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Little Italy in the Bronx, 1946, Courtesy, Bronx Historical Society

Frankie's Home Run

A True Story of Determination, Courage, Integrity and Leadership

— Emilio Iodice, Rome, Italy

Families of immigrants are all different and all the same. They face the hardship of assimilation in a new culture while clinging to the values they left behind. Such was the case for a baby born in the South Bronx in 1946. His mother wrote *Francesco* on his birth certificate. In his home, which was a small piece of Italy in the New World, he had one name but when he stepped out the door into the world of Americans, he had another. In the enclave in New York City of people

from the island his parents immigrated from he was known as Francesco; in the United States he was often called, "*Frankie.*"



Island of Ponza

His parents came from a lovely rock in the Mediterranean. Ponza was a land of magic. Its incomparable beauty, wild elegance of volcanic colors and turquoise water set it apart as a Mecca where its sons and daughters wanted to return too even after living in the land of milk and honey, which was America. Most never went

back, as their children became natives of this new nation and cast off the traditions of Italy and the island. It was a sad yet natural phenomenon of survival.

Frankie was born in a hospital named for the patron saint of Italy. For his mother, Lucia, this was a good omen. St. Francis Hospital was the place of care and birth for many of the people and children of the Ponzese. Francesco was also the name of Lucia's uncle, whom she adored. He baptized and married her and was her mentor and educator. He was the legendary pastor of the church of the Assumption in Le Forna of Ponza. Don Francesco was a brilliant, clever and passionate priest who served two generations of families in Ponza.



St Francis Hospital, East 142nd Street and St. Ann's Avenue, Courtesy Bronx Historical Society

Lucia had lost six babies. She carried each for nine months but at birth, they were stillborn. She was determined that this child would live, no matter what. Her doctor would perform a caesarean section, which was a rarity at that time. Women risked infections and dying from loss of blood. Lucia was required to sign a special form. It forced her to make a fatal choice. If there were complications, who should the doctor save: her or her baby? Lucia made it clear to the doctor. She said, "If you have to choose between me and my baby, save him and let me die."

Francesco was born on April 13th, the birthday of Thomas Jefferson, third President of the United States and creator of the American Declaration of Independence. On the day of his birth, his god mother, Angelina, said, "This baby will be in the White House, someday."

Frankie was a fine, healthy boy. He had long, blonde, curly hair and a pleasant personality. He smiled and was playful, intelligent and obedient.

Frankie's family was not a normal one. His father, Silverio, did not have one full time job. He had two. One was running his own business; a small grocery store in the North Bronx.

When Frankie's father was not at the store he was on the waterfront, loading and unloading ships. It was hard and dangerous but it paid well. Ships in the 1950s still had boxes, bales, fruits, and vegetables and tons of



Longshoremen hauling bananas, Courtesy, New York Historical Society

loose luggage to handle. There were few containers.

Longshoremen, like Silverio, lifted and moved the freight from the ship on to the dock to load into trucks that would deliver the merchandise across the continent. Injuries and deaths on the waterfront were frequent. It was a savage and perilous place to work. Silverio was strong and



Longshoremen getting ready to work on a ship, Courtesy, New York Historical Society

tough. He had to be to survive on the waterfront of New York.

Silverio would be at the pier by 5 AM. At times, he would work 12 grueling hours. He would be so exhausted that he would feel like all the blood was drained from his body. Even so, he would drive across New York City to go to the store and be there until it

closed. Several times a week he would get up at 2 AM, travel to the Bronx Terminal Market, buy boxes of fruits, vegetables and groceries and bring them to the store. After unloading everything, he would head back to the Brooklyn Navy Yard or the piers on the North River. By 7 AM the store was opened by Silverio's wife and boys.

Frankie's mother, Lucia, worked. His brother, Ralph, worked and he worked. He began to go to the store at the age of 5. At that time, they lived in Little Ponza. On days he and his brother were not in school, they would take the subway from the South Bronx to the North Bronx where the store was. By the time Frankie was eight years old, he was an expert who knew how to sell to customers; go with his father to the market to load their truck with provisions; stock shelves and keep the store clean and deliver groceries. At the age of 10 his family moved across the street from the store. Now that former garage that was turned into a place to sell groceries became the center of their lives.

