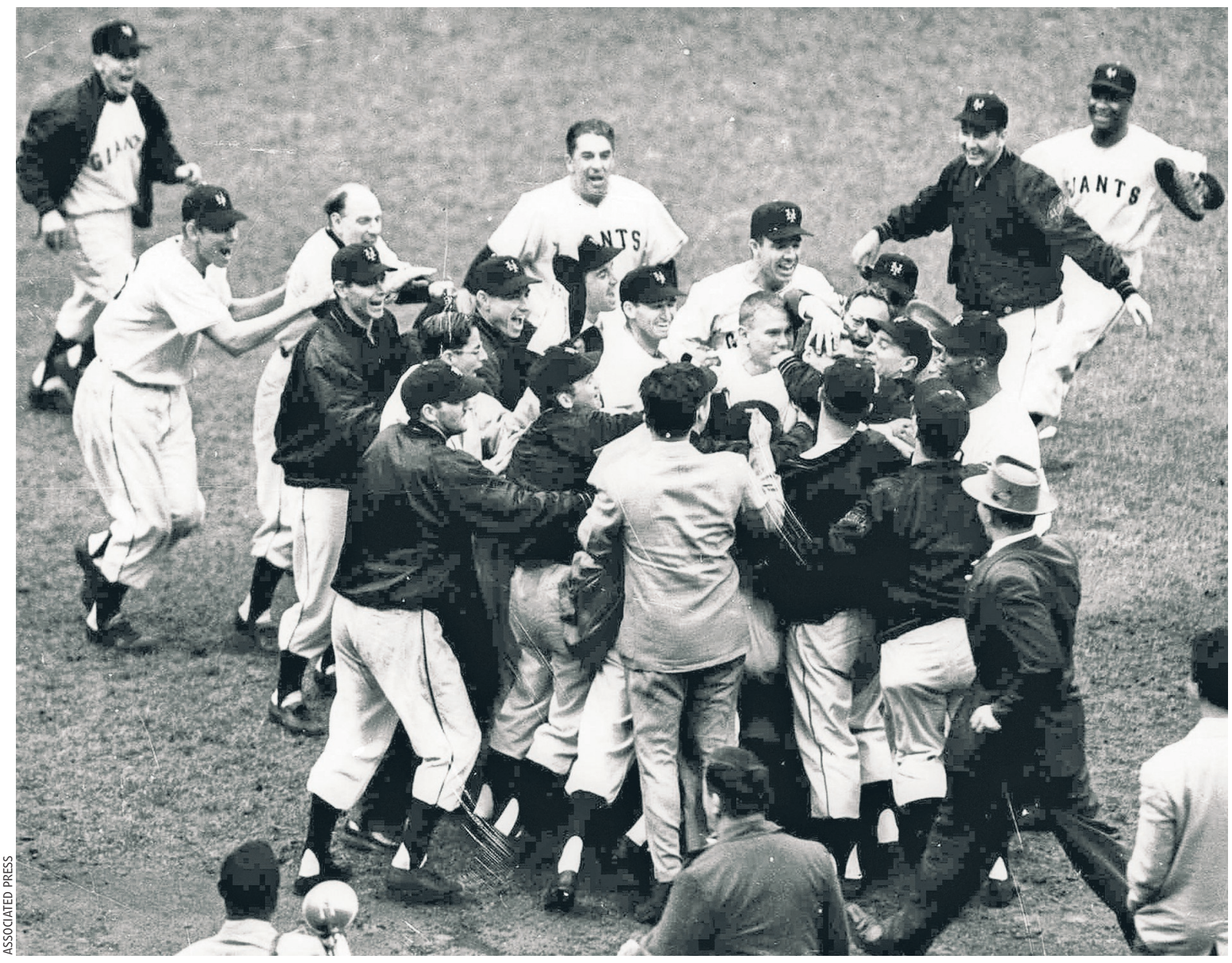

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New York Giants players and fans converge on Bobby Thomson (whose head is being rubbed) after his pennant-winning home run, New York, Oct. 3, 1951.

A Final Twist In an Epic Baseball Swindle

A 1951 New York Giants coach suggests that Bobby Thomson was tipped off to the pitch he hit for 'the shot heard 'round the world.'

By Joshua Prager

Last month, the Athletic, an online sports news outlet, reported that the Houston Astros cheated during their championship 2017 season. Sportswriters Ken Rosenthal and Evan Drellich found that Houston had connected a center-field camera (trained on opposing catchers) to a television monitor in the tunnel behind its dugout. There the Astros decoded the catchers' signals and, with a bang on a trash can, relayed the pitch to the batter. Major League Baseball is investigating, and the Astros have said they are cooperating. Baseball has indicated that it is at last going to come down hard on teams that use technology to steal signs.

