Italian- Americans and the Rochester Red Wings – Growing Up with the Wings

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Italian and Italian-American players have been in baseball since at least 1897 when Ed Abbaticchio became the first known Italian-American to play in the major leagues. Abbaticchio first played for the Philadelphia Phillies and later was with the 1909 Pittsburgh Pirates in the World Series. He also had the distinction of being the first Italian-American to play professional football, playing for the Latrobe Athletic Association in 1895. Other players of Italian descent joined Abbaticchio, giving Italian immigrants people to cheer on in this American game. By the end of World War I, there were many players of Italian descent, and by the 1930s Italian-Americans were familiar figures and great players had emerged, including the DiMaggio brothers, Frank Crosetti, Tony Lazzeri, and George Puccinelli.

“At least 454 Italian Americans have played baseball in the major leagues since 1897. It's the sort of statistic that even the most fanatical of fans would probably not know.” (Yolin, Patricia Italian Americans in baseball exhibition. July 3, 2012 The San Francisco Chronicle http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Italian-Americans-in-baseball-exhibition-3683100.php#ixzz27lzkEpIT). That fact was just one of many found in the exhibition at the Museo Italo Americano in San Francisco

The peak years for Italian ethnics in baseball were the 1950’s, the years immediately after World War II. From the very beginning of the wave of Italian immigration in the late 19th Century Italians sought to prove their loyalty to America. Many of the migrants had left Italy because of poor economic conditions. Indeed, economic conditions in the mezzogiorno were worse after Italian unification than they were before, and many southern Italians felt little if any connection to the new Italian State. (See David Gilmour 2011 for an extended discussion.) It is little wonder that an overwhelming number of Italians who migrated to the United States, some
estimate between 75% to 85% of pre-World War II Italian immigrants, came to the United States from the *mezzogiorno*. Gilmour notes that many of these people had no concept of “Italy” and most did not speak or understand “standard Italian”. It was only in the ethnic melting pot that did not melt that the came to call themselves “Italians”. Within the Italian group itself, they kept their own local identities.

However, becoming an American in a nation of immigrants meant having an ethnic identity in order to compete with other groups who had their own ethnic identities. It also meant demonstrating that one’s overarching loyalty was to the United States. Baseball was the American national pastime. Therefore, being a baseball fan and rooting for the home team in general and for Italian ball players on that team in particular was a means of establishing both one’s ethnic identity and loyalty to America. Whatever the internal disputes and rivalries between people from different areas of Italy, it was important to keep a united front in the face of ethnic competition with other groups. This sentiment was expressed clearly through the exhibit.

Not only have Italian Americans contributed to baseball at every level, all the way up to commissioner, but baseball itself has contributed to the Americanization of Italians,” said Museo curator Mary Serventi Steiner, who put the exhibition together for the Fort Mason museum.

The exhibition makes it clear that "this most American of sports became a quick way to counter that negative immigrant identity as an outsider." Eventually, many players of Italian descent became household names, including Carl Furillo, Yogi Berra, Phil Rizzuto, Sal Maglie, Tony Conigliaro, Tommy Lasorda, Joe Torre, Barry Zito and Mike Napoli. (Yolin, Patricia Italian Americans in baseball exhibition. July 3, 2012 The San Francisco Chronicle)
Rochester was no exception to the general rule. It is true that its ethnic rivalries were not so fierce as those in New York City. Indeed, Italians in Rochester when I was growing up thought that New York Italians were a bit too Italian, *un poco matto* in fact, about being Italians. Of course, the ethnic rivalry in New York was much greater than that in Rochester, where Italians and Poles often united, for example, against the dominant Anglo-Saxon power structure in business and the Irish-German dominance in the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, there were ethnic rivalries and baseball was also a powerful mutivocalic symbol in Rochester, signifying a unity in diversity and one’s right to be an American in America.

