

# Baptism By Fire

It started with baseball cards. Five cards came with a flat stick of bubble gum for five cents. Each card had a single player pictured on the front with his history and statistics on the back. Cards for the home team Pittsburgh Pirates were highly prized and traded rarely. Most cards traded hands through games of skill. A card flipped from belt high would win if it landed face up. Cards pitched against a wall would succumb to the closest. A card that leaned against the wall would prevail if the opponent failed to knock it down.

The baseball cards made it easy to identify every player on the home team. Unfortunately, the Pirates did not fair well during my early years, rarely moving above last place. Despite their losing ways, by age nine I was anxious to see a ball game. One summer evening, Dad took me to Forbes Field to see the Pirates play the St. Louis Cardinals. Their star player was Stan, the Man, Musial who grew up in Donora, a few miles south of Pittsburgh. With a bag of peanuts and my first score card, I watched him hit in the winning run, beating the Pirates 4-2.

The Pirates finished second the following year. The Milwaukee Braves led the league and Dad took his sons to watch them at Forbes

Field. We sat high up in right field and watched Eddie Matthews hit a ball over the right field roof - a rare feat.

Right field is where I saw most of my games. The Pirates let in children for free on Saturday afternoons, filling the right field seats with shouting enthusiasm. Right fielder Roberto Clemente never ceased to amaze with his dramatic catches, strong throws and potent bat. Keeping score, I knew every member of the team and how well they batted.

They batted well in 1960. After 33 years, the city finally had a World Series. It came down to the last of seven games. Catcher Hal Smith hit a grand slam in the seventh to push the Pirates ahead. The Yankees tied it in the ninth but Bill Mazeroski, mostly known for his fielding, hit a home run to win the game and the series. The Pirates were the world champions.

After 1960, the city awaited another championship season. It did not arrive until 1971 while I attended the Rutgers Law School in Newark, New Jersey. My roommate, fortunately, had a portable TV, so I could watch the last two games. The Baltimore Orioles had four twenty game winning pitchers and were expected to sweep the Pirates. After losing two games in Baltimore, the Pirates won the next three in Pittsburgh. The sixth game went into extra innings but Brooks Robinson hit in the winning run in the tenth. The final game turned into a pitchers' duel, with neither team scoring until Roberto Clemente hit a home run. The Pirates won, 2-1,

thanks to the sharp pitching of Steve Blass. Steve never won another game and Roberto Clemente never played in another World Series.

I returned to Pittsburgh after graduating from law school, working downtown within walking distance of Three Rivers Stadium, the new home of the Pirates. Despite the cold April winds, the opening season game never passed without taking the afternoon off to root for the Pirates. On Friday evenings, I would often meet Mother and Dad to watch a game before heading home for the weekend. Rooting for the Pirates was synonymous with living in the City of Pittsburgh.

In the 1970's, the Philadelphia Phillies stymied the Pirates' hopes for another World Series. The rivalry came to a head in 1978, when the Phillies led the Pirates by three games. The last four games of the season were played at Three Rivers Stadium and the local TV stations called it "The Showdown at Three Rivers." The Pirates needed to win all four games to end in first place. A two-night double header began the series and I joined my family in the upper deck above third base. The Pirates won the first game but the Phillies led the second by a run. Then Willie Stargell, everyone's favorite player, hit a two run homer. Fifty thousand people erupted in applause and shouting that lasted fifteen minutes. I shouted at the top of my lungs but could not hear my own voice - it was lost in the din



of the crowd. The Pirates won that day, only to lose the next when Richie Hebner, a former Pirate, drove in the winning run for the Phillies.

The next year, the Pirates would not be denied. The theme song "We Are Family" reverberated through Three Rivers Stadium and the streets of downtown filled with people celebrating the winning of the World Series.

The next World Series win has yet to come. Despite moving away from Pittsburgh in 1986 and spending more than half my life outside the city, I still root for the Pirates, cheering every win and bemoaning every loss. And it all began with baseball cards and the adoration of my local heroes.