Plenty of teams have stolen signs illegally. But it is when a champion cheats that a sport feels compelled to act. And though the pennant-winning 1951 New York Giants cheated too, using a telescope and a buzzer to alert their batters to incoming pitches, their scheme wasn't substantiated until a half-century after Bobby Thomson ended their (regular) season with his liner to left field—baseball's legendary "shot heard 'round the world."

If the Giants and Astros cheated in similar fashion, they denied doing so similarly too. When rumors of the Astros' cheating first began to swirl in 2017, their manager, A.J. Hinch, said that the mere allegation of illegal sign-stealing "made me laugh because it's ridiculous." Bobby Thomson, who died in 2010, had used the very same word to dismiss rumors that the Giants had cheated, telling the Associated Press in 1962 (after a utility infielder named Danny O'Connell tipped off the wire service) that they were "the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of."

> 'If I'm ever asked about it, I'm denying everything.'
>
> HERMAN FRANKS
> Former New York Giants coach

In 1962, baseball commissioner Ford Frick took the rumors seriously, but he could only speak of the punishment he would mete out if he had proof that the Giants had cheated. ("I would forfeit the game," he told the AP.) Today, however, commissioner Rob Manfred *does* have proof that the Astros cheated. He has the mandate to punish them too: Their scheme wasn't yet public when Mr. Manfred announced in 2017 that baseball regulations "prohibit the use of electronic equipment during games and state that no such equipment 'may be used for the purpose of stealing signs or conveying information designed to give a Club an advantage.'" Article II of the Major League Baseball Constitution further grants the commissioner the power to investigate any doings "not in the best interests" of baseball—and to act on his findings as he sees fit.

Mr. Manfred may push Mr. Hinch and his Astros to confess. Or they may choose to come clean on their own, just as Thomson and nearly all of his surviving teammates did with me in 2001, telling of the months of cheating that preceded their playoff win over the Brooklyn Dodgers nearly 50 years before—from the July day that an electrician installed a buzzer in the Giants' center-field clubhouse to the October day that a coach pressed it to alert Thomson (via a player in their right-field bullpen, where the buzzer sounded) that the opposing pitcher, Ralph Branca, was about to throw a second fastball.

Still, one Giant—a former coach named Herman Franks—chose to remain quiet. "If I'm ever asked about it, I'm denying everything," he told me in 2001, when I was working on a front-page article for The Journal about the team's 1951 scheme. He denied everything.

Despite his denials, I came to learn from the players he had coached that Franks had been the locus of their 1951 plot: peering through a telescope at the finger signals of opposing catchers and pressing that buzzer (once for a fastball, twice for something off-speed). I'd lamented his silence, wondering what it had been like for a man to spy and relay a sign only to watch the pitch it presaged soar off an Adirondack bat into history.

To carry a secret is to carry a burden. Thomson, for one, felt lighter after speaking to me. "I feel almost like I just got out of prison," he said the day after my article ran in 2001. So I was excited but only somewhat surprised when, eight years later in 2009, Franks invited me to stop by his Salt Lake City home on my way to a vacation in Montana. Seated in his den beside his wife and eldest son, the old catcher turned coach, 95 and on oxygen, was ready to confide what he had not before.

I'd gotten one detail wrong, Franks now told me. Yes, the Giants' spy had sat with his telescope at the face of the fourth window in the Polo Grounds center-field clubhouse. But by the start of the 1951 playoff between the Giants and Dodgers, the spy—to ensure that he'd remain unseen—had retreated from that window into the darkened bathroom that adjoined the rear of the room.

The telescope the spy had used, Franks told me, was so powerful that the fingers it spied filled his field of view. Then Franks added something striking. After spying every sign and relaying it with one or two presses of his buzzer, the spy (whom Franks referred to in the third person) had tilted his scope up to the eyes of the batter. The spy did so to watch the batter glance toward right field, where a player in the bullpen relayed the stolen sign. The eyes of the batter also filled the scope's field of view. And at 3:57 p.m. on October 3, 1951—with two on and one out in the bottom of the ninth inning, and the Giants down 4-2 in the third and final game of the playoff—Franks had just spied Brooklyn catcher Rube Walker call for an 0-1 fastball when he looked up at the eyes of Bobby Thomson.

Thomson had spoken freely to me of having benefited from the stolen signs. But asked whether he'd gotten the sign for the pitch he'd hit to win the pennant, he had waffled. "I'd have to say more no than yes," he said.

