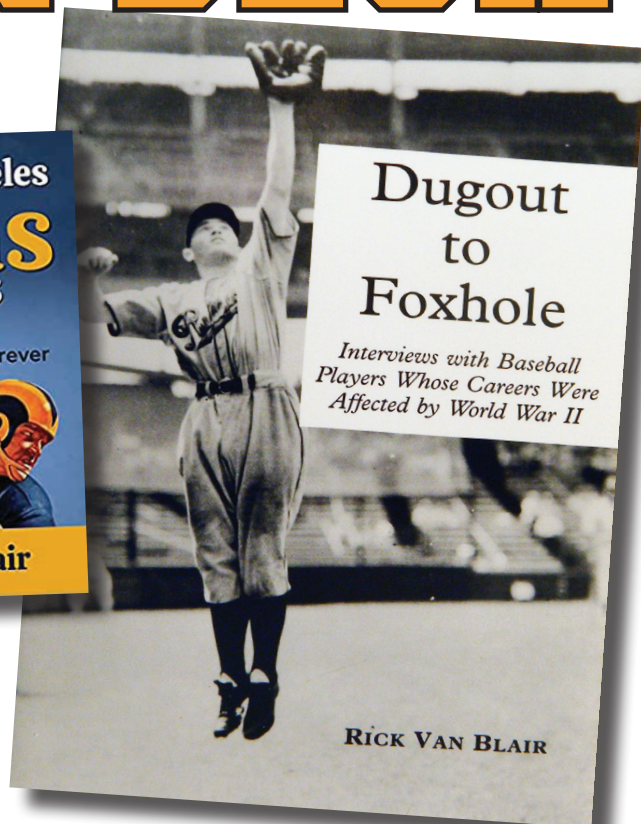
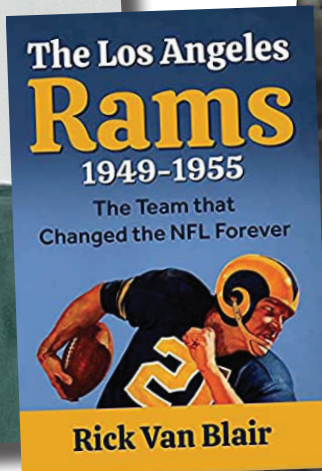


ON DECK



Rick Van Blair



HOW ONE LETTER CARRIER WENT FROM SPORTS FAN TO SPORTS AUTHOR

Rick Van Blair could talk all day about baseball.

"I love baseball," he says. "I love the history of it." Van Blair doesn't just talk about baseball; he writes about it, too. The retired letter carrier has helped baseball players tell their stories by interviewing dozens of them, publishing their recollections in sports magazines and books. He has expanded his area of expertise by delving into the history of football as well.

Van Blair joined the Postal Service after serving in the Air Force from 1966 to 1968, including service in Vietnam. He started with USPS as a special delivery messenger and then switched to the letter carrier craft in 1971. For most of his 30-year letter carrier career, he delivered mail in San Luis Obispo, CA, as a member of Central California Coast Branch 52, until his retirement in 2001.

An avid reader of interviews with baseball players published in fan

magazines such as *Sports Collectors Digest*, Van Blair found his job and his love for sports history align in the mid-1980s when he was working as a substitute carrier delivering to a neighborhood in Los Osos, CA. A customer there mentioned offhandedly that a neighbor had a special role in baseball history.

"There's an old-timer who was the first guy to pitch to Jackie Robinson" when Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball, Van Blair said the customer told him. A few days later, Van Blair delivered a package to the former player, Warren Sandel, and asked him for an interview so he could submit it to a magazine. Sandel agreed, and they met later after Van Blair had clocked out.

"We talked for over two hours," Van Blair recalled, "and it was so interesting to hear his career in the minor leagues."

