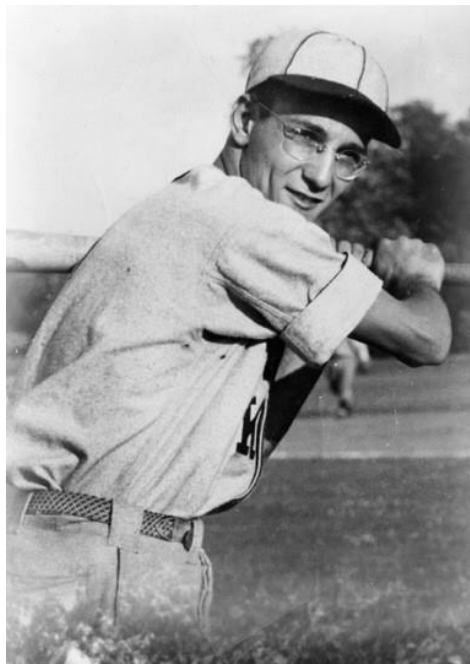


## Ralph, Baseball Hopeful



Young Ralph Ruggiero, age 17. *Circa 1934.*

**H**ey you, homerun king! Wanna earn lots of money this summer?" yelled the Black ballplayer.

"How?" asked young Ralph.

"We need good batters for our Negro team. You get \$20 a game if a thousand spectators show up, \$10 if there's no crowd."

It was the summer of 1932 during the worst depression that America has suffered. Ralph, a lean athlete, was the son of Guiseppe Ruggiero, a poor Italian immigrant who had many mouths to feed. Picking peas and beans earned him very little each week, so ten or twenty dollars per game was more money that a seventeen-year-old could imagine.

“You gotta be kidding. But I am not a Negro,” Ralph reminded the ballplayer. He didn’t realize just how dark he got working in the fields.

“Don’t matter. You dark enough, so if you wanna play with us, you can. You good at batting and fielding. You play first base.”

A natural in baseball, gymnastics, and football, Ralph was always the first pick in gym class. His gang played sandlot ball on Mary Street School playground in East Utica. Their fly balls broke many windows on Blandina Street, triggering the youths to drop their gloves and run.

Not unlike immigrant children, Ralph dropped out of school after eighth grade to help support his family. His first job at Utica Knitting Mills came with a chance to play on the company-sponsored baseball team. For \$28 a week, he gathered mounds of fabric all day called gussets, but couldn’t wait to play ball after work. He was instrumental in winning the team’s championship for the factory.

“You should play baseball instead of wasting your time in this factory. You hit the hell out of the ball, and you’re terrific on first base!” his time-study manager told Ralph after watching him play.

Playing on the Negro team was young Ralph’s chance to make more money. He was only too happy to leave the bean fields and factories. Instead of spending long hours in the hot sun stooped over bean plants, he spent hours in the hot sun doing what he enjoyed most.

For the rest of the summer he traveled by bus with his black teammates throughout New York State playing ball in such cities as Ogdensburg, Rome, Ilion, Frankfurt, and Little Falls. Growing up in a segregated school, Ralph never had the chance to connect with the African-American culture. Their English was different from his. So were their foods and customs. But their mutual passion for baseball and the chance to demonstrate their talents bound them together. That’s what they had in common, and that was all that mattered.

Since African-Americans were not allowed in segregated motels, Ralph bunked with his black roommate, Jessie, in places where they were welcome. He played, ate, drank, and slept with his team. They were just as happy to have an outstanding player on their team as he was to be playing with them.

One night, Ralph found Jessie with his head in his hands at the foot of his bed.

“Whatsamatter?” Ralph asked.

“If only I was white. I knows I could play for mo’ money in major leagues. A scout watched you today.”

“Me?”

“Yessir. He knew you was white.”

Ralph was excited and sick at the same time. Jessie was as good a ballplayer as he, yet there was no hope for him making it to the major leagues. The best Jessie could do was to join a Negro League team, but for far less money.