**The Rochester Red Wings and Italians**

The Rochester Red Wings has had a long history as a Triple A team. The team began in 1889. From 1929 to 1961 the Wings were affiliated with the St. Louis Cardinals. From 1961 to 2002 the Baltimore Orioles were the parent club. In 2003 to the present the Wings were a farm club of the Minnesota Twins. The team has had some success over the years winning ten championships 1939, 1952, 1955, 1956, 1964, 1971, 1974, 1988, 1990, and 1997. There were also many years in which the Red Wings were less than champions. However, in the years before nightly TV broadcasts of major league games and the ease of transportation to the big cities, the local minor league team loomed large in the imagination of young boys – larger than it does today. Indeed, we loved watching young players develop into major league stars and older ones returning to the minors to finish their careers.

There were many great players who passed through Rochester over the years, including Johnny Mize, Joe Altobelli, Rip Collins, George Puccinelli, Tim McCarver, Stan Musial, Jim
Palmer, Boog Powell, among others. There were also those whom Italian-Americans loved but who did not go on to greater glory. Frankie Gravino from nearby Newark, NY, leads my list. Gravino played for the Wings in 1948. Despite having a good year, he went to lower minor league teams. Overall, Gravino had great years in the minors finishing his twelve-year career with a .292 average and 272 RBI’s. He hit more homers in 1954, 42, than his teammate Hank Aaron. Aaron had 19. Over the years, Gravino out-homered other future major league players, including Roger Maris, Wes Covington, and Dave Roberts. Gravino hit 14 homers in 1948 for the Wings, and as a member of the Knot-Hole Gang, I remember seeing a number of those home runs and marveling at their distance. The fact that Gravino and I shared a first name strengthened my hero-worship. I had further incentive to get to express and develop that worship through the institution of the Knot-Hole Gang.

The Knot-Hole Gang appears to be an old idea in baseball. Some trace its origin to the late 1800s. It is a club for kids, usually up to age 10 or 12, allowing them to get into certain games for free. As I remember it, one could get the membership cards at school. At first, the games were day games, usually on weekends. There were very few week day games played during the day in the minor leagues. After a year or so, the Red Wings began to list night games but insisted that people over 18 had to accompany kids. Since my dad worked most summer nights, I walked the mile and a half or so, an joined the ranks of kids who would ask any adult to let us walk in with him. As long as we behaved no usher ever asked us to leave.

Sundays were usually the day my father took me to the game. He was a strong New York Yankee fan who was not fond of the St. Louis Cardinals, the parent team of the Wings. He felt the Cards were anti-Italian while the Yankees had many Italians on their team over the years. I guess Joe Garagiola was not Italian enough for my Dad. Since I was also a Yankee fan, I never
argued the point with him. We did enjoy those Sunday double-headers, and I loved having my Dad explain the game to me and recall former great Italian players of the past. The fact that there were very few Italian players on the Wings in those years, one in each of the years between 1948 and 1951, for example, made my father’s point. Because my Dad felt it was an important point, made it one for me as well.

Although fathers and sons going to ballgames may be an American tradition, it was not one I witnessed among my friends and relatives. Whenever he could, usually on Sundays, my Dad took me to Sunday double-headers. He often also took my cousins and other friends as well. Sometimes we would start out alone but people would join us along the way. Since generosity was one of my father’s virtues, it meant people would eat well and wash the food down with pop. (We never called it soda or soda pop in Rochester. That was left to our Pennsylvania or New York City relatives.) The only price they paid was listening to my father’s stories of great Italian players of the past and present.

Occasionally, he would tell us of own baseball exploits. He had been a catcher, and a good hitter. When young he had been in great shape. With the exception of his time in the army, I had never seen him at his ideal weight. I knew he was strong and everyone wanted him to help move into their new homes. He did so gladly because he was as generous with his time as with his money. Since I tagged along on those occasions, trying to stay out of the way as much as possible, I saw some of his demonstrations of strength – the lifting of refrigerators on his back and carrying them upstairs, moving couches and heavy furniture with little or no help from others.

