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# Jerry Izenberg, Defying Father Time, Publishes First Novel at Age 90

By Lawrence Lerner

Feb 15, 2021

*This profile is Part 1 of a two-part series on RU-N alumnus and sportswriting legend Jerry Izenberg. It covers Izenberg's growing up in Newark, his time at RU-N, and his new novel and future projects. In our **Part 2 extended Q&A**, we talk with Izenberg about his career; some of his most enduring friendships with famous athletes; Project Pride, the nonprofit he created in 1979 to help disadvantaged kids in Newark; and his deep ties to his alma mater.*

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Rutgers University–Newark alumnus Jerry Izenberg (SASN '52) was relieved.

It was 1951. He'd been paying his way through college by working the night shift at an Ironbound District chemical factory when it shuttered after an explosion during his junior year.

"For three years I loaded drums of powdered red dye there. I'd come home at night, and my hair and eyebrows were all red. It felt like I was torturing myself," he said. "Then it blew up—much to my delight."

Good news, except Izenberg was also in a pickle.

Between the chemical plant and his next job as copy boy at *The New Jersey Star-Ledger*, where he raked in \$6 a night as a professional gopher, he was short on cash heading into his senior year at RU-N, short enough that he'd have to drop out.

Up to that point Izenberg had been leading the glamorous life, spending the bulk of his time in the cellar of the Rector Street building that housed *The Observer*, where he served as sports editor, and a bar on Lombardy Street called The Place, where he spent a share of his paltry earnings while skipping more than a few classes.

A lot rode on whether he'd make it to finish line and graduate with degree in hand, and his prospects suddenly looked dim.

As Izenberg began clearing out his desk at *The Observer* that August, resigned to an ignominious fate, the Dean of Students caught wind of his dilemma, trudged downstairs from his office to the paper's—they shared the row house on Rector Street—and said, "If you beg, borrow and stole, could you scrape together the money for the first semester? If so, the second semester's on me," according to Izenberg.

To this day, Izenberg doesn't know where the Dean got the money—whether he reached into his own pocket or found a "slush fund"—but Izenberg has done everything he can for the school since that day.

"I was headed nowhere and don't know what I'd have done," he said. "Whatever success I've had, I owe it to that Dean and the school."

His success, of course, is the stuff of legend. As one of the country's premier sports writers over the last 60 years, mostly for *The Star-Ledger*, Izenberg has had a front-row seat to history and brought us along with him, using his incisive style and trademark wit to reveal the people behind the headlines, hold the powerful to account, and tackle racial injustice and other pressing issues of the day.



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“It wasn't comfortable or safe for an interracial couple to walk down the streets of Newark after the riots.”

At the tender age of 90, Izenberg is currently columnist emeritus for *The Star-Ledger*, limiting his travel and filing stories from his home in Henderson, Nev., where he lives with his wife, Aileen, a former Newark Public Schools administrator who is Black. He's also just published his first novel, *After the Fire: Love and Hate in the Ashes of 1967*, an interracial love story between a Black girl and Italian boy set in the aftermath of the Newark Rebellion.

## Newark after the riots.

"It wasn't comfortable or safe for an interracial couple to walk down the streets of Newark after the riots," said Izenberg. "You could walk in the East Ward, because the

Portuguese didn't care, but the Italians and Blacks hated each other, and blamed each other after the riots. One called it a riot, the other called it a rebellion."

The novel is chock-full of Newark lore and history, based on real people and events but "fictionalized to protect the guilty," as Izenberg likes to quip.

Izenberg knows this territory well from his time growing up and being a journalist in Newark. Raised with his older sister, Lois, in the Clinton Hill section of the South Ward, he was a small, scrappy kid who played pick-up baseball and synagogue-league basketball, snuck into Ruppert Stadium to see the Newark Bears and Eagles, and played clarinet in school orchestras and bands. He was respectful to his parents—his mom a homemaker, his dad a former minor-league second baseman who worked seven days a week at A. Hollander & Son dyeing fur pelts—but he was a handful to his teachers, regularly getting clocked during the days of corporal punishment for dipping a girl's hair in ink or sending snide poems to his teachers.