Most immigrants from Ponza usually toiled regular hours, even if it was the back breaking labor of construction. Instead, Frankie's family worked from dawn to dusk, seven days a week. Other families had vacations, enjoyed holidays and weekends off. His never took a break; not even on Christmas, Easter or Mother's Day. The only holiday for Frankie and his family was on June 20th, the feast of San Silverio.

Frankie and his mother opened the store very early each morning. He would go off to school and when he returned, he was there until 8 or 9 PM. He did his homework when not serving customers or doing other chores. His passion was reading. Fortunately, he had back issues of the New York Times, including the Sunday edition that had scores of book reviews. It was this sort of reading that gave Frankie a deep understanding of culture, current events, philosophy, fiction and history that would serve him well in life.

The boy also delivered merchandise to clients in the neighborhood. The boxes of groceries were heavy for a 10-year-old. They became especially challenging when he had to haul them five or six blocks on his shoulder. He had no delivery bike or cart. Invariably, his customers lived in apartments on the fifth floor or higher in buildings without elevators.

When he finally reached their door and gave them their goods he hoped for a tip. If it was the lady of the house who greeted him, he received 5 or 10 cents. If the husband was home Frankie could get as much as 25 cents. In the mid-1950s 10 cents or 25 cents were small amounts even for that time.

Part of the neighborhood clientele were restaurants. They usually bought boxes of fresh vegetables and bags of onions and potatoes. One restaurant, in particular, purchased at least three orders of potatoes a week. Sacks weighed on average, 25 kilos. The restaurant was four blocks from the store. Each Monday, Thursday and Saturday afternoons, Frankie would carry a bag of potatoes to the back door of the establishment. The owner would pay \$1.25 for the potatoes. The restaurateur never said thank you and never gave him a tip. This went on for three agonizing months. Finally, Frankie had enough.

On a cold December afternoon, he hauled his delivery of potatoes to the restaurant. It was snowing hard and very cold. His feet were freezing and wet. His hands were frost bitten. His back ached from the heavy sack. Frankie knocked several times until the owner could hear him. He opened the door and went in. He dropped the bag on the storage room floor. Frankie then stuck out his hand and said, "The price of potatoes has gone up. They now cost \$1.75." The owner looked at him with fire in his eyes. His restaurant was thriving but he would rather dance with the devil than pay 50 cents more for a sack of potatoes that would easily net him a profit of \$10.00. He reluctantly shoveled out the fee, counting nickels, dimes and pennies. Frankie's pockets were literally filled with coins.

When he returned to the store, he confronted Lucia. "Mamma, I did something I probably should not have done but I had no choice. You know that cheapskate restaurant owner who has never given me a gratuity? Today, I decided that I would charge him for my service. I raised the price of the potatoes 50 cents so I could have a decent tip. I am sorry, Mamma," he said. Lucia looked at him and smiled. "You did fine, my son," she said. "Some people need to learn a lesson, one way or another," she explained in her fine Ponzese dialect.

There were three times a year when the family did their hardest work. At Christmas they sold trees. At Easter and Mother's Day, they offered flowering plants. More than half of their annual income was earned from these three holidays. Frankie loved to sell. He was good at it. He smiled and carried on all sorts of conversations with customers until he made the deal. He enjoyed being of service and giving satisfaction to people. He was so good that clients invariably

returned to be served by him. He had one unique quality that stood out above all else: he looked and sounded sincere. Frankie had a high sense of honesty that came with his Catholic upbringing and family values.



Rhododendron Courtesy, <http://flowerinfo.org/rhododendron-flowers>

One sunny Mother's Day, Frankie's personal integrity was challenged. A young lady came to the store. She was in her early twenties. She had on a white dress with mother of pearl buttons and a rainbow-colored scarf. Her hair was like strands of gold. Her face was white with touches of pink. Her light blue eyes were like jewels. She was gorgeous. Her perfume was

a magic potion that captivated Frankie with its sweet scent of orange blossoms.

She went up to the boy and asked, “Do you have any rhododendrons?” Frankie was at a loss. He knew they did not have any but did not want to lose the sale. “You like rhododendrons,” he asked? “Actually, I have never seen them but someone told me they are beautiful and would make a lovely gift for my mother,” she responded. “In that case, I am going to get you the nicest one we have,” said Frankie. He dashed into the back of the store where there were hundreds of potted plants.