Sandel played professional baseball

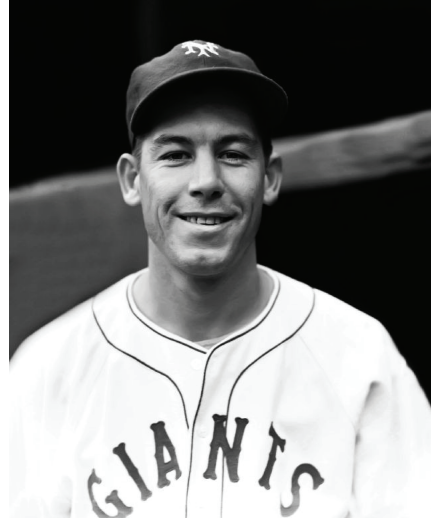
in the minor leagues from 1938 to 1952. When the Brooklyn Dodgers courted Robinson to integrate baseball in 1946, Robinson was first sent to a Dodgers minor league farm team, the Montreal Royals. Pitching against the Royals for the Jersey City Giants on April 18, 1946, Sandel became the first pitcher to give up a hit to Robinson.

In that first game, some of Sandel's teammates wanted him to deliberately hit Robinson with a pitch.

"Warren would not do it," Van Blair said Warren told him. Sandel had grown up near Robinson and had played baseball with him. "He said, 'I played against Jackie in sandlot games—I respect him and I like him. I'm not going to throw at him.'"

With Sandel at the mound, Robinson's first at bat resulted in a ground ball straight to the Giants' shortstop for an easy out. But with two runners on base in the third inning, Robinson stepped to the plate and recorded his

Harry
"Gunboat"
Gumbert



first base hit—a three-run home run. A photo of Robinson's white teammate, who was the next hitter, shaking Robinson's hand as he crossed home plate, was widely published in newspapers.

In his Sandel interview, Van Blair quickly showed his talent for drawing meaningful memories from his subjects. Sandel recalled his brief trip to the majors, an invitation to the New York Giants training camp in 1946, where he butted heads with Giants manager Mel Ott: "I always wanted to have fun and was pretty much a comedian when I pitched. I did a lot of crazy things. One time I went up to bat without a bat ... I always wanted to have fun playing baseball [and] that got me into trouble with Mel Ott ... I knew I wasn't going to last long with him. [Once] Ott came out to the mound and said, 'When are you going to get serious? When I sent you out here I wanted you to work.' I told him the only way I would work [was with] a rake and a shovel [because] I came out here to play ... I was in the minor leagues soon after that."

Van Blair sent the interview off to *Sports Collectors Digest*, which published two or three interviews each issue, and it accepted his article.

Van Blair was hooked. He estimates that he has published interviews with 67 players in that magazine and in *Baseball Digest*.

He found his subjects using a reference book that listed players' home addresses and wrote letters to them asking for interviews. He chose everyday players he knew would have something new to say.

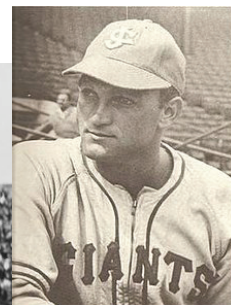
"The guys I wanted to talk to were not the stars," he said. "I couldn't talk to Ted Williams. I couldn't talk to Willie Mays. I couldn't talk to Warren Spahn. They'd been interviewed to death. I wanted to talk to a solid major league player who played 10 or 15 years in the big leagues. And you know what? I found out that they couldn't wait to talk to me, because nobody else had called them or wanted to talk to them about their experiences."

His interviews succeeded because of his natural approach. "I asked questions that a normal fan would ask," he said, "because I was a normal fan."

The players Van Blair interviewed often shared perspectives on other players, including their lives off the field. He recalls talking to pitcher Harry "Gunboat" Gumbert about a

teammate on the St. Louis Cardinals, fellow pitcher and future Hall-of-Famer Dizzy Dean, the last National League pitcher to win 30 or more games in a season. Gumbert relayed how Dean, with only a second-grade education, had come to the Cardinals in 1930 from a very poor background. "Dizzy Dean had nothing," Van Blair recalled from the Gumbert interview. The Cardinals' manager directed Gumbert to "take Dizzy downtown, and you get him a pair of underwear, some good shoes, a toothbrush and some toothpaste, for crying out loud."

In the interviews, many players also offered their views on how the game had changed since they were in their prime. Gumbert told Van Blair: "After I signed a pro contract, I spent four years in the minors learning my craft. Today a guy gets to the major leagues and he doesn't even know the basics of the game. There are too many teams and not enough talent. It is not as tough a game as it was when I played. We ran hard, slid hard, and



Warren Sandel (above) was the first pitcher to give up a hit to Jackie Robinson (!) after Robinson broke the baseball color barrier.