After my article ran, Thomson's equivocation had hardened into the denial that Giants' fans craved—never mind that it was hard to imagine a batter not availing himself of a sign that was there to be had with a simple glance. Still, no one but Thomson could say that he was wrong. Or so I had assumed. Now Franks told me that in the seconds before Thomson had swung, the spy—alone with his telescope in that dark bathroom—had looked up at Thomson's brown eyes, bright in the ballpark lights, and watched them shift toward right field.

Franks had little more to say. And 19 days later, he died.

Mr. Prager is a former Journal reporter and the author of "The Echoing Green: The Untold Story of Bobby Thomson, Ralph Branca and the Shot Heard Round the World" (Pantheon). He is at work on a book about the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision.

Turning Holiday Gift-Giving Into A Game of Chance

By Gabriella Gershenson

The scene was my sister's holiday table in New Jersey, earlier this week. We had just finished tidying up the uneaten food, dirty dishes and other detritus of the meal, leaving the tabletop empty. The eight of us who had gathered that evening, ranging in age from 10 to 78, were ready to play the seriously unserious game of *pakkeleg*.

I encountered this popular Danish Christmas game on a visit to Copenhagen several years ago, and I liked it so much I made it part of my own holiday tradition. *Pakkeleg* (pronounced PAH-keh-lie), which means "package game" in Danish, is universal enough that I played it at a Hanukkah dinner in Copenhagen one day and at a Christmas lunch the next. Americans may recognize it as a distant cousin of the gift exchange game White Elephant.

The rules can vary, but they are simple. Each guest brings a gift or two worth $5 or less. The gifts are wrapped—part of the fun is wrapping them deceptively, to hide what's really inside—and there's no indication of who brought which package. During the break between dinner and dessert, the presents are piled in the center of the table, a set of dice is produced, and chaos ensues.

Players take turns rolling the dice, and if you roll a six you take a gift from the pile. Once all the gifts have been taken from the center of the table, a timed, second round begins. Only the host knows how long the timer is set for, to create a sense of urgency. Now when you roll a six, you "steal" a gift from another player. When the timer runs out, you're stuck with what you have.

Though the stakes are low, *pakkeleg* can be ruthless, which is part of the fun. "It brings out the best and the worst in people," says Anna Wowk Vestergaard, curator at Den Gamle By, a Christmas museum in Aarhus, Denmark. "There is just something about human nature and how you react when you have five gifts and how you react when you have none."

If some Danish customs inspire *hygge*, that famous sense of coziness and contentment, *pakkeleg* does the opposite. It gets people excited, agitated. It stirs the pot. Though it might seem counterintuitive, the reason I fell for the game is because it shifts the emphasis of the holidays from getting stuff to having fun. The gifts are just baubles, yet they inspire a silly amount of competition. With its eruptions of laughter, fake panic and harmless rivalries, *pakkeleg* makes being together the point.

***Pakkeleg* allows players to compete for inexpensive gifts by rolling dice.**

"It's not about the parcels, it's about the game and stealing from each other," says cookbook author Tina Scheftelowitz, the host of my first *pakkeleg*. "It's when the grown-ups can steal from small children. Normally, that's not allowed."

Pakkeleg is fertile ground for pranks and spoofs. Seasoned players know that the biggest, most beautifully wrapped gift is usually a decoy. "You should never take that in a game of *pakkeleg*," says Ms. Vestergaard. "That's when you end up with the salt you put on the pavement during wintertime." When I played at the home of the cookbook author Nadine Levy Redzepi and her husband, chef René Redzepi, a replica of Borat's banana-hammock mankini was the hit of the party.

Pakkeleg can also be practical. "It's a game that prevents people from buying 500 gifts for everyone," says Trine Hahnemann, author of "Scandinavian Christmas." Reducing waste is a priority these days, and while the Danish tchotchke shop Flying Tiger is a *pakkeleg* go-to, handmade presents, recycled gifts and functional items are also prominent. "I would rather do a really nice homemade chutney than spend my money on all kinds of plastic," says Ms. Hahnemann.

While *pakkeleg* doesn't replace putting presents under the tree for your children, it does take the pressure off adult gift-giving. "The financial strain on a family to buy presents for everyone is quite significant," says *pakkeleg* enthusiast Nina Jensen. "It's a strain most of us wouldn't miss if we didn't have it."

But the most rewarding part of *pakkeleg* is the way it brings people together in a joyful burst of activity. Why not try it next year? You may find that your holiday gets a little less serious and a lot more fun.

Ms. Gershenson is a journalist in New York City.

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