“Sorry, Jessie. I don’t know what to say.”

Ralph admired Jessie and his teammates, but knew he was powerless to help them. Ralph was poor, but he was always filled with hope. Ralph began to understand Jessie’s despair.

The sweltering summer created dusty ball fields with dirt kicking up every time a runner sprinted around the crude bases. Handfuls of spectators sat in the wooden bleachers, careful not to get slivers on their hands from the dried-out boards. They fanned themselves with hankies and cupped their hands over their eyes to block the sun. Whenever they disagreed with a call, shouts of insults burst from the crowd, “kill the ump!” There were no announcers, sportswriters, or concessions. The locals showed up for a game by wandering to the baseball diamond and spotting teams playing. Admission charges determined the players’ pay.

Ralph gave the spectators their money’s worth by power-hitting the ball past the outfield into a parking lot. Youngsters who could not afford admission scrambled to scoop up the ball. They proudly threw it back to the pitcher. A skilled first baseman, Ralph was relentless in tagging runners out.

Racial slurs emanated from the stands, especially the “n” word. Ralph endured several abusive jeers and taunts. He was surprised by hostilities that Whites displayed toward Blacks. Even if some knew Ralph was not black, many also considered Italians inferior.

Sitting on a bench in the hot sun, waiting for his time at bat, Ralph asked Jessie, “I’ve been called names before, but not like this. How can you stand it?”

“Used to it,” was his response as he spit in the dirt while staring straight ahead at the ballfield, “Don’t want no trouble.”

An awkward silence followed. Ralph realized that his teammates did not trust confiding in him with matters concerning racial tensions. They avoided making waves with Whites all their lives, and Ralph was treated no differently. Yet many displayed a pride for their skills at sliding, batting, and catching. Ralph quickly realized that his team’s top players, had they been white, would have been courted by professional scouts. Soon Ralph would experience these frustrations when his own dream shattered.

Knowing too well how various friends and family members expressed prejudice against this race, Ralph learned that poverty was an equalizer. Both cultures struggled to survive and feed their families.

“Jessie, I’m just as poor as you, and my life is as tough as yours,” Ralph blurted out. He couldn’t help but try to make Jessie identify with his own destitute life.

“Someday, you gonna move up ‘cuz you white. Then you forgit about us.”

America was segregated in the 1930’s, which not only kept African-Americans separate from Whites but also kept them from any opportunities. Baseball was one of them. Black players learned to stifle their dreams of making it to the segregated major leagues. Jackie Robinson did not integrate white major league baseball for another fifteen years. He started with the Kansas City Monarchs, a Negro team, then was recruited by the New York Dodgers. By then, Jessie would be considered too old to play.

Living in the midst of poverty, Ralph didn’t understand Jessie’s wisdom. He realized, however, after one season playing on a Negro team, he would never see Jessie or his teammates again. Ralph returned home to the east side of Utica, the “coloreds” to the west side. In August, he not only earned more money to give to his struggling family but gained a new respect for a culture and plight that was separated from his.

“Over here, Ralph!” yelled the women sewers. “I need the work. Bring the gussets to me!” (A gusset is triangular fabric sewn into a seam to strengthen the garment).

Ralph returned to his job at the knitting mill. He found that he really hated factory work now that the baseball season was over. His older sister Sara helped him get this job and he didn't want to disappoint her. Since the women worked on piece work (paid extra after sewing their quota), they competed for gussets that runners piled on the sides of their machines.

Ralph had fun choosing which girl would receive the gussets, sometimes awarding the pretty ones first. This enabled him to socialize and turn on his charm. He was warned to stay focused and keep up with the workload, but his heart wasn't into this job.

"I'm sorry Ralph, but I have to let you go. You are far behind the others, and these girls need the piecework," explained the time-study manager, "Sara asked for second chances for you, but I cannot give you anymore.