"I was expelled from the eighth grade for going to a burlesque show and getting caught," said Izenberg. "I was that kind of kid."

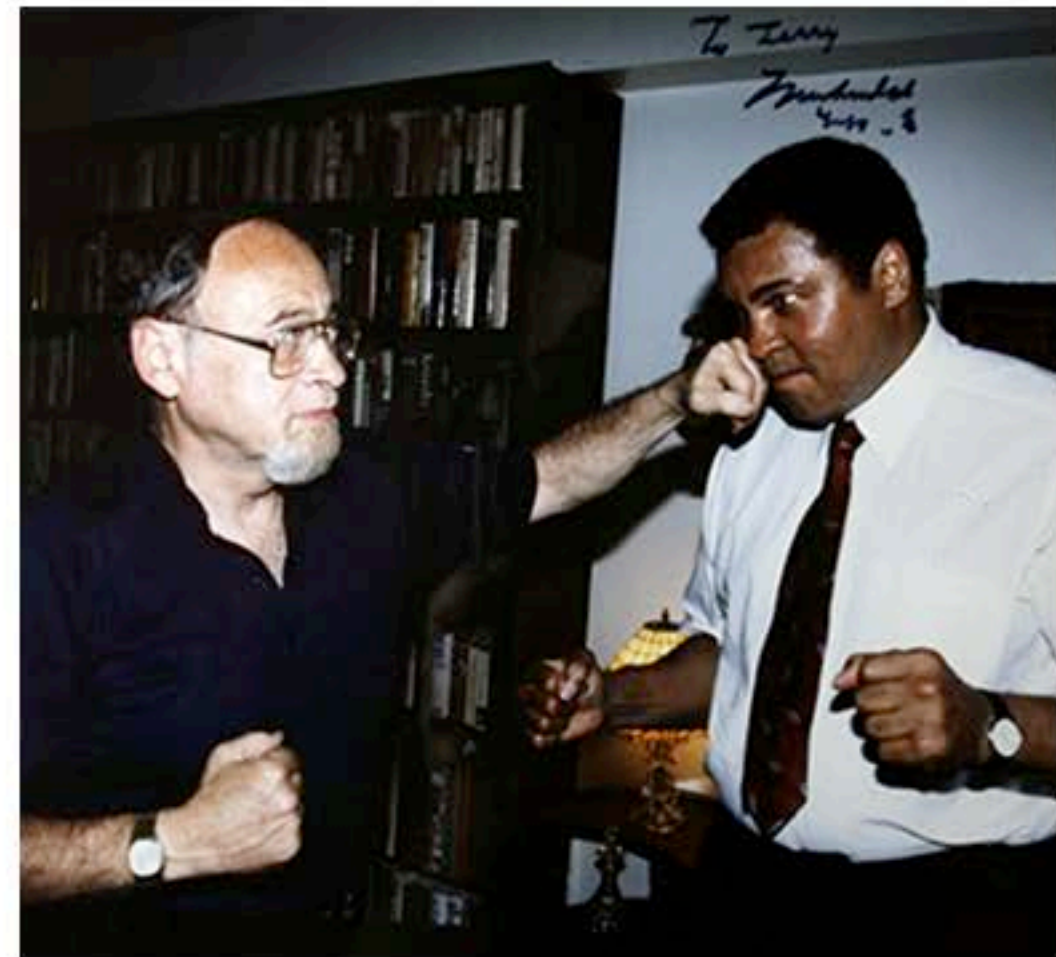
His parents rewarded him, with the help of Izenberg's aunt, by shipping him away to Augusta Military Academy in Stanton, Va., for high school, where he continued to test the limits of decorum and land in hot water.