Geranium, Courtesy Pinterest

He picked a stunning geranium. It was dark pink with velvety petals and large Irish green leaves. It was fresh and had flowering buds. It would continue to bloom for weeks. In minutes he managed to wrap it in bright red aluminum paper, knotted a white bow to it and brought it to his customer. “This is the best rhododendron we have and I personally wrapped it for you,” he said. “It’s beautiful. I love it and so will my mother. Thank you so much,” she exclaimed. Her eyes sparkled with a lovely smile. Frankie was enthralled by her charm. She gladly paid for the plant and went off to celebrate Mother’s Day. Her fragrance hung in the air as she turned a corner and disappeared.

Frankie reflected on what had happened. He had sold one thing for another but his customer was delighted. Did this justify being dishonest? He knew it did not. He realized, in his heart, it was not right but also knew he was prepared to do it again. He faced a personal dilemma that questioned his values in the sale of a potted plant. Frankie’s logic was simple. His family struggled to make a living and a lost opportunity never returned. He reasoned that as long as his customer was happy, all would be well. At the same time, he knew it was wrong and would always try to avoid making this kind of choice.

His years of experience in the store taught him about human nature; about right and wrong and about sacrifice and service to others. More importantly, he learned about his own shortcomings and his visions of the future and his ambitions.

One dream was so important to him that he saved all his pennies, nickels and dimes from tips to realize it. He wanted a pair of “sneakers.” The shoes were very popular in the mid-1950s and became the footwear of athletes. Frankie’s classmates all had sneakers. He could not ask his parents to buy him a pair because he realized how hard they worked just to make a living. Instead, he saved until he had enough money to see his wish come true.



Sneakers, Courtesy, BF Goodrich

He vividly recalled the day he bought his first pair. Frankie went to the shoe store around the corner. It had been there forever. The same family ran it for twenty years. They had all types of shoes but one pair stood out for the boy. For weeks Frankie would pass by the establishment and literally put his nose up against the glass showcase staring at a pair of black and white sneakers. Now he was ready to realize his fantasy.

He went into the store carrying a brown paper bag filled with coins. “How much are the sneakers in the window,” he asked? “7.99, plus tax,” said the shopkeeper. “I have exactly \$8.00,” explained Frankie. “Is that enough,” he asked. Frankie had counted his money five times. He knew precisely how much he had. “Well, with tax it comes out to \$8.03,” said the shopkeeper. The man looked at the boy and realized that he had saved hard for this pair of shoes. “I will give

you the sneakers for \$8.00,” said the shopkeeper. Frankie quickly started counting. It took him almost 15 minutes to count all his money. His bag was empty but he was excited. He put on the shoes and started to walk around the store. “They’re perfect. Thank you, Mister,” he exclaimed. “You’re welcome, Frankie,” he said as the boy rushed from the store. He carried his old leather work shoes in a box under his arm as he darted up the block.

Frankie felt he was flying and not just running. The pavement seemed to melt away. The sneakers were light and they appeared to put springs in his feet that made him leap as he dashed along the street toward the store. “Mamma, look” he exclaimed as he showed off his new pair of shoes. Lucia was happy for her son. He was a good boy. He worked hard, was a fine student and was kind, affectionate and respectful. He deserved a pair of sneakers.

What Frankie missed the most was the chance to play with other children. His father was afraid that



Playing stick ball in New York, 1956, Courtesy, New York Historical Society

he could get mixed up with some of the gangs in the neighborhood. As a result, he was forbidden to mingle with the other kids in his area. Lucia, instead, looked the other way. She knew the parents of most of the children and most of the boys came from respectable families. She loved her son and knew that he had to socialize in order to grow up and trusted his good judgement.

Around the corner from the store were a group of neighborhood boys who played stickball every day after school and on weekends. It was a simple but sophisticated game that required precision, speed,

practice, and determination. It was a poor boy’s sport, with a plain rubber ball and bats made from old broom sticks. It was, in many ways, the game of life in that all types of people played and one learned about them by how they performed under all sorts of conditions. Character was formed and defined on the asphalt of New York.

Playgrounds and school yards were often off limits for kids playing stick ball. Usually, the only place available was the street or an empty lot or wherever they could find space. In parts of New York, like the North Bronx, stick ball playing was prohibited because it was dangerous for pedestrians and motorists and the bats were considered lethal weapons. They were often confiscated or destroyed by the police. As a result, children always looked out for a patrol car or a uniformed officer as a potential enemy.

