

From Glasgow to the Giants

To mark the centenary of the birth of Scottish-born baseball player Bobby Thomson, Christopher Warner explores the sportsman's journey from life in the oldest part of Glasgow to a place in America's Basketball Hall of Fame

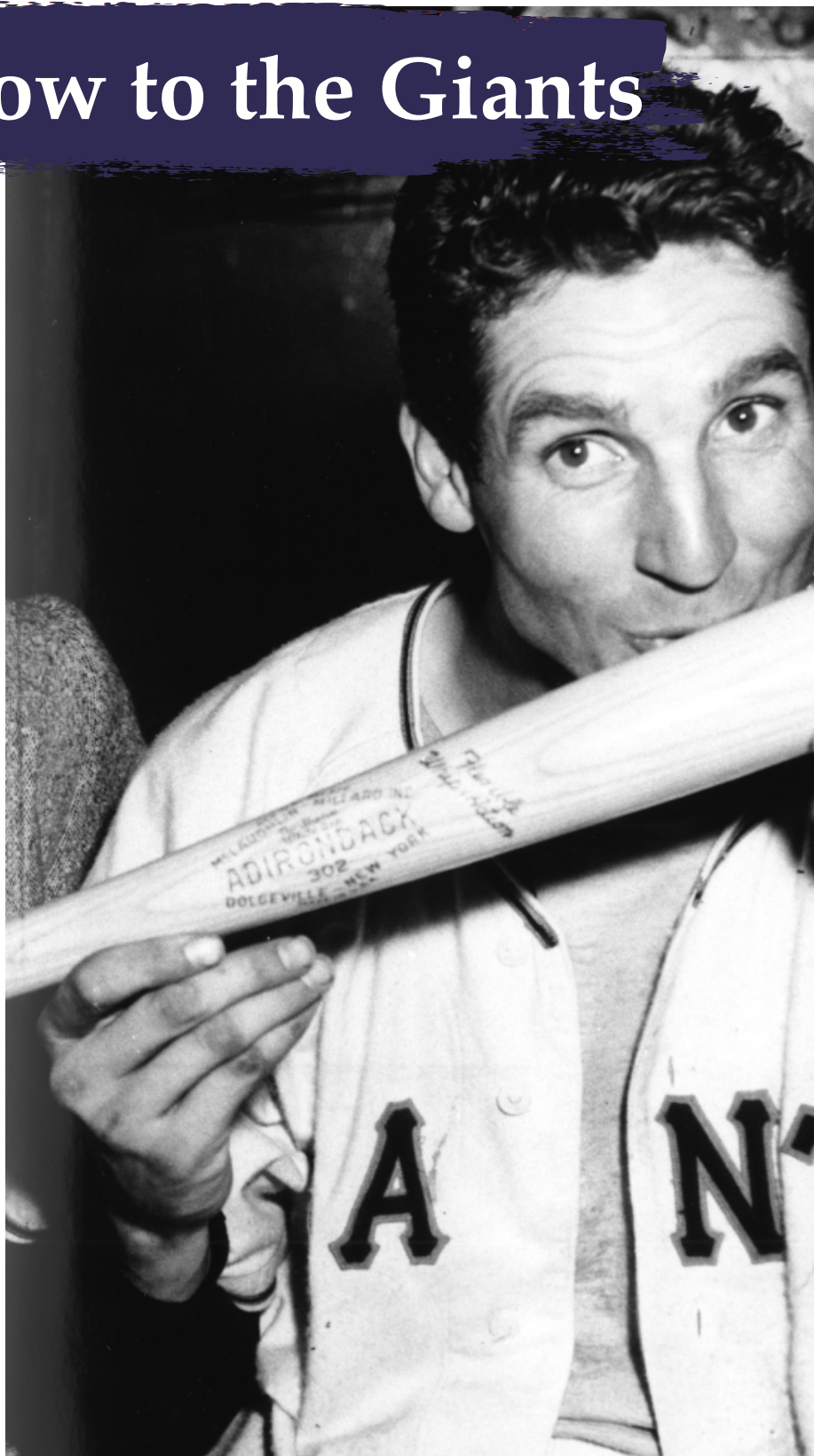
Scottish-born Bobby Thomson played 1,779 Major League baseball games in a career spanning fifteen seasons. During that time, he was a three-time All-Star and posted a steady lifetime batting average of .270 while smacking 264 home runs. These statistics, however, have long ago been relegated to trivial fodder – not by the fickle nature of fame or the vestiges of time – but rather due to one colossal swing of the bat. On 3 October 1951, at the Polo Grounds in New York City, Thomson hit a game-winning home run for the New York Giants to capture the National League pennant over the Brooklyn Dodgers. That fateful moment, hailed as the 'shot heard 'round the world', remains the most sensational home run in the history of America's national pastime.

