giants. Do you recall much about Ernie Lombardi?*

BT- Yeah, Ernie, but not a whole lot. Ernie used to sit on the bench with his catcher's glove just like a big pancake. He'd roll it up and he'd sit on the bench. He was just pinch hitting then and he'd just sit on the bench with that under his arm and his shoes were always untied and you know, sometimes he had them off I guess. We used to watch Mel Ott, when he was looking for a pinch hitter, come down on the bench and all he would say was, "Hey Lom." That's all, he would just nod at him and say, "Hey Lom." He didn't have to say anything else. Lom knew he was a pinch hitter and he always was just very relaxed. He'd bend over and tie his shoelaces and go over to

the bat rack and grab a bat, and just drag it up to the home plate. He wouldn't even swing it sometimes. You know, like a lot of guys want to do, they get loosened up.

*Just walk up there and...*

BT- Oh, yeah. He was just a very nonchalant guy.

*OK, Monte Irvin was the first Black player on the Giants I believe. Do you recall him coming up to the Giants?*

BT- Oh yeah, he and Hank Thompson. Oh yeah, I don't remember anything unusual. I do remember about Monte and Hank. I remember we took a train out to Chicago this one time and we got to Chicago and got off the train and we all got on a bus and Monte and Hank Thompson got in a cab and went to wherever they stayed and I know that, I thought geez that wasn't right. You know, I talked to some of the guys about it. I thought that if they were playing on our ballclub they ought to be able to stay with us. But, that changed.

*It changed shortly afterward.*

BT- Yeah.

*So this was in Chicago that they had to stay in a separate hotel?*

BT- I remember, I just remember that one trip.

*This was what, '48?*

BT- Yup. That would be, probably '48.

*Irvin was a real good ballplayer and he really helped the '51 team.*

BT- Oh yeah, I respected him as much as anybody on the ball team.

*You also played with Billy Rigney. He was a manager too, for a while, in fact.*

BT- Well, yeah. He became a manager.

*Right.*

BT- Well, he was another Durocher man. He was a utility player, a good hitter, and a great utility player. He was a student of the game. Obviously, he learned a lot from Durocher because he became a manager for a good number of years himself. He was a very successful man in baseball.

*Whitey Lockman you mentioned before. What type of a guy was Whitey Lockman?*

BT- Whitey was a very low-key guy. I remember him most as a first baseman. He was an outfielder, a good outfielder, could run and get the ball, but he broke his leg in spring training and I don't think that leg ever...I think he lost some of his speed, but he could still run above average. But, as a first baseman, he was great. He was always shadowed in New York by Gil Hodges but Whitey was as good a glove man as any of them. And, he hit the ball.

*You also played with Eddie Stanky. You mentioned him before. What type of a guy was Eddie Stanky?*

BT- The Brat. That was a great guy to have on your ballclub, you know, if you played with him. But, of course, if you played against him, you hated him. He was that type of guy, you know. He was a cocky guy and he was into the game and I remember when I was playing center field with a pitcher, say would get two strikes on a batter, he'd turn around and stand there like a general, with his arms folded and just stare at me. To see, what I was going to do. Well, naturally on our team if Jansen was pitching and he got two strikes on a hitter, well, we felt we thought what he was going to do with certain hitters. So obviously, you'd move around. So, basically, what I'm saying is I didn't need Stanky to turn around and wonder if I'm going to move around. Because, Freddie Fitzsimmons used to have a saying about if you're moving around you're killing the grass. You know, these pitchers weren't running around enough. So, I'd holler back at him a few choice words, you know, you play second base and I'll take care of center field. But that's the kind of team we had. There were guys that we just didn't show up to put our suits on. You know, we're out there to win and you know, we had little things like that go on.

*How about Sal The Barber, Sal Maglie?*

BT- Oh, The Barber! The media painted him to be such a mean guy and of course, he had a heavy beard. But, he was a very easy-going guy. He used to laugh at the reputation that they gave him. But, of course, he was a tough pitcher. He did come inside on hitters but he wasn't any kind of mean guy at all.

*We talked about Willie Mays before. Primarily, your move to third in '51 was triggered by his arrival. Was he immediately recognized as a great talent by everyone on the team? I know he struggled early.*

BT- I would imagine we felt he was a great talent because he did the job in the field right away. He made some great plays. But, he struggled at bat. But, Leo kept him in there and you know, he wasn't Willie Mays with the bat that year. It took him a little while before the real Willie Mays showed up with the bat. But, it didn't take him very long.

*No, he was Rookie of the Year.*

BT- Yeah.

*What type of a guy was Willie to play with?*

BT- Oh, he was a young kid that loved to play baseball. The good Lord put him on earth to play baseball and he was just like a little kid, you know, innocent little kid that loved every minute that he was on the ball field.