The basics to playing stickball were to have a solid wooden bat and a “Spalding” ball. No one had much money so the sticks usually came from old mops or brooms. They were thin and lightweight. The ball was not cheap, especially for kids with little money. In 1956, a new Spalding cost \$.99 and sometimes as much as \$1.50. It was expensive when a family like Frankie’s earned less than \$3,000 in a good year. The balls were precious and when they were lost it was a tragedy.

When school ended in late June, kids flocked into streets across the Big Apple to play stickball. They would start early in the morning and continue until sundown. The game was played



A Stick Bat and Spalding Ball, Courtesy, A.G. Spalding Company and Pinterest



One Strike Stickball, Courtesy, New York Historical Society

in several forms. One was with a pitcher and a catcher similar to baseball. He would throw the ball and the batter would have three strikes to hit it. Another form was the use of a wall in the place of a catcher.

Perhaps the hardest type of stickball was where the batter bounced the ball or threw it up in the air and swung. He would have only one strike and not three. This was the way they played in Frankie’s community.

It was a tough, unforgiving game with only one, rare opportunity to succeed.

The measure of a home run was usually the distance of three sewer covers in the City. It was about 300 feet. In Frankie’s locality, a home run was measured by getting it over the fence that bordered on the farthest street. It was almost 400 feet away. In Yankee Stadium the distance from home plate to the center field wall was 410 feet. Even for a strong hitter, a home run was a near impossible task in the vicious game of stickball on the streets of Frankie’s neighborhood.

Frankie had just completed the 7th grade. He was thirteen. It was late June. He was off from school until September. He asked Lucia to let him go around the corner from the



Yankee Stadium, Bronx, New York, Courtesy New York Daily News

store to see the boys playing stickball. She said yes, especially since Silverio was working on the waterfront.

Frankie was nervous. He did not know any of the children in the area. He went to a Catholic school and most went to public schools. The community was mixed with Italians, Irish, Jews, and a few Hispanics and Blacks. The place where the boys were playing was a large, irregular road. It was a triangular space that bordered on fenced in residential lots and large apartment buildings. Five boulevards fed into the thoroughfare. It was sharply inclined and hilly with dirt and gravel stones spread out across the area. Lots of cars, trucks, and an occasional bus traveled over the motorways. Whenever this happened, the boys had to stop the game, regroup, and begin again. It was not an easy place to play.

Frankie went over to where the boys were sitting, waiting their turn at bat. "Hi, my name is Frankie," he said to one of the boys. He had red hair and lots of freckles on his cheeks and forehead. His name was Red. Frankie was greeted with silence. The boy did not respond or look at Frankie. The other boys did the same. They acted like he was not there. Frankie stood on the sidelines watching the game. He heard all forms of foul language as boys invariably struck out or had their hit caught by the opposing team. They cheered wildly when they scored. If someone hit a home run, they were treated like a divinity. The boys all knew each other well. He heard nicknames like Skinny, Bone, Slushy, and Block.

"I want to play" said Frankie to one of the kids that seemed to be the team leader. His name was JoJo. He was tall, slim and sun tanned. "We don't need anyone. Anyway, how do we know you're any good" he responded sarcastically. "I don't know how to play but I can learn and I am strong and fast," said Frankie. "Get out of here," one of the boys yelled. "We don't need you and we don't want you," screamed another. "Scram" yelled one more. Frankie slowly walked away.

He was hurt and discouraged. He reflected on what had happened. He was the outsider. He wanted to be accepted and be part of the team but he had nothing to offer. If he was to succeed, he had to learn the game, follow the rules and be able to make a contribution to the team. He needed preparation. Frankie was determined to be a great stick ball player or die trying. He remembered the words of his parish priest, "You can't expect to join the church today and be elected bishop tomorrow."

Frankie watched and studied the sport of baseball which was the essence of stickball. He decided he would concentrate on the stars of the game of the past to understand how they succeeded. He had seen films of the great home run hitters. The one he idolized was Babe Ruth. He was known as "The Sultan of Swat," "The Great Bambino," and "The Babe." He was a forceful hitter and set legendary records that lasted for decades. Many considered The Babe the greatest player of all time.

Frankie read about the life of George Herman (Babe) Ruth. He was a poor boy who was raised in St. Mary's Orphanage in Baltimore, Maryland. It was run by Catholic brothers. One, in particular, Brother Mathias, became Babe's mentor and guide. He taught him how to play baseball. Ruth called him, "the greatest man I have ever known." The Babe became famous by determination, hard work and perspiration.