There may have been no reforming him, but his parents continued to try, quashing his plan to enter the military after high school—he would serve in the Korean War later—and ordering Lois to drag him down to campus and register him at RU-N, which ended up being a great fit for Izenberg. As a working-class kid from Newark, he appreciated the grit and underdog mentality of the school, which existed to serve students like him.

"I got an unbelievably great education there. And I'm so happy I went to Rutgers-Newark," said Izenberg. "In New Brunswick, the buses don't slam their doors in your face when you're going from one part of campus to the other. Here when it snows, nobody touches the streets. The cars come by, the mud splashes up on you. You learn this is what life dealt you!"

Izenberg believes RU-N backed up its mission with professors who really cared. He liked his government and comparative religion courses the most, the latter shedding light on people's thinking and how they experience the world, which he credits for adding depth to his sports writing.

"I really don't like to scratch the surface. I want to know what I'm talking about, and I take the time to do it," he said, whether it be explaining Muhammed Ali's Parkinson's Disease, revealing Jim Eisenreich's Tourette's Syndrome, or portraying the racism faced by Black ballplayers breaking the color barrier, like his old friend Larry Doby.



In the 1980s, Izenberg taught seminars at his alma mater, sharing his wisdom with a lucky few, including future *Star-Ledger* columnist Mark Dillon, who took Izenberg's class twice and became a protégé of the legendary sports writer.



Fast-forward to 2021, and Izenberg refuses to rest on his laurels. In fact, he has several more books up his sleeve.

One is a baseball fantasy novel that's finished and sitting in his desk drawer, titled, *Josh Gibson Remembers: A Ghost Story*, filled with true anecdotes told to him about life in the Negro Leagues. Another is a biography of Doby, the first African American to play in the American League. Then there's the book on horse racing he'd like to get to, along with a mini-autobiography titled, *Growing Up Jewish in Newark, New Jersey*, which will cover the first 20 years of his life. The last, and perhaps most important, book Izenberg wants to write is a memoir titled, *Made in*

*America*, about the antisemitism and racism that he and Aileen have endured individually and together, which he'll connect to the August 2017 Unite the Right white-supremacist march in Charlottesville, Va.

If it seems like Izenberg refuses to slow down, you'd be correct. Although recently he did make one concession to Father Time.

"When I turned 90, I gave up driving," he said. "I took my driver's license to the DMV and said to the lady, 'This is my gift to the people of Henderson, Nevada. Everyone will be safer now.'"