These memories made his baseball stories more interesting as I imagined him years younger, ebony hair slicked back, handsome in a swarthy Italian fashion, gently devilish.
Although he loved Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, his better stories were of “Push ‘em up” Tony Lazzaro, George Puccinelli, and, of course, Joe Di Maggio, and Yogi Berra, among others. I cannot claim that I understood that my father was telling these stories to validate his claim to be a real American while not denying his heritage. Similarly, I did not know that his refusal to pull strings to stay out of the draft was part of his claim to be both an Italian and an American. I may have been a bright kid but I was not that bright. However, if I did not understand the meaning of what my Dad shared with me intellectually, I did have a feeling that there was something special being shared on those idyllic summer Sundays, which in my memory were always sunny with bright blue skies and lazy puffy white clouds sailing through them like boats on a calm sea.

Certainly, the Red Wing management must have known the meaning baseball had for ethnics, including Italian-Americans. Thus, although there were not many Italian-Americans on the team, there was usually at least one playing for the Wings. Between 1947 and 1957 the following players were on the team: 1947-1949 Larry Ciaffone, 1948 Frank Gravino, 1950 Pete Castigione, Memo Luna, Al Papai, and Mario Picone, 1952 Ron Plaza, 1955 Bob Burda, 1957 Frank Zupa. This was a relative handful of players among the 200 players or so on the team in those years. However, by the mid-60’s times changed and Joe Altobelli became manager, leading the team to four first place finishes, paralleling the presence of many other Italians moving into higher positions in professional life. However, by that time my interest in the Wings was quite marginal. I had moved out of Rochester and focused on major league ball, when I watched ball at all.

The days of keeping scrapbooks, filled with box scores, reports of games now long-forgotten were over. The days were also gone when my close friend and I would cozy up to his next door neighbor, an aged widower, who had an FM radio which carried the Red Wings’
games. WVET, which carried the games, was an AM station whose signal was just about nonexistent at night. Perhaps, the fear was that if every game were on AM radio, it would kill attendance. (CF Pat Doyle, Baseball Broadcasting from Another Day http://www.baseball-almanac.com/minor-league/minor2004a.shtml). The same attitude carried over into TV, where few, if any Wing games were carried. One of the great surprises of my young life, in fact, came when my parents took me to New York from Rochester to see a Yankee game. At a relative’s home a day before we went to the real Yankee Stadium, much to my surprise, there was a Yankee game on TV! Remember those were days long before Cable and pay-tv. But that was the big city, where one could drive down Swing Street (52nd Street) with the car windows open, as a relative did, and hear the world’s greatest jazz for free. No one seemed to mind if we pulled over before an open door and just listened for five-minutes and then parked near another open door and listened a bit more.

It may well have been that trip in the early summer of 1953 that kindled my own wanderlust, pushing me to move, eventually to the New York area. Home was safe, secure, but in my hubris I found it a bit dull – familiar. I wanted to find out what the new and strange were like. The Apple meant big time everything – sports and jazz, especially. It took me a while to learn that the new may be silver but the old is gold.

It is, therefore, with great fondness that I look back on those 1940s and 1950s Rochester Red Wings. Being a Red Wings fan was something like riding a roller coaster. The ride was fun whether you were up or down, a lesson for life. The 1940s were days the Wings spent at or near the cellar. However, the team won three championships in the 1950s – 1952, 1955, and 1956. The St. Louis Cardinals, however, decided to sell the team and its stadium on Norton Street at the end of the 1956 season, another life lesson; namely, sometimes you lose even when you win.
Morris Silver led a successful campaign to find buyer for the Red Wings and the stadium, keeping the team in Rochester. The RCB, Rochester Community Baseball, still owns the team. The Wings and Cardinals ended all ties in 1960. The team since has had affiliations with Baltimore (1961-2002) and currently with Minnesota (Rochester Red Wings Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rochester_Red_Wings#Cardinals_era._281929.E2.80.931960.29), giving yet one more life lesson; when one thing fails do not despair, try something else.

There was another lesson I learned in the early 1960s, when I began teaching. Two substitute teachers showed up in the lunch room one day, Dave Ricketts and his older brother, Dick. They were both major leaguers, Dave with the Cards and Dick with the Rochester Red Wings and St. Louis Cards as well as the St. Louis Hawks and Rochester and then Cincinnati Royals NBA teams. It was interesting to note that they had to work outside of sports in the off season. It was a short mental trip to think of the minor league players who roomed in private homes in Rochester, making far less than even the least paid major leaguer. The lesson was clear to me. If you loved something, you made sacrifices to do it even though you could have made more money doing something else. The Ricketts did make it to the big leagues, one in baseball the other in basketball. But, like so many other young talented players, they could have spent their careers in the minors, playing for little money but doing what they loved.

