



**USA  
TODAY  
SPORTS  
WEEKLY**

AN EDITION OF USA TODAY

ON SALE NOVEMBER 4 - 10, 2020

# BLUE HEAVEN

## LA's latest heroes conquer World Series

### OTHER SIDE

Honoring  
Jackie Robinson's  
'Shotgun' shake

AT LAST: THE DODGERS  
REACH THE TOP FOR THE  
FIRST TIME SINCE 1988



[www.usatoday.com](http://www.usatoday.com)

\$3.00



45

FOR HOME DELIVERY: 1-800-872-0001, [mysportsweekly.com/pccxj](http://mysportsweekly.com/pccxj)

# Honoring Jackie's 'Shotgun' shake

**Joe Mock**

Special to USA TODAY

George Shuba was a gifted athlete while growing up in Youngstown, Ohio, in the 1930s and '40s. While on the athletic teams at Chaney High School, he competed with and against Black players.

His batting prowess not only brought him a contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers, it earned him the nickname "Shotgun."

In 1946, Shotgun Shuba had advanced to the Dodgers' top minor league affiliate, the Montreal Royals, who won the International League by 18½ games that season. Opening day was in New Jersey against the Jersey City Giants.

It was unusual for such a game to attract so much attention that the stands at Roosevelt Stadium were overflowing and correspondents from The New York Times and Associated Press were present. Everyone was there to witness history.

In the top of the third inning, the Royals had two runners on base when a rookie player smashed a home run. The two baserunners didn't wait at home plate to congratulate the hitter. Shuba, the on-deck batter, sprang to his feet to shake the beaming hitter's hand.

Jackie Robinson had crossed both home plate and the color barrier with his first hit in "white" baseball, and Shuba was the only one on the field to congratulate him for it.

Shuba went on to have a solid career with the Brooklyn Dodgers as an outfielder and reliable pinch-hitter, known for his great eye at the plate. When his playing days were over, he returned to Youngstown to raise a family.

His son Mike, now 58 and still living in Youngstown, said it was his father's goal "for us to have a normal upbringing. There was no indication that he was a major league baseball player. There were no shiny bats. No plaques. He took all of his baseball memorabilia and put it into a Maytag box in the



**Sculptor Marc Mellon is creating a statue of the moment in 1946 when George Shuba shook the hand of Jackie Robinson just after Robinson's first hit in white baseball. The bronze statue is scheduled to be dedicated on the 75th anniversary of the handshake.** BABETTE BLOCH

basement. Except for one picture."

That framed picture hung on the living room wall until Shotgun Shuba died in 2014. That photo showed him shaking Robinson's hand on April 18, 1946.

Mike said his father obtained the one-and-only print of the now-famous photo a day or so after the game in Jersey City. He encountered the photographer — whose name is now lost to history — and paid him 25 cents. "Why a quarter? It was the cost of two Schlitz beers," Mike chuckles.

Several years ago, Mike Shuba's phone rang. On the other end was Eric Planey, a Youngstown native who was now a banker in New York City. Planey said he wanted to honor that famous handshake with a statue, but he needed Mike's blessings.

"I was so surprised that I said, 'Can you please repeat yourself?'" Mike recalls. "I had no idea that was coming. But I

wanted to do the very best I could for my dad and for Jackie."

Planey says a series of unlikely events had led him to the decision to push for the statue. While visiting Washington, D.C., he'd encountered a coach of his niece's baseball team who happened to hail from Youngstown. "He told me that he'd grown up near Shotgun Shuba, and I thought, 'Who is that?'"

So Planey started reading everything he could find on Shuba and discovered that it was Shotgun himself who shook Robinson's hand the day of his debut in white baseball. "This was an incredible moment in sports history, in American history," he says. "I couldn't believe there wasn't a plaque or anything honoring him in downtown Youngstown."

He enlisted the help of his friend Julius Oliver, a councilman in Youngstown. They then asked Lou Zona, executive director of the Butler Institute of American Art, for guidance on

how to create a statue of two men shaking hands.

"It's not easy," Zona told Planey.

Zona suggested that only a world-class sculptor like Marc Mellon could accomplish the task, so Planey and his wife ventured to Connecticut to meet Mellon and visit his studio. That's where he spotted an example of Mellon's work: a bust of Pope John Paul II, who was revered in Planey's household as he was growing up. "I really thought I was looking in the face of Pope John Paul II because of the care and time he put into creating the molds. ... I thought to myself, 'Marc is absolutely our man.'"

Having a well-known sculptor was crucial to aid in the necessary fundraising, plus it was critical due to the complexity of the project. Planey adds that due to the loss of its steel industry, "Youngstown went from an incredible sense of greatness to losing its sense of pride in itself.

So we wanted to go with a world-class sculptor to reinvigorate Youngstown's sense of dignity that is coinciding with its comeback."

A very unlikely encounter at a Manhattan restaurant between Planey and an executive at Major League Baseball (who happened to be a Youngstown native) paved the way in obtaining MLB approval's and the Robinson family's permission to use Jackie's likeness.

A committee of business and social leaders in Youngstown was formed to oversee the logistics and start a fundraising campaign. Despite pauses in the efforts due to the pandemic, the organizers are optimistic that the goal of \$400,000 will be reached.

Co-chairing the committee are Greg Gulas, former sports information director at Youngstown State University and editor of Shuba's memoir; former major leaguer Herb Washington, who owns a chain of McDonald's restaurants; and recently retired Ernie Brown, for 43 years an editor at The Vindicator, the daily newspaper for the area.

"Jackie Robinson was always a hero to me for what he had to go through to make (Dodgers co-owner) Branch Rickey's experiment succeed. If it hadn't, it would've set us back a great deal," says Brown, 68, an African American who grew up in Youngstown.

He hopes that the completed statue will allow young people "to learn about the significance of this event, and to understand that at that time, the Black race was considered inferior and should be kept separate."

The statue is scheduled to be dedicated in Youngstown on April 18, 2021 — exactly 75 years to the day of the handshake.

"This moment was the dawn of the modern civil rights movement," Mellon says. "There's a re-think going on that makes this statue project so very, very timely right now."

*Mock covers sports facilities for USA TODAY publications.*