*Top photo: Izenberg at Bears & Eagles Riverfront Stadium, Newark, in 2015*

*Middle photo: Izenberg with Muhammed Ali*

*Bottom photo: Izenberg at home in Henderson, Nev., in 2021*



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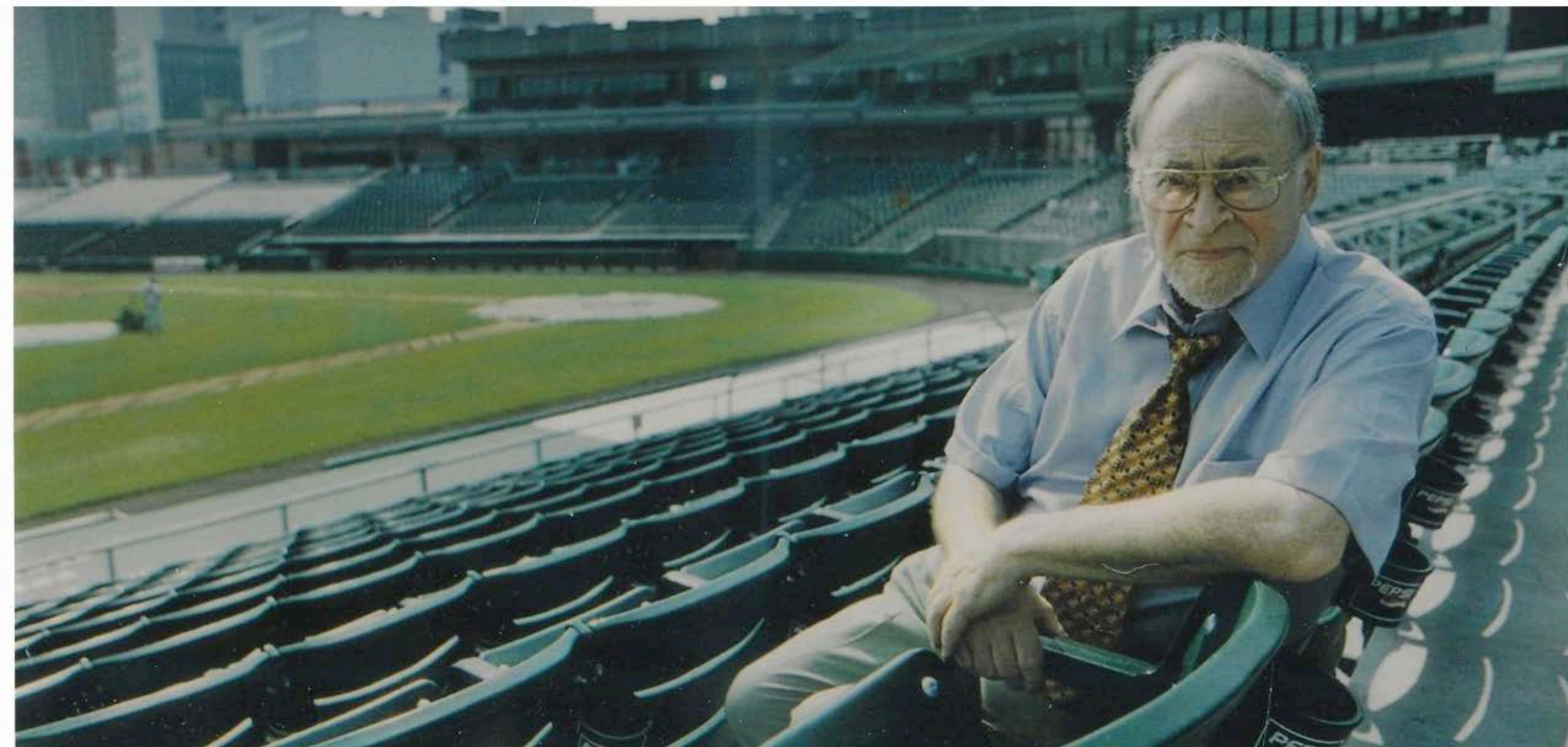
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# Sitting Down With Legendary Sports Writer Jerry Izenberg

By Lawrence Lerner

Feb 24, 2021

This extended Q&A is Part 2 of a two-part series on RU-N alumnus and sportswriting legend Jerry Izenberg. In our [Part 1 profile](#), we focused on Izenberg's childhood growing up in Newark, his days at RU-N, and the publication of his first novel at the tender age of 90, along with future projects he has planned.

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*Rutgers University–Newark alumnus Jerry Izenberg (SASN '52) is a living legend. Since August 1962, he's penned a syndicated sports column for the The Star-Ledger, captivating readers by turning the spotlight on countless athletes and issues, and winning every award conceivable while being inducted into numerous Halls of Fame, along with Rutgers University's Hall of Distinguished Alumni.*

*He is one of only two sports writers who covered the first 53 Super Bowls, from 1967 to 2019. He also covered 55 consecutive Kentucky Derbies, along with an array of other sports, from Major League Baseball to boxing to rodeo and fly fishing, and covered more of Muhammad Ali's fights than any other writer, dating back to the 1960 Olympics. In addition to newspaper work, Izenberg created the Sports Extra television show in the 1970s, which ran for eight years, and hosted a radio show, Sports with Jerry Izenberg, on the NBC network in the 1980s. He's been the writer, narrator or producer (sometimes all three) of 35 network television documentaries, one of which earned an Emmy nomination.*

