

'Miracle Ball' tries to solve mystery behind Bobby Thomson's Shot Heard 'Round the World ball

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Saturday, July 3rd 2010, 1:25 PM



Keivom/News

Documentarians Brian Biegel (l.) and Scott Weitz have produced movie about home run ball hit by Bobby Thomson in 1951.

The persistent man with the thrift store baseball called the Daily News sports department several times during the summer of 2005, and his faith and certainty never once wavered, even when we laughed and told him he was crazy.

Jack Biegel claimed he had the ball that Bobby Thomson drove over the left-field wall at the Polo Grounds on Oct. 3, 1951, the Shot Heard 'Round the World ball, the ball that made the New York Giants the most unbelievable National League champions in history. He bought it a few years earlier, he said, for \$2 at a Salvation Army store in Levittown, L.I. Leland's, the Long Island sports memorabilia house, was offering \$1 million to anybody who could produce the Thomson ball, and Jack was absolutely convinced he had it - even though he had no evidence to back that claim up.

"It could be any ball from 1951. You have no proof that your ball is the ball," we'd say, laughing.

"You have no proof that it isn't," Jack would snarl back.

"You should have looked in the back room of that Salvation Army," we'd reply, stifling a snicker. "You might have found Jimmy Hoffa."

Biegel eventually stopped calling - but now he's back, as one of the stars of a documentary made by his son, Brian Biegel, called "Miracle Ball: The Hunt for the Shot Heard Around the World." The film, which will premiere at the Long Island International Film Expo on Saturday, is a terrific account of how Brian, inspired by his obsessed father, tried to solve sports memorabilia's greatest mystery: What happened to the Thomson home run baseball that broke millions of Brooklyn hearts nearly 60 years ago?

"My initial goal was to prove that my dad had the ball, but it became more than that," Brian says. "It became about finding out the truth and being part of this important moment in sports history."

"Miracle Ball" lacks the depth of a 2009 book (by the same name) that Brian wrote with Peter Thomas Fornatale about his two-year journey that took him from Cooperstown to the offices of NYPD forensics experts to the Daily News building to a high-plains convent near Albuquerque. The film doesn't address Brian's bitter divorce, or the crippling depression that followed, leaving him unable to get out of bed some days, or the way his father and mother, Sandy, nurtured him back to mental health. But it does look at the guilt he felt when he had to tell his dad that the Salvation Army ball is probably not the Thomson ball, and it does explore how baseball brings fathers and sons together.

"Film is a different medium than print," Brian says. "You can have an 'A' story in a book, and a 'B' story and a 'C' story. It is hard to go back in time in a film, so we decided we would focus on the hunt for the ball. There's an old adage in film: 'Show me, don't tell me.' That's what we decided to do."

The Thomson ball disappeared because back then, memorabilia really was a hobby; if fans held on to a scuffed-up ball or a grass-stained jersey, it was because they loved baseball, not because Forbes said they would be good investments. There were no auction houses under investigation by the FBI in 1951, no crooked authenticators giving their stamp of approval to items they are not qualified to authenticate, no forgers cranking out bogus autographs.

When that ball cleared the left-field wall at the Polo Grounds, whoever it was who grabbed it - in Brian's improbable story, it was most likely a baseball-loving nun who violated her order's rules to attend the game - simply wanted a souvenir of a great game and one of the best seasons in baseball history.

The best part of this stripped-down film version of Miracle Ball - which features interviews with longtime Daily News columnist Vic Ziegel and yours truly - isn't about Thomson and the 1951 Giants, or the brilliant forensics detectives who helped Biegel, or the fact that the ball might be worth a fortune if it was sold today. The best part of the film is when Brian tells his dad that the Thomson ball was probably grabbed by the rebellious and mysterious Sister Helen, and it probably never wound up in a Long Island thrift store. In other words, Biegel was trying to tell his father that his crusade was misdirected, that his passion was misplaced - that his research indicates that he has been dead wrong for years.

Jack's eyes burn with fury, but he wants to do right by his kid. Like all parents, he knows he has to let go, even if he's disappointed that his son is not following in his footsteps.

"If you feel she truly has the ball, then you have my blessing, Brian," he says. "Remember, I created you. You live inside of me. I want you to finish out this mission. You need to keep moving forward on your quest. I love you no matter what happens. Go find her."