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# George Powles: the coach who saw through time

October 26, 2010

8:52 PM MST



George Powles (left), gives Frank Robinson (center) and Brady Hord a few last-minute instructions as they prepare for a game in 1953.

*Oakland Tribune Collection, the Oakland Museum of California.  
Gift of ANG Newspapers*

[Baseball](#), a spiritual experience? Oh, let me count the ways. It certainly is when there's a good human interest story to be told.

Darrell Berger has a good story to tell: "A story of

time, place, and people,” he says. Berger’s story is about **George Powles**, who coached baseball, basketball, and football at McClymonds High School in Oakland, Calif., from 1947 to 1975. It’s about a guy who had the smarts to become a major-league manager but who instead chose to mentor kids in working-class Oakland and motivate them to succeed.

“In 1947, George Powles started ushering athletes through the door that Jackie Robinson opened,” says Berger. Which athletes? Well... Frank Robinson... Curt Flood... Vada Pinson... Joe Morgan... Bill Russell (the basketball legend, not the Dodgers shortstop)... all of them came under Powles’ tutelage. Many of them have since talked about the influence Powles had on their lives.

“I learned more about baseball from George than I did from anybody in the big leagues,” Hall of Famer Robinson **told an interviewer** for the alumni magazine of San Francisco State University, Powles’ alma mater.

### **Ahead of his time**

Berger, who is the minister of the **First Unitarian Universalist Church of Essex County**, in Orange, is writing his third book about baseball. His latest, *The Coach Who Saw Through Time*, focuses on Powles and what Berger calls the coach’s “ministry” to youth in the community.

“This is a guy who was years ahead in the way he coached and in the way he treated his players,” says Berger.

“For every Frank Robinson and Henry Aaron who

survived, there are a lot of black players who, if they had the breaks the white players did, would have been in the majors, too, but they just couldn't overcome it. He saw these guys like Russell and Robinson, and he knew what they would go through.”

In 1959, Powles coached his Connie Mack league team into national championship. When the team arrived in Missouri to play, Powles was told that his black players were not allowed to stay in the same hotel with his white players. “So Powles replied, ‘Well, I guess I’m going home,’ and the fact that George Powles was going to go home prompted city leaders to find a hotel that would accommodate both,” says Berger. “This was ’59. For years after that, even some major league teams had not integrated their spring training facilities.”

Berger hasn't yet landed the interview he craves with Robinson, but he has spoken with several others who played for Powles. “I talked to one guy who was a star pitcher for him and asked him, ‘What’s the most important thing you learned from George Powles?’ and he said ‘A firm handshake.’ These were poor kids, black and white, who lacked a lot of social graces. Talking to guys who are now 65, 70 years old, they said ‘George Powles taught me a firm handshake, and when I went to interview to be a manager at Sears, that made a difference.’

“Heroism doesn't take heroic acts,” Berger continues. “The small stuff makes such a difference.”

## Giving back

Berger would like readers to take two ideas away from his book: One, it's possible to change people's lives. Two, remember the importance of giving back. Powles not only gave all he had to give to the kids in Oakland, he inspired them to do the same for their generation.

“The Russells and Robinsons of that generation were taught to go forward, then give back,” says Berger. “I think that's the real key to what Powles was teaching and what Russell and Robinson interiorized. They knew it wasn't enough to excel. They also had to break barriers. Too often, that is lost among professional athletes now.”

The theme of giving back is something Berger will use as a bridge from Powles' era to today. “I would like to devote the last chapters to some coaches who are doing it today, like **Bob Hurley**,” the longtime basketball coach at St. Anthony High School in Jersey City, “and maybe some others you've never heard of.”

What motivated Powles to carry out his “ministry”? Berger thinks it goes back to Powles' experiences in World War II: “He was part of a mortar queue, dropping shells on German soldiers and whomever else got in the way. He saw a lot of kids who were broken by war. He had kids about that age.” Putting down the helmet and taking up the bat and ball, says Berger, was Powles' “subconscious atonement for what he had seen and done during the war.”

Or, on second thought, maybe it's not that heavy.

“I did a sermon recently where I quoted from St. Jerome,” says Berger, “and the quote really hit me: ‘What God asks of you is not found at a great distance.’ I think George Powles is a terrific example of that.”

*Michael Dalzell is a lifelong Chicago Cubs fan. Two of his idols, Hall of Famers Ernie Banks and Billy Williams, were often forced to stay in separate hotels from the rest of the Cubs team until the early 1960s.*

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Newark Unitarian Universalism Examiner

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