*Izenberg has written 15 non-fiction books and recently, at the tender age of 90, published his first novel, After the Fire, Love and Hate in the Ashes of 1967, an interracial love story between a Black girl and Italian boy set in the aftermath of the Newark Rebellion.*

*We sat down with him recently to discuss his career; some of his most enduring friendships with famous athletes; Project Pride, the nonprofit he created in 1979 to help disadvantaged kids in Newark; and his deep ties to his alma mater.*

**You started as a copy boy at *The Star-Ledger* in 1951, while you were a junior at RU-N. What did that involve?**

I would take the copy that was edited, put it in a pneumatic tube, and send it up to the composing room, where the press was, on the top floor. When it was edited or they had changes, it came back the same way. And I had to take the photos around the corner to this independent guy who made the mats for the stereotypes to get the pictures in the paper. With all the alcoholics on staff, I had to make probably 10 coffee runs a night to keep them upright. I swept up the floor. And I kept peeking over people's shoulders to see how they wrote—that's what fascinated me. All the gopher work you could do on a newspaper in 1951, that's what I did.

**How long did it take to work your way up to writer?**

Well, within a couple of weeks, someone got sick, and we were shorthanded on a desk, and the editor said, "Can you count?" And I said, "Yeah, I can count." And he said, "Well, in this typeface, you get 13 characters. In this typeface..." you get whatever. "Sit down," he said, "I want you to write headlines." Well, much to his surprise, I wrote the headlines. In a short period of time, I was writing stories and then going and out on assignments. When I went out on assignment for the first couple of years, I sat next to a Morse code guy who tapped out my story, and a guy at the *Ledger* typed it up as it went along and gave it to the copy desk, and that was the genesis of the stories unless they were AP and came from the wire.

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“When I went out on assignment for the first

**After serving in the Korean War and then completing brief stints at *The Paterson Evening News* and *The Star-Ledger*, you spent three years at *The New York Herald Tribune* under Stanley Woodward.**

Yes. When I went to *The Herald Tribune*, it was like I'd died and gone to heaven. It was the greatest paper this

couple of years, I sat next to a Morse code guy who tapped out my story, and a guy at the *Ledger* typed it up as it went along."

country ever had. My desk was next to Red Smith. I sat across from Walter Lippman. I mean, the names just roll out. It was an unbelievable place. That's where I really got my newspaper education. And Stanley Woodward was the greatest editor who ever lived. He told it to us every morning, "Anyone here who persists in God-ding up these athletes doesn't work here anymore." So, he gave me perspective. He taught me so much.

**And then Woodward convinced you to leave the *Herald Tribune* and return to *The Star-Ledger*?**

When he had cancer, he said to me one day, "I want you to go back to Newark. I know about your being offered the columnist job." I said, "I don't want to go back there! I didn't lose anything at that paper, I don't have to go look for it. I'm not going back. I like working for you." And he said, "You're going back. If you don't go back, you're fired." I said, "You won't fire me!" He said, "You're fired." Then he looked at me and said, "Let me tell you something. In 10 days, I'm going to be fired, and I want you in a columnist job somewhere before I go." *That* was an education.

**And the rest is history. You've been at *The Star-Ledger* under Donald Newhouse ever since.**

*The Star-Ledger* really gave me the opportunities I wanted. It's a funny thing, I always stumbled into blind luck. I didn't make any money for years there, but I'd knock on Mort Pye, the editor's door, and say, "I'm going to Africa on Thursday." He'd say, "Vacation?" And I'd say, "Why would I go there on vacation? Ali is fighting Foreman." He'd say, "Well, do we need that fight?" He didn't know much about sports. And I'd say, "Yeah, we need that fight." And he'd say, "Then go ahead." He knew what made a good newspaper and sort of gave me free rein.