Starting in Scotland

Robert Brown Thomson was born to James and Elizabeth Thomson on 25 October 1923, in the Townhead area of Glasgow. His father, a cabinet maker by trade, had served in the British army as a physical training instructor during World War I. The Thomson clan would eventually emigrate to America and settle in the borough of Staten Island in 1926.

As the youngest of six children, 'Bobby' was taught to embrace hard work, discipline, and humility — values that would serve him well throughout his life. Like most American boys, he also learned to play baseball and rapidly developed into a standout athlete under the watchful eye of his older brother, Jim. 'My brother was mentor,' Thomson recalled. 'He's the guy who bought me my first glove when he worked for Sears-Roebuck, and he's the guy who had me in the backyard when I was

Bobby Thomson, forever immortalised in sports history thanks to the 'shot heard 'round the world'



strong enough to hold a bat'.

After graduating from Curtis High School in 1942, Thomson signed a professional contract with New York Giants for \$100 a month. The team sent its lanky third baseman to Bristol, Tennessee, in the Appalachian League, where he initially struggled on the field. Fortunately, his big brother continued providing the support he needed to persevere. 'When I first went

away to play Class D ball (the lowest professional league) out of high school, I wasn't doing too well,' Thomson said. 'He'd write to me and tell me to keep my chin up and keep hustling. And after a lot of instructions, he'd sign, "your severest critic, but your most ardent admirer".'

The 'Flying Scot' emerges

During World War II, the young



debut on 9 September 1946, appearing in eighteen games. The following year, he emerged as a starter, flashing his natural athleticism and blazing speed that earned him the nickname 'The Flying Scot'. Although he made the All-Star team in 1948 and 1949, the Giants failed to keep pace with their arch-rivals from Brooklyn. That would all change in 1951 in an unforgettable season that featured more drama than a Shakespearean tragedy.

Although the Giants and Dodgers played in vastly different neighbourhoods, they shared one thing in common: an intense dislike for each other, passed down through generations of disdain and contempt (think Rangers/Celtic minus the sectarian element). Located in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, Ebbets Field was more than just a ballpark to Dodgers fans. The intimate stadium exuded a pub-like atmosphere, fostering not only unwavering support but helping to define the borough itself. In stark contrast, the Giants played their home games at the Polo Grounds, a cavernous venue built on a promontory known as Coogan's Bluff near the western shore of the Harlem River. First opened in 1876, the oddly-shaped field hosted a wide range of sporting events, such as motorsports, boxing and even a 1935 exhibition between Scotland's national football team and an American all-star squad (the Scots won, 5-1).

The heated intercity rivalry reached a fever pitch at the end of the 1951 regular season, when the teams tied for first place, forcing a three-game playoff. Adding to the intrigue (and agony for Brooklyn fans), the Dodgers had maintained a commanding lead for most of the season, only to see the Giants launch a remarkable winning streak, including their last seven games in a

row.

In game one of the playoffs, Thomson belted a home run off Brooklyn starting pitcher Ralph Branca, propelling the Giants to a 3-1 victory at Ebbets Field. The Dodgers responded with a 10-0 shutout to win game two at the Polo Grounds, setting the stage for the decider on the Giant's home turf. The game also made history as the first sporting event to be nationally televised as well as heard by millions more around the globe on Armed Forces Radio. Brooklyn held a 4-1 lead going into the final inning, but the Giants refused to die just as they had done all season long. The Dodgers turned to their ace, Branca, to face Thomson with two runners on base. After laying off a called strike, Thomson sent the second pitch into the left field stands for a stunning three-run blast. After being mobbed by his teammates, the ever-humble slugger quipped to a reporter: 'I was lucky just to hit it, I guess!'

The subsequent World Series proved anti-climatic, with the Giants losing to the Yankees. But Thomson had already cemented his immortality – and his game-winning bat can still be found at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York. After retiring from baseball, Thomson became a sales executive for a paper products company, and in 2003, visited his ancestral birthplace as part of his induction into the Scottish Sports Hall of Fame. Thomson passed away on 16 August 2010, aged 86.
Christopher Warner

Baseball timeline display at the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, NY

ballplayer enlisted in the Army Air Corp on 5 December 1942. He spent the next two years training as a bombardier but remained stationed on the west coast until the end of the war. After receiving his discharge, he eagerly resumed his baseball career and joined the Giants' top minor league team in Jersey City, New Jersey. Thomson later made his major league

