

# *SportsLetter Interviews*

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## **Michael Shapiro**

On October 8, 1957, Brooklyn Dodgers publicist Arthur “Red” Patterson shocked the baseball world when he announced that the team was moving to Los Angeles. Since then, Brooklynites of a certain age have clung to their hatred of team owner Walter O’Malley even as they inoculated their children with the same venom. Some would go so far as to say that the Dodgers’ abrupt departure destroyed Brooklyn’s soul and caused the borough’s steep decline in the 1960s and 1970s.



Their rancor helps to explain an old joke: “If you were in a room with Hitler, Stalin and O’Malley, and had a gun with two bullets, what would you do?” The answer: “Shoot both at O’Malley.”

Columbia University journalism professor Michael Shapiro thinks the O’Malley bashers are wrong, and in his new book, *The Last Good Season: Brooklyn, the Dodgers, and Their Final Pennant Race Together* (Doubleday), he has amassed enough evidence to exonerate O’Malley. According to Shapiro, the real villain is New York City power-broker Robert Moses, who rebuffed O’Malley’s efforts to build a new stadium in Brooklyn.

“It’s time to forgive O’Malley,” says Shapiro. “I’m not saying we have to like him, but he’s the wrong man.”

Shapiro, 50, is a professor at the Columbia University School of Journalism. His work has appeared in *Sports Illustrated*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. *SportsLetter* spoke with him from his home in New York City.

**SportsLetter:** You were born and raised in Brooklyn: What was it like

being there after the Dodgers had gone?

**Michael Shapiro:** Growing up, I felt like I had missed out on something big — and the Dodgers' leaving was an embodiment of that . . . In many ways, going back to do this book allowed me to resolve something for myself. I was trying to recreate this world that sounded too wonderful to be true — with tons of kids and everyone getting along, no matter if you were Jewish, Italian or Puerto Rican. It sounds too rosy by half, but in many ways it was true. There was this sense of neighborhood life, and I had missed it.

**SL:** You tackle a long-ingrained myth — that Walter O'Malley stripped Brooklyn of the Dodgers — and turned that on its ear. How serious was O'Malley about staying in Brooklyn?

**MS:** It was no secret that O'Malley wanted a new stadium. Ebbets Field was crumbling, and attendance was dipping. What wasn't clear was how much he wanted to stay because he played his cards so close to the vest. He was desperate to stay in Brooklyn, and he tried to convince [Robert] Moses to help him.

**SL:** What did O'Malley do to try and keep the Dodgers in Brooklyn?

**MS:** In 1955, O'Malley approached [architect] Buckminster Fuller and his Princeton students about designing a domed stadium.

**SL:** A domed stadium? Back then?

**MS:** I think O'Malley saw it as being new and modern and bold. Whether it would have been feasible or affordable is another question.

**SL:** What was O'Malley's best proposal, location-wise?

**MS:** He scouted several potential sites in Brooklyn. I think his best bet was at the corner of Flatbush and Atlantic Avenues. That would have been an amazing location: fans could have walked there or taken the subway. Those fans who had moved from Brooklyn could have driven there or taken the Long Island Railroad . . . If O'Malley had built the stadium

there, they would have built a monument for him. It would have changed Brooklyn dramatically.

**SL:** You detail the Moses-O'Malley relationship through their correspondence. Why didn't Moses help O'Malley?

**MS:** I got the impression — and this is purely speculative — that Moses couldn't stand Walter O'Malley. O'Malley was like gum on the bottom of Moses' shoe . . . Moses did offer O'Malley other sites for the stadium, including one in Bedford-Stuyvesant. At the last minute, he offered to build O'Malley a stadium in Queens [now known as Shea Stadium]. But I think this was a way to cover his tracks.

**SL:** Then why does O'Malley get all the blame for the Dodgers' leaving?

**MS:** It's easy: He took the team away. He profited while Brooklyn suffered . . . It's funny because, until he left town, he was pretty popular. He was a marvelous talker, and he enjoyed great press — he let the sportswriters beat him at cards. What he didn't recognize was the incalculable thing about baseball. Just because people stopped going to the ballpark didn't mean they stopped caring about the team.

**SL:** But, Horace Stoneham never was vilified like O'Malley when Stoneham took the Giants to San Francisco.

**MS:** Stoneham was seen as hapless, and the Giants never had the following the Dodgers did in New York. In the late 1950s, the Giants didn't resonate except for Willie Mays. It was also [about] O'Malley's personality. O'Malley affected what sportswriter Frank Graham described as the "Irish pol manqué."

**SL:** In writing about the Dodgers in the mid-1950s, you encroached on Roger Kahn's territory [Boys of Summer]. How did that book affect your work?

**MS:** Boys of Summer is a marvelous book. Kahn had covered the team in 1953, which many players told me was their best team even though they didn't win the Series. So he knew the players when they were young

men in their prime, and he's going back to write about his contemporaries. I wrote a completely different book. There are many similar characters, but by 1956 the team is aging and Brooklyn is changing. Because I didn't live through it, I had to go back and recreate this through interviews and newspaper accounts.

**SL:** The Dodgers moved west in 1958. Why did you choose to write about the 1956 season?

**MS:** I felt I needed a season because baseball lends itself to narrative time. So much happens and there's a relentless beat — there's so much you can do with it. 1955 had been done to death because that was the year the Dodgers won their only World Series. 1957 was depressing because they played the whole season under a dark cloud. 1956 was a great season, with an exciting pennant race. But the only thing anyone remembers about it is Don Larsen's perfect game [in the 1956 World Series]. As I did research I began to get the impression that, in 1956, the world is changing and only two people see it: Walter O'Malley and Robert Moses.

**SL:** In the book, you relate a conversation that O'Malley had with [L.A. city councilwoman] Rosalind Wyman, with O'Malley telling her, "I am a New Yorker. If I can get the best deal in New York I will stay in New York." Did New York blow this deal?

**MS:** There's no doubt in my mind that if New York had come through and allowed him to build where he wanted, on Flatbush Avenue, he would have stayed. He wanted to stay until the end. But New York never came through.

**SL:** Was Los Angeles' deal — the 300 acres in Chavez Ravine and promises to build access roads — just too good to pass up?

**MS:** In retrospect, O'Malley looks like a genius. Certainly, he was brilliant in playing New York and Los Angeles off each other. But he had no assurances that this would work out in L.A. The West Coast was unknown territory.