The growth of the paper was amazing, and I grew with it, I think. We were the eighth largest paper in the country at one point, and when we got over a million readers on Sundays, I was really proud of it. Donald Newhouse said to me recently, "We thought we had the best sports columnist in America. What we realized is that you had a following—we'd never had anyone with a following. We then began hiring people who complemented what you were doing. It was sports that sold this paper and engineered its climb for years." He made a concerted effort, and we did wonderful things. This paper in Newark, NJ, sent me to Africa, sent me to Manila for Ali-Frazier, sent me to Malaysia, and I am proud to say I was arrested in all three countries—for doing my job.

**In the course of your work, you ended up becoming close with many famous athletes, including several who played ball in the Negro Leagues, then broke the color barrier and transitioned to the Major Leagues.**

At 9 years old, I learned how to sneak into Ruppert stadium, and when the Newark Bears, the Yankees triple-A team, were on the road, the Eagles would play. I'd be the only white person in the grandstands, and I loved that team. Guys who are in the Hall of Fame were on there. Monte Irvin and Larry Doby, two of my best friends in life, played on that team. Monte said to me much later: "You can't die because you're the last guy who ever saw us play, and the kids won't believe we ever had a league." And I said, "I promise you we'll make it known," and that's the book I began to write about



Josh Gibson.

**Gibson, who is widely regarded as one of the best hitters in baseball, was the second Negro League player to be inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame.**

Josh Gibson was the greatest hitter I ever saw, for power—the only man to hit a fair ball out of Yankee Stadium, clean out of the park. Ruth didn't do it, Mantle didn't do it, Maris didn't do it, but Josh Gibson did it.

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“This paper in Newark, NJ, sent me to Africa, sent me to Manila for Ali–Frazier, sent me to Malaysia, and I am proud to say I was arrested in all three countries—for doing my job.”

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Yankees, but we didn't have a relationship. But he lived in Montclair, and I was his off-season columnist, I realized later. So, one day he comes to my house, rings my doorbell and says, “What are you doing tonight?” I said, “Nothing.” He said, “What do you drink?” I said, “You pick the poison. Don't worry, I'll handle my end of it.” He said, “I'll be here at 7 o'clock.” He comes with a fifth of scotch, and we sit in the kitchen. I provide another fifth of scotch. And when the sun comes up, a fifth-and-a-half is gone, and he has told me all of the terrible things that happened to him because of baseball's hypocrisy. And he gave me a new appreciation for the Black Leagues, because he said it was the only time he was really happy. They knew they couldn't go to the Major Leagues, so they played the game they loved, and when the season ended, they went to Cuba or Venezuela or Mexico, and they played with Major League white players on the same team.

**And that talk was pivotal for Doby and for your relationship?**

They hired guys to follow him around. It was horrible what he went through. Larry was the most bitter athlete I have ever known until after we had that talk, and I am very happy to say that I was instrumental in getting him into the Baseball Hall of Fame. And then I did the eulogy at his funeral.

**Ted Williams figures in this story, too.**

Ted Williams and I had a wonderful adversarial relationship for years, to the point it was almost fun, we were so nasty to each other. I really respect him

**Larry Doby was the first Black to play in the American League, and you've said he had an even tougher time breaking the color barrier than Jackie Robinson, correct?**

Jackie was a hero, no question about it, but Doby had it much harder than Jackie. People don't realize that. He was playing for a team that didn't want him: The owners did, but the players didn't. Jackie had a team that wanted him, because Branch Rickey made sure because he traded everybody off the team who didn't want to play with him. Larry comes into the dressing room, and the manager, who doesn't want him, introduces him, and the players all turn their backs and look at the wall and don't shake his hand. Only three guys shake hands.

