S P O R T S

BASEBALL RECONVERTS

To understand why the current baseball season possibly will be the wildest on record, case of John Grodzicki, a big right,hander who pitched well enough in 1941 to be stamped a St. Louis Cardinals regular for 1942. Before he could fulfill his mission, Pearl Harbor happened and he went off to war, like a record of 170 parachute jumps, is the fabulous Stanley.

Thousands of ballplayers went into uniform, But just follow John through his futile attempts to transfer into the attempts to transfer into the Air Corps and then the tank outfits. His size was always against him—nearly six feet three and 205-plus pounds. Eventually he wound up as a paratrooper and March, 1945, found him in Germany. A corporal in the 17th Airborne Division, he was flown across the Rhine near Wetzel where he hit the silk with 10,000 others. They floted down through flak and tracer bullets. Some landed as corpses. Others dragged riddled frames through the darkness. John was okay.

Survivors of that big leap somehow found their way to Montgomery's armies to help with the assault on Munser. but within a week big John's luck ran out. A piece of shrapnel knifed into his right hip and nicked the sciatic nerve. He was carted to a field hospital in Germany with a paralyzed leg. He was flown to England and hospitalized for two months, then ferried back to lodged him at Nichols General Hospital in Louisville.

Meanwhile the nerveless leg was atrophying. He was kept in bed and the shinking continued. In October last year they let him out with a leg-brace, a pair of crutches and a full pension of $114 a month based on full disability.

Well, you should have seen this same pensioner at the Cardinals' Florida training camp some weeks ago, battling to win back his job. To escape the severe cold of his native Nanticoke, Pa., he had wintered in the Canal Zone. There he actually pitched two nine-inning ball games with the brace still on the shrinking leg. He won a game, 3-2, and lost one, 4-3, pitching for Colon againss Diablo.

At. St. Petersburg, Fla., he partook of daily hot-water "whirlpool" treatments, galvanic rays and massages. The calf of his right leg measured two inches less than his left, but within two weeks he added a full inch to the smaller circumference. During the second week he added three-eights of an inch more. The numbness to leave, and presently he could twist his foot a bit in all directions excepting upward. Still wearing his brace, he pitched regular batting practice for the Cardinals, and later discared it. The two-hour daily visit for medical treatments continued, and he finally announced that he would be pitching with all he ever had around June or early July.

"I worked hard to get this job before the war," he declared solemnly. "Anyone who takes it from me will have to earn it by working harder."

That just about explains the most free-for-all major League baseball has ever known. And Grodzicki is by no means the only case. They are on all teams in one degree of severity or another.

Mickey Rocco presumed that the Cleveland first-basing job was his, despite the return of Les Fleming, and so the Italian held out for a hike in salary. Suddenly a giant ex-sailor named Eddie Robinson, Baltimore's pre-war prize first baseman, appeared in the Clearwater, Fla., camp. The Navy doctors who operated on his damaged foot had told him to forget baseball, as he would never play again.

But there he was, six-feet-three, 10 pounds and swinging left-handed. He powdered a fast-ball pitch over the fence and out of sight, whereupon Rocco rushed down and signed his contract.

Harry Walker, another St. Louis Cardinal, and kid brother of Brooklyn's Dixie, carries a piece of shrapnel in his right buttock.

"Hey, it's still there," he said grimly. "Got it with a reconnaissance outfit in the Saar River offensive". Then he grinned. "I may not beat out Musial, Moore or Slaughter, but I'm hustlin' from the word go, and they'll never mistake the piece of steel for lead."

At least 1,000 big-league regulars and potentials were in the frantic scramble that began a few months ago in Florida and California. There never was so much talent, because every service player has returned with a claim of status quo ante, protected by baseball legislation which declares he must not only have a chance to prove his claim at his pre-you must first consider the war salary, but that he cannot be shipped to the minor leagues until all other big-league clubs have waived the chance to take him.

In addition to the returness, there are deserving 'war-time regulars' 'and a crop of unheralded rookies with amazing talent, considering that organized baseball dwindled to token activity in the past three years. But they came from somewhere and swarmed to the training camps. The Brooklyn Dodgers had 170 "unknown" players at their preliminary school-camp in Sanford, Fla., and at least 70 showed enough ability to be retained and worry the Dodger regulars.