*OK, let's talk about Leo. You said that the perception is that you and Leo didn't get along. You were saying that it was just the usual back-and-forth between ballplayer and manager that occurs over the course of a career or a game.*

BT- I'm not saying there was a general perception but there were a few articles off and on, you know, at any given time, that we had a thing, there was a kind of serious thing between us. But, Leo was that kind of manager. If he had something to say, he wouldn't hold back. No, heck, I like playing for Leo because he played ball. As long as you were out there hustling and giving 110%,

you know, making an error had nothing to do with it. Really, I don't remember what it was that he got teed off at me before. I think it might have been in Cincinnati. I'd been sick all night long and the next day I showed up, it was a Sunday morning. I don't know whether I'd just had a virus or something, but whatever it was, I really felt terrible. It was a hot day in Cincinnati and I was playing center field and I didn't catch a ball that he felt I should have caught. And, I think he jumped on me for that. And, I forget what I said. "I did the best I could," or whatever it was. But anyway, I think that was what it was all about. I mean I didn't, you know back then, we didn't get out of a ballgame because something was wrong with us. He probably never knew that I was in terrible shape. I agreed with him that I probably should have had the ball but it wasn't the usual effort. Some little thing like that. So, really, it wasn't much more than that. So, as I said, I wrote a letter to him. I wouldn't have written a letter to him if I didn't feel the way I did about him.

*How did Leo become the manager? I know he came from the Dodgers. But, what happened with Mel Ott? How did he end his tenure as manager with the Giants?*

BT- Well, Mel Ott. Well, we weren't a winning team and Mel Ott wasn't a guy, you know, that would run a tight ship. He was just a nice guy, a great ballplayer, and given the ballplayers that could go out and do the job, because he let them go out and do his thing, do their thing, just like he did. Nobody had to manage him. He just went out and hustled and played his game of baseball. So, I guess they felt we needed somebody who was going to shake us up. Give us a little more clout. And, of course, Durocher had a lot of clout.

*Let me ask you about a few guys from Milwaukee, just a couple. Warren Spahn you played with at Milwaukee.*

BT- Oh, Spahnie was great. He was a great, he was not only a great pitcher, he could hit. He could field, so he helped himself win a lot of ballgames.

*Eddie Mathews was playing for the Braves when you were there.*

BT- Oh yeah, Eddie was strong and had a good swing and could really rip that ball. He was just very strong. He showed up every day, not say a whole lot around the clubhouse. Just went out there and played ball. A tough man and a great glove man.

*And Hank Aaron was another.*

BT- Yeah.

*Not much you can say. How was he back in those days?*

BT- He was a young kid. He showed up, like Willie. He wasn't as excitable as Willie. You know, he was quieter and low key. You wouldn't hear him in the clubhouse. Willie had that high-pitched voice and you know, guys would kid him and you know, you'd hear him yakking away. But, Hank was a low key guy. He just went out and swung the bat.

*In Chicago, you played with Ernie Banks, too, who was a great ballplayer. He was a shortstop at the time.*

BT- Yeah, Ernie I always thought hit more three-run homers than anybody I'd ever played with. He would do the job at shortstop and do the job at bat and just a very easy going guy. He used to

kid me every day I walked in the park. He'd say, "You're the Thomson with the 'p' or without the 'p.'" He was talking about Hank Thompson.

*OK, we were talking about several players and managers in your career. 1951 has been well documented. You talked about how you played, etc. I wonder if you remember how the playoff format was decided and what the feeling was in the club at the time. You had such a phenomenal end of the season. How was the three game playoff format decided?*

BT- Well, the powers that be in baseball, I guess decided that there was going to be a three-game playoff. I guess the Giants previously...

*In '48, there was a one-game playoff in the American League.*

BT- It had already been decided by the powers that be.

*Had been decided long before the end of the season. A month or so.*

BT- I would assume so.

*Yeah, they usually have a coin flip nowadays. Let me just ask you. A lot of people don't know you hit a home run in the first game. Tell me about the first game, if you can.*

BT- Well, of course, I thought we had won the pennant on Sunday up in Boston because we beat the Braves and the Dodgers were playing down in Philly and they were losing. So, gee whiz, they ended up winning and we were going to have to play the Dodgers in a three-game playoff. But, I didn't like the sound of that at all. But, you know we feared them. We respected them. But, going into that first game, we were losing one to nothing and I got up and hit a home run with a man on and made it two to one and Monte Irvin later hit another home run, so it was three to one, but you know, you get out there and you're nervous, but once the game starts you totally determined and you're doing your best and that's all you can do.