Larry told me everything. I knew him. I covered Major League Baseball and used to see him when he played the





enormously. The veterans committee would not put Larry Doby into the Hall of Fame for years, and finally I wrote the nastiest column I could think of: Why am I not surprised by their behavior? Because they didn't want him to play the damn game in the first place! And I sent a copy of that column to everyone on the committee, and *one* guy wrote back: Ted Williams. And he said, "Listen you dumb SOB, Rizzuto, Irvin and I have been voting for Larry for years. Get off your fat ass and get the other votes." I respected him even more for that. And Doby later told me, in those days they used to leave their gloves in the outfield—they wouldn't bring them in, they'd throw them on the grass. And Larry was going to the outfield—they were playing at Fenway Park—and Williams was coming in, and as he bent down to pick up the glove, he saw Larry and said, "Keep your chin up, kid. You have the skills to make it here."

**And Doby was instrumental in Project Pride as well, yes?**

Larry was on the Board of Directors, and he was on my committee as my personal blackjack guy for the SAT program, and he'd look at those kids—some were white, but most were Black and Hispanic—and he'd say, "Don't tell me about how things have been against you. You're in a program here that white kids in the suburbs never get, and if you don't come to class, I'll tell them to throw you out. Don't tell me how hard it is to be Black or Latino. I've got stories that'll top any you want to give me." And he really felt for those kids.

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“Ted Williams and I had a wonderful adversarial relationship for years, to the point it was almost fun, we were so nasty to each other.”

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**It was 1979 when you put on your first Pride Bowl to get the organization going. How did that come about?**

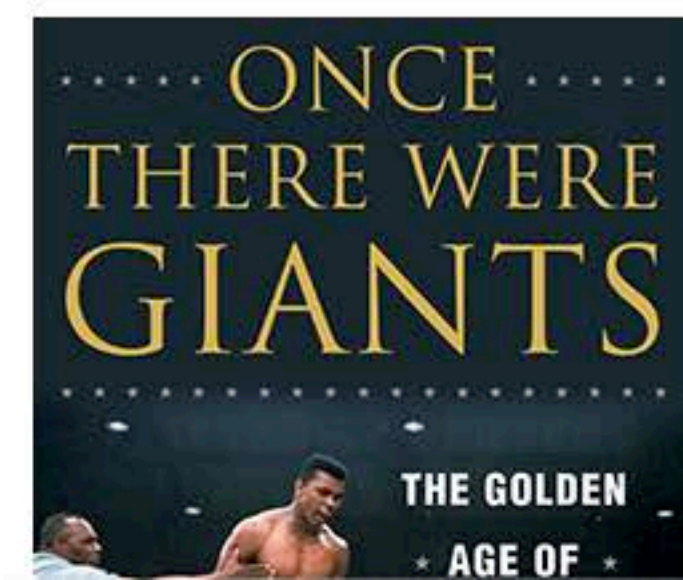
I was really struck by the fact that Aretha Franklin could play Newark Symphony Hall, really the Mosque Theater, and it'd be sold out and everybody would be Black. And Jerry Vale would come and everyone would be Italian. I said, if I can get those Black and white people to sit on the same side of the field and root against a Black team, maybe we'll have something. So, I invited an all-Black team from a college in Pennsylvania to play Seton Hall, which had a terrible team and which was going to drop football, and Monsignor Faye, may he rest in peace, said, "If you want the game for that purpose, I'll keep the team

alive for two more years." And we had them the first two Pride Bowls.

The first year we had \$2 tickets, made \$17,000 and put it all into intramural athletics for kids, and by the time we were done, we'd raised over \$4 million and had sent over 1,100 kids to college. We had college scholarships, computer and math classes, English comprehension classes, and a waiting list of people who wanted to put their kids in our program. It lasted 29 years. In the end we had Army and Navy bring in their JV teams and play the last eight games for us.