Babe Ruth, Courtesy, Sports Illustrated

Frankie was struck by The Babe's legendary words of wisdom that became his lifelong mottos:

***Never let the fear of striking out get in your way.
Every strike brings me closer to the next home run.
Yesterday's home runs don't win today's games.***

Babe Ruth not only hit more home runs than any player in history, he hit the ball the farthest. Often times, his home runs were like explosions of cannon balls that sailed over the wall of Yankee Stadium and landed on the tracks of the subway. He actually hit a ball over 600 feet and set a record for the longest home run in history. The Great Bambino also "called" his shot in a legendary game against Chicago in 1932.



The Babe Calls his Shot, Courtesy, Baseball Hall of Fame

With two strikes against him, he pointed with two fingers to the flag pole which was at the outermost section of the stadium. The Babe said that the next pitch would be hit there. The crowd and opposing players jeered and laughed. The pitcher was determined to use his fast ball to strike out the legendary Babe Ruth. He propelled the sphere with a fiery vengeance. It was low and outside, making it especially hard for Ruth to hit it.

Instead, the Sultan of Swat took a step forward and one sideways and swung his bat with tremendous power and precision. The swing of the bat cut the air with sound and fury. The Chicago crowd heard a loud crack as the Great Bambino blasted the orb into the heavens. For

a moment it seemed to disappear. Suddenly, they froze and watched as the ball sailed high over the pole flying the colors of the American flag.

The Babe pointed at it as if pushing it toward its destination. He smiled and humbly tipped his hat as he slowly turned the bases. He bowed before entering the dugout. The entire stadium of spectators rose with applause and pandemonium. The opposing team was stunned into silence by the magnificence of the Sultan of Swat. Babe Ruth demonstrated again that he was the greatest player of all time. It was one of the most electrifying performances in baseball history.

Frankie decided that he would learn from The Babe about how to hit a ball. He went to the library and watched movie reels of the Babe in action. He read and studied as much as he could about his technique and skill. Frankie looked carefully at the way Ruth hit a ball. It was almost like he was playing golf. He swung nearly from the ground to pick up the ball and fling it into



Courtesy of the family site of George Herman Ruth

the stratosphere. With tremendous power, he would literally knock the ball high into the sky in a gigantic arc that often made the small, white sphere seem invisible. Winds would carry it like a bird in flight to its destination which was usually over the fence.

While all baseball bats were the same size, he discovered that The Babe used a very heavy bat. The standard was 33 oz. but his bat was on average 54 oz. Ruth called it his "Monster Bat." Most players wanted lightweight clubs that they could swing easily without hurting their back or arms. The Babe, instead, relied on a special one that was 60% heavier than the standard bat. It was riskier but it also provided more energy for battering long balls. The Bambino struck out many more times than hitting but when he hit the ball it flew far and wide. For nearly two decades, Babe Ruth was considered among the greatest players in baseball.

Frankie would do all he could to emulate The Sultan of Swat. Instead of using the standard broom handle, he found an old pole which was twice the weight of the broomstick. He wrapped black tape for the grip called it his "Super Bat." He trained with it constantly. It was heavy but added another dimension to his strength which he put into every swing. It was hard but Frankie had muscles and was heavier than most boys his age. His style was similar to the Babe's. He swung low and carried the club close in and brought it around his torso so that the full force of his muscles was in every inch of the bat. On his own, Frankie practiced hitting, throwing and fielding. He spent hours drilling in a nearby school yard.

From July to August, Frankie was up at 5 AM each morning. By 5:30 AM he was on the back lot where the neighborhood team, the Barnes Avenue Eagles, played stickball. He was there even if it rained. There was no one to watch him or coach him and no traffic to impede his work out. He bought six used Spaldings for practice. He found them at the local Salvation Army. They were worn and bounced irregularly. They were all he could afford. He was afraid of losing the only new one he had since it cost him a week's worth of tips.

Frankie could see the sun rise in the East as it covered the roads with light. He stood at the top of the hill and looked at the entire setting from the plate to the home run fence that protected a garden. Frankie took the old balls and his "Super Bat" and slammed them with all the strength in his body. He missed the balls many times but when he hit one, the pink sphere flew high and fast and seemed to touch the clouds. He practiced for two hours a day and then went to work.