*This was at Ebbets Field?*

BT- This was at Ebbets Field, yes. The home run wouldn't have been a home run in the Polo Grounds.

*In the Polo Grounds, no way, right? Unless you had gotten it down the line.*

BT- Well, I hit it over the 360 mark whatever, and maybe hit the ball 380 feet, but that was an easy out in the Polo Grounds.

*OK, the second game...*

BT- So, now we move to the Polo Grounds and now we're one game up on them so we felt pretty good about ourselves. Except Clem Labine shut us out.

*Right.*

BT- And he was just unhittable and ten to nothing. That was a terrible feeling.

*I was just going to ask. It must have been very discouraging.*

BT- To get beat that badly because, hey look, the Dodgers had a great team from top to bottom. You know, they were better than our team in the golden decade of the fifties.

*So, going into that final game you had a blowout in the second game. You had kind of a thrilling win in the first game and you're facing Don Newcombe in the third game. How did you do against Newk previously? Do you recall?*

BT- No, I really don't. He was a great pitcher. He had very strong stuff. You know, he wasn't an easy guy to hit against. So, I can't tell you. I had some hits off him, but, he got me out a lot of times.

*Any talk before the last game, from Leo, anybody? Or, was it just a question of showing up, getting out there.*

BT- Nah, we had been through the whole season and had plenty of pep talks before. We knew what we had to do. There was nothing to say. We were professionals. Dark and Stanky and Lockman and Irvin. Oh, Don Mueller and all these guys. We felt we had a good ballclub. But, it's funny, that day, what was the first time for a lot of things, what I found myself doing that final game warming up before going out to take infield practice, I found myself looking around at our guys. Maybe I was looking for support. I don't know. I looked at Dark and I knew he was as good a competitor as anybody. And, boy, I'm glad he's on my team. And Stanky and I remember looking at Lockman. You know, maybe I'm just trying to build up strength within myself. But, I never had done that before. But, I looked at my guys over and thought, we're ready, let's get 'em. But, I'd never done that before.

*And this was an unusual game, too.*

BT- And there were a lot of things that happened that day and rationalizing, and going back over and asking them, you know what it boils down to is we're professionals and we get down the fundamentals and the important things. Total concentration and total determination. That's what it was that day and of course, the way it turned out, I guess some things were just meant to be. And that's the only way I look at it.

*So, it's the bottom of the ninth and by now you guys did start a rally.*

BT- Yeah, well, of course, we were losing four to one going into the last of the ninth and I never felt more dejected in my life. I threw the glove down in the dugout and I felt terrible. And I remember thinking that we weren't good enough to go beyond this point. Those Dodgers were too tough for us. What a letdown. And I also realized that I was the fifth hitter that inning. I'm dead. I don't even get a chance to hit. Because Newcombe mowed us down in the eighth inning. He just looked unbeatable. But pretty soon though, we got a couple of ground ball base hits and wow, things were looking up. Monte Irvin popped up. Here's our big, strong guy all year and they just throw that and he popped up, which anybody could do against Newcombe. But then it was when Lockman hit a double to left and we scored a run and it's now four to two and I'm up. I get a chance to hit. But of course, that's when Mueller slid into third and hurt his ankle severely and looking back on that and rationalizing the whole thing, they stopped the ballgame. It stopped the tension, broke the tension of the ballgame, because really I was down at third very much concerned about Mueller. You know, he was lying there in pain and I felt badly for him. It wasn't until they carried him off the field that I got back in the baseball game again. In the meantime, they had made a pitching change. I wasn't even aware of it.

*You didn't realize that they had brought in Branca?*

BT- No. I didn't realize and so now I'm heading to home plate with a bat in my hand all the time and I realize, hey, I'm the next hitter and I'd never done it before. Of course, approaching home plate from third base to begin with. Then, psyching myself up, telling myself to wake up and give yourself a chance to hit, swearing at myself, calling myself an SOB. Wait and watch. Give yourself a chance to hit. Do a good job, all those things is what I'm saying to myself. I never talked to myself like that before. But, basically it was wait and watch. Wait and watch. Don't get overanxious. As soon as you commit yourself and you're a ways out on your front foot, you know, you've got nothing left. So, wait and watch, wait and watch and really psych myself up and swearing at myself to just give myself a chance to hit. So, I got in the batter's box and of course I realized Branca was out there, but it didn't phase me.