I know it may be trite to say that baseball, especially in the post-war period, was both a preparation and a reflection of American life. From this distance I can look back on the lessons I learned and those I should have learned from what was The National Pastime. They were there, easy to see, but sometimes we overlook the obvious and only see it clearly through the mists of time.
Conclusion

Baldassaro (2011:53) has a good deal to say about the role of baseball in Americanizing young Italian-American men.

Baseball seemed to offer one avenue of entry; as the game that all true Americans played as children or at least followed as fans, it provided some common ground for newcomers. But precisely because baseball was so American, many immigrants saw it as one of the many institutions that threatened to destroy their children’s ties to Old World traditions and to weaken the all-important family structure. For the children of immigrants, family – that most enduring and ambiguous of Italian stereotypes – was a double-edged sword. It provided a safety net and protection from the dangers your parents were certain lay in wait beyond the front door, but it also did its best to keep you close to home, physically and emotionally, and not only as a child.

Baldassaro then quotes Rochester native Jerre Mangione’s Mont Allegro (1943:1) whose opening line is WHEN I GROW UP I WANT TO BE AN AMERICAN. Belissaro then continues, quoting the less-often quoted passage to Mangione’s narrator from his father. The narrator has told his father that his teacher had told the class that everyone born in America is an American. His father replies, “Your children will grow up to be an American. But you, my son, are half-and-half.”

In an interview with me Mangione expanded on this concept of a dual-identity. This is an excerpt from that interview.

FS: You write along the way about a dual heritage. And do you still feel that, that there’s this kind of split identity?
JM: Well, I think it can be resolved easily. You just take the best of both. I think I expressed that idea. You appreciate the qualities that your grandparents gave you but you also appreciate the kind of energy and enterprise that this country has which is much more exciting and not as fatalistic as it was in Italy. Well, you know, even now I guess. I don’t know recent Sicily very well, but they were extremely fatalistic people. This became quite evident to me during the period I lived there while writing my book, *A Passion for Sicilians*, about Danilo Dolci. The fatalism was so clear, much more clearly in Partinico than it was in Agrigento where people were somewhat more educated. In Partinico they were mostly peasants and people with very little education and they were fatalists. And Dolci fought to give them a sense of the future. And, of course, here in this country it has practically nothing else but a sense of the future, except not a very constructive one as I see it now. (Salamone interview of Jerre Mangione

http://www.oocities.org/enza003/Via/ViaVol4_2Salamone.htm)

However, he also noted that he could not ever think of living again in Rochester. Perhaps, still bitter over the criticisms of his memoir by Rochester Italians after 50 years, he noted that these Rochester Italians would smother his creativity in the way that Baldassaro noted in his discussion of the ambiguity of the Italian family as both a refuge and a type of prison keeping one prisoner with silken bonds. I wondered at Mangione’s response because in a lesser way, I felt the same way. I had thought naively that I was the only one who did.

With the luxury of the passing of twenty years since that interview and time to digest its contents, I realize what Jerre was saying. Distance is needed to understand oneself and the ecological factors that make each person a microcosm of his/her environment. A fire requires air
to burn and so do humans. Air and space and time to think – these are needed to put the lessons learned in youth to work and make sense of individual life and the society and culture of which one is a part. Minor League baseball is fun in itself but the Majors are the ultimate aim of the game. And yet, the memory of those warm summer nights in July and August still sometimes glide into my thoughts as the white clouds of summer glided over the ballpark. At the ball game there were no mundane worries, only the hope and promise that if we did not get them today, there was another game tomorrow – or next year. The old stadium represented safety and security – and hope. Although it is in the past, it still pulls me back and reminds me of the cost of ambition. After all, the minors had their thrill, too, and they taught mighty life lessons about the life most of us live.
References

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