Unbeknownst to him, he was being watched. One of the buildings that bordered the place where the boys played stickball was the home of JoJo, the Eagles team Captain. JoJo rose early one morning and looked out the window as the sun went up. He saw someone in the street with a bat. It was Frankie. He watched as the boy hit and ran to recover his ball. He saw Frankie stand squarely at the plate and swing with power. Even though he struck out many times, he kept coming back. JoJo stared as he saw this strange young man bang one ball after another over the fence. On that memorable morning in August, Frankie smashed six drives into the garden with the precision of a sharp shooter with a deadly weapon. It was a sight JoJo would never forget.

By the end of August, Frankie was ready to visit the boys playing stickball near the store. This time he brought with him a large basket of cold ripe peaches and several bags of potato chips. The boys were famished and perspiring heavily from the game. He offered the fruit to one and all.

It was the most important event of the season. The neighborhood championship was on the line. It was the Barnes Avenue Eagles against the Bronxwood Avenue Panthers. It pitted two strong teams. Each had phenomenal players. Still, despite the importance of the contest, it was being played on a busy New York street in the North Bronx, where stick ball playing was prohibited.

During the top of the third inning, a centerfielder shouted, "Chickie, chickie," which was the warning signal that a police car was approaching. The boys immediately took their clubs and hid

them in various places. The Eagles dropped them down the corner sewer knowing that it was shallow enough to retrieve their precious sports tools as soon as the coast was clear.

The police car stopped and two patrolmen emerged from the vehicle. They examined the area and saw the boys milling around and talking. They knew they were playing stickball. Two sticks were discovered hidden under a car. The officers immediately broke them into four pieces and threw them into a garbage can. The policemen looked high and low for more broom sticks that they considered weapons of mass destruction. Frustrated, they left after 30 minutes of careful investigation. As soon as they were gone, the boys immediately resumed the game, but first they had to retrieve their bats. About a dozen ended up in the sewer. One boy, called "Skinny, or Bone," had a special role. He was the smallest and thinnest member of the Eagles.

Two of the strongest boys lifted the grate on the corner sewer where the bats were hidden. They were stuck in the muck of the cesspool. It smelled of rotten eggs and excrement. The boys grabbed "Skinny" by the ankles and held him tightly as he went into the sewer, head first, to recover the family jewels of his team. He put a band aide on his nostrils to avoid the stench. With care, he grabbed one stick after another and passed each one to his co-players. It was an arduous task. He depended on the two strong young men to prevent him from falling into the bacteria and virus infested mud. After nearly ten minutes, "Skinny," completed his mission. "Hurray," screamed the boys as they cleaned off their bats and restarted the game.

In the bottom of the ninth inning. The Eagles were losing by a run. Their strongest hitters, "Slushy" and "JoJo," had struck out. Elliot, Block, and Red each got a hit and were on first, second and third. The bases were loaded. Suddenly, the next player to get up to bat twisted his ankle while warming up. The match stopped. The umpire looked him over and said he could not continue in the game. He was taken out.

JoJo, was furious. "We're finished. Unless we get a hit to bring in some runs, we will lose the championship," he said in desperation. The Panthers had won every title for the past three years. They were considered invincible. JoJo looked about for a substitute. There were three choices. Sitting on the curb, ready to play, were Al, Jimmy, and Tommy.

Al was blond, tall, slim, and strong. He was a veteran player who had a mixed record of hitting and fielding. He was also arrogant and difficult to manage. Jimmy was short, dark haired, overweight and proved to be unreliable and rarely showed up at practice. Tommy, instead, was a serious player. He was of medium height with broad shoulders. Tommy lifted weights. He specialized in being a long ball hitter who struck out more than he succeeded. He had an angry personality and was a bully. He often fought with the other players. All season, he had been in a slump. None of these performers seemed right for the great challenge ahead. JoJo needed someone capable, courageous and a risk taker. Everything was on the line.

JoJo had the sharp instinct of a leader. He quickly detected strength and weakness. He was also a great, all-around player which was why he was named Captain. He looked across the curb and, unexpectedly, saw Frankie. He had never seen him play but saw him slam those balls across the field with an enthusiasm he had never seen before. He felt that this boy from the corner grocery store had something special about him. JoJo perceived determination and guts. He knew Frankie had been practicing hard. He saw in him bravery. He had to make a serious decision. The future of his team was on the line. So was his credibility as a leader.

