

MICKEY RUTNER, 88: ATHLETE
Obituaries

Toronto infielder was a neglected star and the stuff of 1955 fiction; Baseball player made it to the majors but never succeeded for reasons over which he had no control. He was the inspiration for a character in a novel who was 'victimized by the system'

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VICTORIA -- Mickey Rutner was an infielder for the Toronto Maple Leafs baseball club who inspired a novel about an athlete whose dreams of diamond glory turn to dust.

Mr. Rutner patrolled third base – baseball's hot corner – for Toronto's International League team in 1950. At 5-foot-11 and 190 pounds, with ruddy cheeks and piercing blue eyes, he looked every inch the professional ball player he desired to be.

Leafs manager Jack Sanford rearranged the batting lineup to have him bat fourth, the all-important clean-up position. Mr. Rutner responded by knocking in six runs in the first 11 games in which he hit in the No. 4 slot.

He had a decent campaign in Toronto, as he did on his many stops in baseball's minor leagues. The essence of the novel he inspired was that a player's wish to play in the major leagues could be thwarted by considerations other than talent.

It was Mr. Rutner's burden that he was good enough to pursue a wish of baseball glory, though not so talented as to make him indispensable. He would spend a single month in what players call The Show, the big leagues which bring with them greater acclaim, not to mention larger paycheques. He did well in his brief sojourn in the American League, but not so well as to avoid a return to the minors.

Milton Rutner was born at Hempstead, N.Y., a Long Island town in which his father owned a shirtwaist factory. He was the youngest of five children. The plant and the family soon after moved to the Bronx area of New York City.

As a boy, he shagged fly balls at Crotona Park for a teenager eight years older. The neighbourhood cheered Hank Greenberg as he went on to star in the American League. For his part, young Mickey won attention as a soccer player at Monroe High School, leading his team to championships and earning a scholarship to St. John's University in Brooklyn.

Yet, it would be on the baseball diamond and not the soccer pitch on which he would enjoy his greatest campus success. He played second base for the university's Redmen baseball team and was named captain in 1940. Just before he graduated with a degree in French, he was signed to a professional baseball contract by the Detroit Tigers.

He spent the bonus money on a blue convertible with which he eloped with Leona (Lee) Schiff, a friend's little sister. She became a Radio City Rockette dancer who also performed on Broadway and in Manhattan nightclubs.

"He would be my stage-door Johnny," she said, "and I would watch him play baseball with the other wives."

In 1942, he was an all-star in the Inter-State League while playing for the Wilmington, Del. Blue Rocks before leaving in August to report to his draft board back home.

Mr. Rutner served overseas during the Second World War in the U.S. Army's 45th Infantry Division, seeing action in North Africa, Italy, France and Germany. (The Thunderbird Division had once used the swastika as an emblem, replacing one aboriginal icon for another in 1939.) He worked as a translator in France and it was his division that liberated the Dachau concentration camp.

His most harrowing experience came at the gun barrel of Japanese-American troops in France, who, warned of German infiltrators wearing U.S. uniforms, challenged the blue-eyed soldier. He proved his Americanism by correctly answering questions about pop culture, several of them with baseball, happily, as the subject. The dark irony of a Jewish-American soldier being mistaken for a German by Japanese-American soldiers went unremarked in the encounter.

After the war, the Blue Rocks, named for the colourful granite found beneath the Delaware city, took the infielder back and he replied with one of his finest seasons. Mr. Rutner smacked 36 doubles, nine triples, and 15 home runs to knock in 135 runs, while recording a healthy .310 average.

Those 1946 numbers earned him a promotion the following season to the Birmingham, Ala. Barons, where he was named a Southern Association all-star. A further promotion came in September, when, batting .348, he was at last called up to the parent Philadelphia Athletics, at age 27.

One of his new teammates was pitcher Phil Marchildon of Penetanguishene, Ont., who had returned to the A's after spending nine months in a German prisoner-of-war camp when his bomber was shot down.

The rookie had eight hits in his first 27 at-bats, including a homer off a curve ball thrown by Earl Caldwell of the Chicago White Sox. "A very good prospect," A's boss Connie Mack pronounced after observing his newest employee's first week of work.

Despite his solid debut, the third baseman would appear in just 12 games, getting 12 hits in 48 at-bats for a .250 average.

He was returned to the minors after the following spring training and would never again get to wear a major-league uniform. The demotion came not because of a lack of skill or desire on Mr. Rutner's part. Rather, the A's returned him to Birmingham to save the \$12,000 still due on his purchase price, The Sporting News reported.

His robust style was displayed in a 1948 playoff game, when the stocky baserunner broke up a double-play attempt by slamming into Nashville second baseman, Buster Boguskie. The winning run was scored while the two men lay sprawled on the infield dirt. Mr. Boguskie suffered torn ligaments and cartilage in his left knee; Mr. Rutner wound up with a broken right collarbone.

The Barons went on to win the Dixie Series title in 1948, a championship Mr. Rutner would once again win the following season as a member of the Tulsa, Okla. Oilers.

In the days before free agency, a ball player had limited control over his fate. In 1951, Toronto assigned him to the San Antonio Missions. He balked, insisting his wife was allergic to the weather in Texas, threatening to retire rather than report.

He was convinced at last to show up, played well, and eventually brought his wife along. The couple would eventually retire to the Lone Star State.

His playing days ended in 1953, after he suffered a pulled leg muscle and was released by the Oklahoma City Indians. He worked briefly as a Ford salesman before opening a dry-cleaning business named Big League Cleaners at Wyandanch, N.Y.

Not long after hanging up his glove he entertained an old friend. Eliot Asinof had been a prospect who turned to writing after his baseball career ended. "He was visiting us at the house ... and he was taking notes and he asked me if it would be all right if he wrote this book about me – but he wouldn't use my name," Mr. Rutner told the New Jersey Jewish News a month before his death.

The novel *Man on Spikes* (McGraw Hill, 1955) featured a ballplayer who never succeeds for reasons over which he has no control. The author described the protagonist as a man "used, victimized by the system that made up its own reasons to exploit his talents. He is, then, like so many of us in all walks of life, an unsung hero." The character based on Mickey Rutner was named Mike Kutner.

The novel found a new and appreciative audience when reissued by Southern Illinois University Press in 1998, by which time the author had become one of baseball's best-known Boswells for his look at the Black Sox scandal in *Eight Men Out*. Both the author and his inspiration for the novel suffered from anti-Semitism in their careers. The novel makes no mention of religion, although the working-class hero wears glasses, for which he suffers prejudice.

In recent years, Mr. Rutner was celebrated by members of the Philadelphia Athletics Historical Society. He

was also regarded as the oldest-living Jewish former major leaguer.

The unfairness of his own limited baseball opportunities was made more evident by the alphabetical order that had him share a page of the baseball encyclopedia with the great Babe Ruth.

Mr. Rutner entered hospital earlier this month for surgery to repair a torn rotator cuff, a common injury among baseball players. He died a week later from a staph infection.

MICKEY RUTNER

Mickey Rutner was born on March 18, 1919, at Hempstead, N.Y. He died on Oct. 17 at Austin, Tex. The resident of Georgetown, Tex., was 88. He is survived by Leona, known as Lee, his wife of 66 years, and by three sons, Paul, Richard, and Dr. Toby Rutner, a Winnipeg psychologist. He also leaves seven grandchildren.

Illustration

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