Los Angeles Rams owner Dan Reeves (right) helped popularize the sport of football.



threw at batters and nothing was said by the players or the umpires. That's the way it was. Not anymore."

In 1994, Van Blair compiled several of his interviews into a book with a common thread in the stories of many players he interviewed—how their careers were affected by war. "Dugout to Foxhole: Interviews with Baseball Players whose Careers were Affected by World War II" brings to life the stories of players during the war years, with a chapter for each interview. Some players he talked to were called to service in the armed forces; others found they had a shot at the major leagues to fill the vacancies left.

Among the players who tell their stories in the book are St. Louis Cardinals center fielder Terry Moore, Cincinnati Reds pitcher Joe Nuxhall, and Johnny Pesky, shortstop and third baseman for the Boston Red Sox.

As team captain and a standout defensive player, Moore "made sure his teammates [who included Stan Musial] were 100 percent at the top of their game," Van Blair said. "If they were not, he let them know right away. If they didn't give 100 percent every play of every game, Terry would let them know at once."

Joe Nuxhall began his career as the youngest major league player ever—only 15 when he played his first game. In that game, played on June 10, 1944, Nuxhall pitched against the St. Louis Cardinals. "He got the first two batters out and then he realized that he was pitching in the big leagues and couldn't get any one out, so the manager took him out," Van Blair said. "But years later, after being in the minors, he came back and had a good big league career...He told me [how], when Jackie Robinson got on first

base, he made a fool out of pitchers by taking big leads and diving back in time when he threw to first. Joe took it very personal."

Van Blair described Pesky, who was a terrific player, as a likeable person. "Pesky was such a sweetheart of a man and was Ted Williams' best friend," he said. "John coached Red Sox minor league players for years and we talked about his career and what it was like to be a Red Sox. John met Ted Williams when Ted played for the San Diego Padres in the Pacific Coast League and John was the clubhouse boy who cleaned Ted's and other players' uniforms and baseball cleats in Portland, WA, where Pesky lived at that time." Pesky recalled batting against pitcher Satchel Paige, one of the earliest Negro League players to follow Robinson to the Major Leagues. Pesky told Van Blair that Paige "was the hardest pitcher to hit. John said, 'Paige was fast as lightning.'"

Football is another of Van Blair's passions, especially the original Los Angeles Rams of the National Football League (NFL). "In 1956, I went with my Cub Scout pack to a Rams-Colts game at the L.A. Coliseum," he said. "I did not know much about the game; all I knew was that one team tried to get the ball into the end zone to score points and the other team tried to stop them. The Rams uniform really impressed me a lot—gold-yellow jerseys with that dark blue helmet with the huge dark yellow rams horns. After the game we went down to the locker room to get autographs. So, I was hooked and started reading everything I could get hold of about the history of football and the NFL."

Last year, Van Blair turned his attention as an author to football. His second book, "The Team that Changed the NFL Forever: The 1949-1955 Los Angeles Rams," dives deep into how Rams owner Dan Reeves transformed the NFL after moving his team from Cleveland to Los Angeles in 1946. In Los Angeles, Reeves pioneered many of the practices that helped the NFL catch up with baseball's popularity, including an expanded scouting system, exciting and innovative offensive play, and money-making television contracts and merchandising. With Reeves at the helm, the Rams won four NFL championships and set the stage for the NFL to topple baseball as America's favorite sport.

Van Blair has a few stories of his own to share about his postal career and how NALC kept it from ending prematurely. Shortly after he became a full-time carrier and while he was still learning the ropes, Van Blair transferred from California to Beaverton, OR. Unhappy with his performance, a supervisor told him, "We're sorry we OK'd your transfer. You're the worst carrier we've ever had, and we're going to do everything we can to fire you." His branch in Oregon, Portland Branch 82, stuck up for him and encouraged him as he learned the job. Three years later, when he missed the sunny California weather and applied to transfer back, another supervisor said, "You can't do that, you're the best carrier ever in the office." **PR**