"Hey, Peachboy, you want to play," he asked. Frankie's stood up. "JoJo, you can't put him up at bat," screamed a team mate. "We don't know if he can even hit a ball," injected another. "We'll lose the game," insisted another. Al, Jimmy, and Tommy protested and wanted to be selected. After all, they were regular players and felt entitled to join the contest. "Frankie is going up to bat now," said JoJo. His voice was filled with intensity.

JoJo took Frankie aside. He looked at him squarely in the eyes. “Kid, I’m betting on you, even though I have never seen you play. I know you’re strong and can bring us the championship. Are you willing to take this on?” he asked. Frankie realized that this was his chance. He could seize the moment and shoot for greatness or take the easy way out and refuse the mission. “I will do my best, JoJo. You can depend on me. I won’t let you down,” he responded with grit. “Go in there and show them what you can do,” said JoJo.

Frankie picked up his “Superbat” and walked up to the plate. He was booed by the opposing team and even some of his own companions. He looked across the field. He saw what was on the line. The bases were loaded. It was two outs and the bottom of the ninth inning. His team was losing three to two. It was Frankie’s first game in stickball. “Get a hit, Peachboy,” JoJo yelled. Frankie was perspiring heavily. He was nervous. His hands trembled. He felt a weakness in his knees and arms. He was frightened of failure. In practice he had hit the ball far and showed concentration and control. Now he faced the real test.



The Babe, Courtesy, www.thequotes.in.

Suddenly, he seemed to hear the voice of the Babe. He saw him in his mind’s eye, “*Never let the fear of striking out get in your way,*” he said. Unexpectedly, Frankie felt a new vitality. His doubts melted away. He took a deep breath and said, “Thanks Babe.”



Stickball in the Bronx, Courtesy, New York Historical Society

Everyone appeared to be watching as Frankie held the ball in his hand. He stood straight before the plate. It was a square box drawn in white chalk on the street. He positioned his feet and body firmly on the ground and looked far into the distance. The streets seemed to go on endlessly and the home run boundary appeared to be a small line on the horizon.

It seemed unreachable. For a moment he could hear no sounds and voices. Frankie blocked out everything.

He concentrated on the pink sphere in his hand. He threw it into air. He kept his eye on the ball. Without thinking further, he swung his bat and brought all the strength from his feet, legs, and arms into the wooden pole. As he twisted his body, he felt the small rubber globe meet the bat midway. It shot into the air like a bullet. It disappeared. He stood gazing at the sky.

The crowd and players fell into silence. They were speechless. Everyone looked as the ball climbed toward the sun and then descended in a long curve across the horizon. It seemed like a comet. It soared high over the roads and began to land as if it had wings. The pink orb sailed into the garden and disappeared into the leaves as it zoomed over the fence. Frankie had hit a stunning home run.

As he stepped on first base, he heard the crowd roar. As he approached second and third, he could hear clapping and yelling. Once he touched home plate his team mates flew at him like bees. They hugged him and raised him on their shoulders. "Hooray for Homerun Peachboy," they screamed. His team won the coveted prize that ten teams sought after in three months of punishing stickball games. For a few fleeting moments, the boy from Little Ponza in the South Bronx experienced the sense of glory and fame that heroes feel. He would never have that same feeling again.

Frankie went on to play stickball for several more years. He hit more home runs but nothing like his first one. He was considered a strong player who could be counted on when the team needed him most. He carried his values of determination, ambition, integrity, faith, and hard work into his profession and personal life. Those principles would bring him far.

Epilogue

The boy who hit his first home run in his first stickball game, Francesco Emilio Iodice, went on to work in the Executive Office of the President of the United States, as his god mother predicted, and became a diplomat, an educator, a writer and a devoted family man who was loyal to his country of birth, the United States, and the place where his parents were born, the island of Ponza in Italy.

You just can't beat the person who never gives up.
— Babe Ruth

About the Author

Emilio Iodice is a former American diplomat, business executive, university administrator, professor of leadership, and best-selling writer and public speaker. Iodice is author of two new books, *When Courage Was the Essence of Leadership, Lessons from History* and *Across Time and Space, Chronicles of Hope, Courage, Persistence and Leadership*. https://www.amazon.com/Emilio-Iodice/e/B00HR6PNFW%3Fref=dbs_a_mng_rwt_scns_share.

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