**And you received one other blessing from Project Pride.**

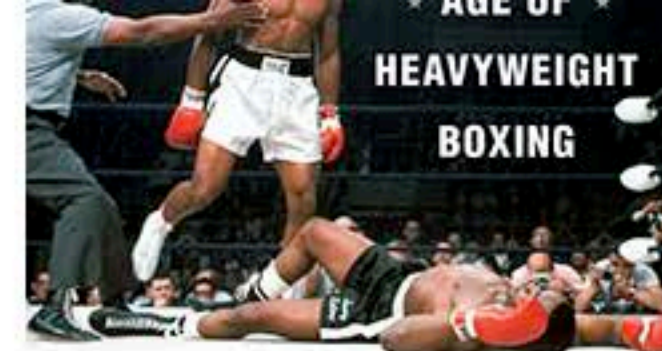
The first Pride Bowl is when I met my wife, Aileen. I went to the Board of Education and asked department heads, "C'mon, it's for the kids. Get me some volunteers." They sent people in, and she was one of them—she was working in Title I federal programs at the time. And someone said, "We don't work on Saturdays, so are we going to get paid for this?" I said, "No, you're not getting paid for this. As a matter of fact, you can leave right now! But that woman who didn't say anything,



you stay. I want you on the committee." And that's how we met. And by the time we ended, she was the treasurer of Project Pride. She fought for every dollar, and we had the best teachers in our afterschool program because they all worked in her programs.

**Rabbi Joachim Prinz, the civil rights leader who opened for Martin Luther King, Jr., at the 1963 March on Washington, figured into Project Pride as well, I understand.**

I was bar-mitzvah'd by Dr. Joachim Prinz at our temple, B'nai Abraham, at end of my block at Shanley and Clinton Avenues. He taught me pretty darn good, and everything I did later in life came out of him in many ways. I'm not what you'd call a ritualistic Jew; I'm more like my father, who was a cultural Jew. But I said to Aileen later on, "There never would have been a Project Pride if there hadn't been a Rabbi Prinz bar-mitzvah-ing me."



JERRY IZENBERG

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“RU-N had a basketball team I fell in love with: They set the NCAA Div III record for consecutive losses.”

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**Now, as a local journalist, did you ever cover any RU-N events or games?**

I covered a lot of Rutgers games in New Brunswick. Newark was getting about eight column inches in the paper and then a little more when they got better. But they had a basketball team I fell in love with: They set the NCAA Div III record for consecutive losses. They only had seven players. Every one of them had an after-school job—there were no scholarships there. I felt very strongly about them. Someone at the school wanted a computer for the business office, and computers back then were as big as cities. And so they said, “We can get the money for

the computer if we get rid of the athletic trainer.” The athletic director was a part-time job. These kids all had jobs but really wanted to play basketball and represent the school. I felt for these kids, they were all good kids and all graduated. I don't think an athletic program should dominate a school, but these kids were giving something to the school and holding jobs, going to classes and graduating, and they deserved a better shake.

So, I went down to see Edward Bloustein, who was the president of Rutgers at the time, and as it worked out, one of my best friends, Sonny Werblin—the former president of Madison Square Garden who built the Meadowlands and donated the Werblin Recreation Center to Rutgers—was visiting Bloustein, making phone calls from Bloustein's home. He said, “What are you doing here?” I told him the story, and he said, “That's disgraceful. They're Rutgers kids as much as anyone.” He said, “When you go into see Bloustein, let me come with you.” We get in, and Sonny says, “One of my good friends is here to talk with you,” and I told Bloustein the story and said, “You'd better get ready to retire the name Rutgers, because under this setup, some kid is going to break a leg, and there will be no one there to attend to him at the game, and his parents are going to own this school, and it'll be Weinstein Tech or whatever they want to make it.” And Sonny said, “I couldn't have said it better, and he's absolutely right.” And Bloustein restored the trainer.

**Your advocacy on behalf of those kids seems to echo your feelings for RU-N.**

I feel a deep obligation to the school. The basic premise is this is a school for blue-collar kids, and that's not changed but has been improved in that it's reaching more groups. There's much more diversity: It's the most diverse school in the country. The school is important to me. I belonged there.

Well, thank you very much for taking the time to sit down with us. This has been a pleasure.

Thank you.

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