*Did you know much about Branca, you'd faced him before, right?*

BT- Oh sure, but you're up there and you're just concentrating on the ball. Of course, he threw the first pitch right through the middle of the plate. Which was the way he pitched and of course, he'd played for Durocher quite a bit and that was Durocher's. You know, you'd come in. You don't nibble at the corners. You get a strike on the guy and then go to work. Of course, I took the first one. The only thing I can think of was I was so determined waiting and watching I watched the thing right over the middle of the plate. I later found out the guys wanted to kill me on the bench for taking that pitch. But now, he's going to come inside on me with a bad pitch. Because I get to figuring he'd come inside and get me back a little bit and then come back with a breaking ball away from the plate. Of course, in the Polo Grounds I could hit his breaking ball away from the plate out to center, right, left-center, 400 feet, you know, 450 feet and Snider would have been out there waiting for it. But he just didn't get it in there far enough. The ball, and I was quick with my hands anyway.

*You turned fast on it.*

BT- Yeah, I just jumped right on it. I remember getting a glimpse of it coming in and jumping on it. That was it.

*I had read that you didn't know it was a home run until I guess maybe you hit second, or you thought it was off the wall? Is that true?*

BT- Oh, no. I immediately thought it was a home run.

*Oh, you did?*

BT- Oh sure. I thought home run right up in my mind but then I thought it starts to sink so obviously I got a little bit on top of it.

*It had some topspin on it.*

BT- But it had to have tremendous topspin.

*It was a fastball, wasn't it?*

BT- Oh yeah, but then, so I'm halfway to first and I'm watching it. I couldn't get my eyes off it and then I saw it disappear. Well, I thought, it's not a home run, when it started to sink, it's just a base hit.

*But, you would have taken it, sure.*

BT- That's all I wanted was a base hit. Because I had hit it hard enough. It had to be off the wall. Then it disappeared and that was it. And then there was excitement that I'd never experienced before. And of course all it meant was that we'd beat those guys and never in the world did we think they'd still be talking about it.

*No. Over forty years later, it's still being talked about. Does that surprise you?*

BT- Not anymore. I've become used to it. But I've been surprised, you know, over the years, that they still think and talk about this. Of course, the world of sports has become so commercialized with baseball cards and this and that. Heck, I get mail from all over the country and these kids telling me about the home run and talking about the home run and these are young kids! But, I guess they see it on TV.

*Yeah, It's been played many times.*

BT- So, of course, I've become accustomed to it. And actually wherever I go, anyplace, people meet me and that's what they want to talk about.

*Do you recall what it was like that winter? I know you had to play the Yankees the following day and won the first game of the Series and subsequently lost.*

BT- Yeah, and that was a tough one. That hurt not being able to finish off the year with a win against the Yankees. No, A lot of mail and phone calls and a lot of stuff like that. But, of course, back then, it wasn't like today where they'd get you on television and you'd be on all the shows and this and that.

*But, you had a busy winter, right?*

BT- Oh, sure, sure. But, I was invited to do a lot of speaking which I didn't do. You know, it was just phone calls and, in a sense, it was quiet, you know, because I had to go to a few banquets but it wasn't an every day thing.

*OK, one more question. Do you have any friends...Two more questions, excuse me. Do you have any friends, close friends on any of the teams you played on and any today?*

BT- Yeah, Larry Jansen and Whitey Lockman. I played on the Braves but there was nobody I'd call close. But, guys that, you know, I knew and liked. I know when the Giants came into Milwaukee and played I go out with Lockman and Jansen. Kind of like Jack Lohrke. He was one of the people I ran around with. But, no, that's about it.

*OK, last question. Your opinion of the game today. Are you still following it. What are your thoughts about it?*

BT- Well, I keep an eye on things. I don't have the time or don't care to sit and watch television for three hours watching a ballgame, unless, once in a while, I enjoy a particular pitcher. Maybe I

want to watch a particular player. But, I just kind of keep a distance and fairly have a rough idea what's going on but, you know, the game has gotten to be a pain in the neck in a sense. You know, based on the whole starting with agents and the huge contracts where the game of baseball has been left behind. The business aspect is what everybody seems to be more concerned with. Of course, the media is part of that. You know, back in our time we signed a one-year contract based on what our performance was the year before. Then, it was over again. There was no haggle and hassle and some of this over contracts. Once you did, it's over with. The business, it never ends. Players aren't satisfied when they're already making two or three million, and you wonder how much can they spend. And, what about the fans? This moving around from team to team. When we played, there were times we got traded but not the way these guys move around today. So, what if the kids and their favorite player has taken off for another team for an extra million dollars? So, that's part of it. The stability of it, you know, I don't like that. The instability of players moving around the way they do has become more of a selfish thing. Hey look, you can't blame the players, I guess. But, it's the system and baseball the way it is now, it's too bad.

*That's it for me. I appreciate your time.*

BT- OK, Tom.

-Transcribed by J. Thomas Hetrick, November, 2005.