

## Killer Goryl

By Mayer Schiller

Yes, we played Little League, stickball, punchball, and stoop baseball. We collected baseball cards and followed the game on television. Occasionally we'd actually go to the ballparks to watch the Mets (Polo Grounds) or Yankees play. Most of all, though, we played Negamco.

Negamco was one of the many statistics-based baseball games which, along with APBA, BLM, and (the Johnny-come-lately) Strat-o-Matic, were quite popular in the precomputer dark ages. Negamco was definitely the simplest and therefore probably the least accurate of all the games, but who cared? To us (a small group of P.S. 206 Queens boys) Negamco *was* baseball.

Every spring we'd eagerly await the new rating charts in order to start playing again. Day after day I'd return home from school and ask my mother the inevitable question, "Did Negamco come?" To this day, my mother (now age seventy-seven) will jokingly refer to anything I'm particularly awaiting as *negamco*. I'll respond in kind, as in, "Mom, I'm going to Barnes and Noble to see if Negamco came in yet."

Now, Negamco was not without its faults. For example, in Negamco Football, if you had a fairly good quarterback and threw the hook pass every play, you would complete it some 80 percent of the time. And, in Negamco Baseball, there was no allowance made for pitchers getting

tired or for relief specialists. Hence, if your pitcher happened to have a pitching rating of "3" or under (lower was better), it made no sense to ever remove him for a reliever whose rating was higher. Similarly, there was no reason not to start an Elroy Face or Jack Baldschun (each with a "2" on the pitching chart) over starters with higher ratings.

These anomalies led to a long and heated debate between me and my friend Danny (who lived in the next-door apartment) as to whether there was some unwritten moral code that obligated Negamco players to, as I put it, "manage realistically." This would entail giving a pitcher having a "bad" day the "hook," and in football, not calling "hook pass" on every down.

However, despite my generally purist stance on this issue, I did violate it in what was probably my worst Negamco loss of all time. It was late June of 1963 and Mr. Scherril our sixth-grade teacher, having concluded the year's work, allowed us to "bring in games" during the last week of the school term. "Games" meant one thing—Negamco.

The baseball sides in our class were quite clearly drawn. There were the Yankee fans who generally liked front runners (the Yankees were in the final stages of their dominance, having just won the previous year's World Series over the Giants), and the rest of us, who were loosely defined as National League fans. By and large our parents

had rooted for the Dodgers or Giants, and now we made our own choices. Some retained the old loyalties to the former New York teams. Others became Met fans. While still others drifted toward the remaining National League teams. The notion of rooting for the Yankees struck this latter group, of which I was a proud member, as indicative of conceit, vaguely Republican, and unmistakably *goyish*.

It was decided that we'd play the two Series finalists of the past October with the "managers" to be comprised of the fans of the rival leagues in our class. I remember few details of the game except that it was a close fought, seesaw affair.

Finally, we reached the bottom of the ninth and the Yankees were up by a run. The Giants had two out with Willie Mays on first and Orlando Cepeda coming to bat. I called time and summoned my co-managers to a conference. The case I presented to them was Negamco-sound but violated my own bugaboo: it was not realistic. I wanted to send Mays in an attempt to steal second. The logic was impeccable. Mays had a "v" on the speed chart, the highest rating possible. Of the fifty numbers on the spinner, Mays would be safe with anything between one and thirty-eight. After that, any hit by Cepeda would tie the game.

Of course, as my co-managers argued, one does not send the last out of the game to steal. But, I responded, this isn't real baseball; it's Negamco.

My view prevailed. I spun the dial as if Cepeda was batting and while it was spinning called "Mays stealing" (which is how we did those things). The spinner stopped on forty-eight.

I was devastated. Somehow, one of my friend's conciliatory comments

didn't quite comfort me: "You think you feel bad. Imagine how Cepeda felt in the on-deck circle." I had defied the Gods. I'd played Negamco unrealistically.

The lesson as such was a tough one to learn, for logic dictated that Negamco responded only to the probability of its numbers, not the metaphysical force of "realistic" baseball or football strategy.

The problem remained unresolved until the advent of "Killer" Goryl. Baseball historians may recall the brief career of journeyman Johnny Goryl, who performed for the Chicago White Sox (1957-59) and Minnesota Twins (1960-64). He played various infield positions, appearing in 276 games and batted a mere 595 times. His lifetime average was .225.

Nothing special to be sure, except in the Negamco universe. In Negamco, a player's batting skills had three components: A capital letter from "A" to "Z" which reflected his average, with "A" being the best. This was followed by a small "d" or a "t" which meant that a certain percentage of hits would be doubles or triples. Finally, there was the all-important home run chart rating. This was a number from one to thirteen (lower being better) that was based on the percentage of a player's hits which were home runs. The best home run hitters would get no lower than, say, a five; average players anywhere from nine to thirteen. After every base hit you would check the home run chart to see if it had been a home run.

Now, in 1962 Johnny Goryl had only twenty-six at bats. (No, I don't know why.) Of these, five resulted in hits, giving him a batting average of just .192. But one hit had been a triple and (wonder of wonders!) two had been home runs. Accordingly, in the

Negamco charts for 1963, Johnny Goryl emerged with a rating of Xt3. We thought it was a misprint but after checking his '62 statistics we realized that it was no mistake. Johnny Goryl, weak-hitting utility infielder for the Twins, had been transformed in the world of Negamco to the greatest home run hitter in the game's history.

Danny and I quickly dubbed the young slugger "Killer." And, although the Killer's supporting cast was composed of the likes of Harmon Killebrew, Bobby Allison, Jimmie Hall, Earl Battey, Don Mincher, and Rich Rollins, we had no choice: Johnny Goryl would have to bat cleanup. True, his hits were few and far between, but those that occurred

were invariably the kind that sailed over the fences of our minds' creations. Before the awesome "talent" of Goryl, my last arguments about realistic play were silenced. In the fall we had Unitas and Starr tossing hook passes up and down the field.

The end of grade school was pretty much the end of Negamco for me. Its blessed universe, like the Never-Never Land to Wendy, was no longer reachable (at least this side of Heaven). To this day, though, when others wax nostalgic over Willie, Mickey, and the Duke, I (and Danny, I'm sure, wherever he is) recall the one player who put them all to shame—the incomparable Killer Goryl of 1963.

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