"Did you hire me just to win the baseball championship?"

"No, but we are grateful to you that we did win."

Bitter, yet relieved, Ralph returned home that evening to another lecture by Sara, "What's the matter with you? You can't afford to goof off. How are you gonna earn money now?" She and her husband were much older than Ralph and had two kids to feed; still, she felt responsible for her kid brother.

"I can get him in the foundry," offered Dan, her husband.

Landing his next job at Utica Radiator with Dan nearby, Ralph alternated working nights and days with 4 black "brothers." Husky and strong, each about 6'4" and weighing no less than 250 pounds, the "shookers" shook the metal out of sand molds to create cast iron radiators while Ralph worked on a machine to press radiator fins together.

"The Yankees are the best team in major league baseball," Ralph teased his co-worker, Ben. Loud, burly laughs erupted from the shooker, "No way, brother! White Sox rules!"

"You're crazy! They can't beat Babe Ruth as outfielder and Lou Gehrig as pinch hitter!"

"The White Sox have Sad Sam Jones, pitching Ace. He's great like the Bambino."

"Yes, I'll admit Jones and Ruth won the 1923 World Series when they were Yankees. It was stupid to trade Jones to Chicago."

Once again, baseball united Ralph with new black friends. They wagered small bets on games throughout the season, but soon realized that neither team would make it to the 1933 World Series.

The day finally came that Ralph had dreamed of. A Buffalo Bisons scout, after watching how skillfully Ralph played over the summer, invited him to try out for the minor league team. The scout was impressed with Ralph's handling of double plays on first base by catching the ball to strike out the batter, then hurling it to the second baseman. He never saw a lefty like Ralph bat so powerfully, hitting doubles and triples.

"He's got what it takes to be a major-leaguer," the scout scribbled on his report.

Rushing to the mailbox after work each day, a contract finally arrived for Ralph to sign and begin spring training with the Bisons. Unable to speak, Ralph ran down the street to his nephew, Francis, waving the contract.

"Woo-hoo, you did it, Ralph!" Francis yelled at the top of his lungs. Then Ralph strutted around in a circle. Only a year apart, they were like brothers sharing their love for sports. They both knew that this could be Ralph's "ticket" out of the bean fields and sweat shops.

"This deal will change my life," Ralph bragged, "I hope to play for the Bisons until I get discovered by a major-league scout." He planted a kiss on the paper, grabbed a pen, and carefully signed his name on the dotted line.

"I'll take this to the post office myself before work tomorrow." At that moment, a wave of sadness interrupted his excitement with the thought of Jessie who was right about Ralph escaping poverty because of his white color.

Ralph raced to mail his contract the next day. At work, Ben was amazed to hear about the Bison offer. He genuinely liked Ralph and was happy for him but couldn't help thinking how impossible it would be for him to even hope for such an offer.

"You a good man, Ralph," Ben said, "You be leaving us behind. If I was white, I'd whoop you on the field!"

"If you were white, we'd whoop everyone together on the field!"

With that sentiment, Ben flashed Ralph a toothy grin and lifted him in the air in a bear hug.

"Hey brothers, get to work," yelled the supervisor sarcastically.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, we're going," mumbled Ralph slipping on his gloves to protect his hands. Ben retreated to his spot across the room near the other shoozers.

Ralph picked up his first radiator of the work day. They were lined up waiting for him to complete his part in the assembly. The heat and humidity in the plant was high. His shift just started, and already he was sweating.

Tightly pressing the fins together, his eyes shifted to the nearby gauge that he needed. At that moment, he felt a sensation on his left index and middle fingers. With no protective guards, they were quickly sliced by pressed radiator fins. Noticing blood gushing out of his glove, Ben realized that Ralph had not moved his hand out of the way in time.

“Get me clean rags!” he barked to a crowd that formed. With great strength, he lifted Ralph onto a nearby table and wound rags around his fingers. With ears ringing, Ralph tried to speak, but all went dark...