

Podres, Baseball Hero from the Adirondacks

Hall of Famer Johnny Podres became a World Series hero in 1955

By John Odell

Among all the stars and Hall of Famers on the 1955 Brooklyn Dodgers, it fell to pitcher Johnny Podres to become the club's greatest World Series hero. Podres' triumph was made all the sweeter by Brooklyn's history of heartbreaking Series losses and his own World Series defeat in 1953 as a rookie.

A native of Witherbee, New York, an Adirondack hamlet just west of Lake Champlain, Podres posted a serviceable 9-4 record for the 1953 Dodgers, who won 105 games and the right to face the New York Yankees in the World Series.

After the clubs split the first four games, the southpaw started Game 5 at Brooklyn's Ebbets Field. Podres quickly gave up five runs (one earned) and was unable to complete three innings. Brooklyn lost the game and, eventually, the Series, their fifth straight Series defeat at the hands of the Yankees. No one, however, would defeat Podres in the postseason again.

Redemption came in 1955, when Brooklyn returned to the Series after a one-year hiatus. Again facing the Yankees, the Dodgers dropped the first two games, a bad omen; no team had come back from a 0-2 deficit to win a best-of-seven World Series.

Although Podres' record was an unassuming 9-10, it fell to him to stop the two-game skid. In contrast to his brief outing in the 1953 Series, Podres pitched a complete Game 3, striking out six and defeating the Yankees, 8-3.

The rejuvenated Dodgers took two of the next three games, and then brought Podres back for a climactic Game 7 in Yankee Stadium. He faced New York's Tommy Byrne, who had shut down Brooklyn in Game 2 and now benefited from an extra day of rest. Both pitchers retired the first five batters they saw, and both clubs remained scoreless after three innings.

Then Brooklyn's Gil Hodges came through twice, driving in Roy Campanella in the fourth and pushing across Pee Wee Reese in the sixth. Those were the only runs the Dodgers would score, but they were all Podres needed.

"When the game began," Podres recalled, "I had the Yankees looking for my changeup. I established early in the game that I was going to throw it, and then as the shadows in the fall in Yankee Stadium came on, I went to my fastball and hard curve. In the last four or five innings, I threw only one change, the last pitch of the game." After scattering eight hits, Podres finished strong, retiring the last five Yankees to complete the shutout, 2-0, and secure the only World Championship the Dodgers would win in Brooklyn.

After spending 1956 in the Navy, Podres' success resumed in 1957, when he led the National League in ERA and shutouts and earned his first of three All-Star assignments.

In 1959, the now Los Angeles Dodgers, returned to the World Series to face the Chicago White Sox. Podres took Game Two as the Dodgers won their second World Championship. In 1963, the Dodgers faced the Yankees in the World Series once again, and as in 1959, Game Two was the charm for Podres. He shut the Yanks down as the Dodgers won, 4-1, then swept the Series.

By the time his 15-season career ended in 1969, Podres had posted a 148-116 record with 24 shutouts. From a baseball perspective, no day surpassed the one in 1955 when, as Dodgers general manager Buzzy Bavasi recalled it, "I guarantee, there was more celebrating in Brooklyn that day than there was for the end of World War II."



Hall of Famer Johnny Podres



John Odell is the curator of history and research at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. Image provided by the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library. This is one of a series written for the NYNPA - Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2011.