

BILLY THE LONER

Good day everyone...it's a beautiful day in Pennsylvania.

This is the time of the hot-stove league--when one has time to re-read Roger Kahn's "The Boys of Summer", two of whom, Gil Hodges and Jackie Robinson are already gone since its year-old publication. The last person Kahn wrote about in that book was Billy Cox, the loner from Newport. Kahn titled that chapter "Billy Alone". You called him Billy and not Bill. He was the best glove in the history of baseball--according to Jack Robinson and Pee Wee Reese--and they knew. Compared to modern Brooks Robinson, Cox had better speed and a stronger arm. He was as good a clutch hitter--especially against the Giants--as anyone on the great Dodgers teams. Pee Wee Reese called Billy Cox the greatest glove and least likely looking major league infielder he'd ever seen. He'd go toward the line, the barehanded side, reaching across the wiry body, slapping that Whelan glove, capturing a two-base hit and turning it into a groundout. "Five to three if you're scoring", Connie Desmond, the announcer said, again and again. In the major leagues, third base is the toughest position in front of the catcher--toughest of them all. You have to see the ball--you can't wait. You have to look that ball right into your glove. Your face is bare to any sudden hop--and those hops have lost the last game of a world series. Sometimes you want to cringe for a third-baseman, but not for Billy Cox. Cox crouched, motionless, staring

down a batter's crow, the ball, not Billy Cox, was the victim. Ball players used to say that when Branch Rickey got roommates Preacher Roe and Billy Cox--from the Pirates--for Dixie Walker, Vince Lombardi and Hal Greg, it was the biggest steal in baseball. Casey Stengel once grumbled "That ain't no third baseman. That's a crazy acrobat!" And that was Billy Cox. An acrobat of the baseball diamond--a loner who came out of World War II with an experience that made him a loner. He came out of Newport along the Juniata, short-stopped for Harrisburg, was sold to the Pirates, eventually went to the Dodgers. He's back in Newport--hunting and fishing when he wants to--like his roomie Preacher does in the Ozarks--and tending bar--he's been at the Legion, Vets, Elks and Owls there. When Robinson got too old for second base--Junior Gilliam had come up--they moved Jack to third. Billy Cox became baseball's best utility glove--and hit 291! The question most frequently asked Kahn, the author of "Boys of Summer" was--"Was Billy Cox really that good?" You should have asked Jackie Robinson who admitted Cox was far and away a better third baseman--I saw Billy play short--it would have been murder to move Pee Wee Reese--but Billy was as good at short. Gotta stop in Newport one day and host a few--with Billy Cox--best glove in baseball.

This is Pete Wambach. It's a beautiful day in Pennsylvania.