Carl Hubbell shepherded 100 probables in the New York Giants' preliminary training camp at Jacksonville. The old Meal Ticket sifted out enough talent to overflow the Giants' flourshing string of farm clubs which he is building.

Personnel at the big-league training camps numbered upwards of fifty players each, and several were over seventy, not including the unsigned strays. Johnny Mize brought an ex-sailor into camp who had never played league baseball before, and he wound up with a contract to play on a Giant farm club.

The fan who paid pre-war prices to see inferior players during the past few seasons now faces the happy prospect of the highest possible standard of skill and power from top to bottom of every line-up. Not only are most of the pre-war standouts back, but the ordinary stars of that perior are fighting desperately to keep the horde of unknown mavericks from taking their bread and butter.

The big guns can be expected to regain their pre-war form, and possibly exceed it, almost without exception. Mel Ott, manager of the New York Giants, put it that way as he watched big Johnny Mize lace into the practice pitching at Miami.

"The desire to play baseball is an indestructible thing," he said. "The fan seldom realizes that almost every hold-out has the horrible, secre thought that he may not be allowed to play. It couldn't happen, but that's what goes on inside of a ballplayer. It's a form of hunger—the real backbone of baseball. The ex-service men are so hungry to get back into a line-up that they'll try to give far beyond their normal ability.

"Maybe next year it will be different. I hope not. But right now I'm counting on that factor more than any other, and so I'll bank on old regulars more than promising rookies. Because of this, big league line ups, I think, will be essentially pre-war stuff when the season opens. And, barring injury, I think the former stars will be better than ever."

Over in the St. Louis Cardinals' camp, Manager Eddie Dyer not only concurred, but said that the unprecedented urge on the part of returness was pyramiding into a problem.

"We've had a surprising number of annoying little hurts," the newest big-league manager said. "None of them really serious, but mostly the result, we believe, of so-called baseball muscles being neglected in military training, which had no use for them. Players on the big league filed for the first time in three or four years dashed out and upset a lot of peacefuly hibernating tissue, and the result was a variety of unexpected strains and sprains.

"Stan Musial was in a pepper game is natural to a player ordinarily. The same with Johnny Beazley, only in reverse. He wrenched his pitching arm in some kind of bayonet practice. And young Ted Wilks claims he strained an arm-muscle in the dining room one morning reaching for the last piece of celery. I didn't doubt him, because that's about what we've been getting."

Ed Froelich, Yankee trainer, seems to have avoided much of this annoyance, and attributes it to a long lecture he delivered to McCarthy's men before they took off for Panama. He warned them against all form of quick or unusual movements, even when the movement was a natural one ordinarily. They must have followed his advice, for the Yankees were the soundest and best-conditioned team in Florida.

The powerhouse hitters and pitchers in training camps bore out Mel Ott's theory of hustle. Joe Di Maggio never looked better than while he was averaging a homer every other exhibition game and two runs per game driven in during the early part of prepara-

Ted Williams. though bigger and at least twenty pounds heavier, could have been mistaken for a desperate rookie while he hustled about the field before practice games. But during the battles he was a new Williams, more determined, stronger and as fine a physical specimen as you could find in all athletics. He talks baseball, particularly batting, at the drop of a provocation. His confidence is such that the mere thought of anyone beating him out for the American League batting title doesn't seem to enter his calculations. He is tremendously interested in Rogers Hornsby's recent statement that he, Williams. has the best chance of any batter to better the Rajah's modern record of .424 for a full season of swinging.

Nor is young Dick Wakefield, of Detroit, less confident. The well-publicized wager between him and Williams as to who would outhit the other was under-standably denied and squelche, but it gives you assurance that the boys have a lot of baseball to get out of their systems.

Bob Feller is perhaps the phenonomenon of baseball history, even without his salary of almost $50,000, highest on record for a pitcher, and currently topped only by Hank Greenberg's $65.000. Feller left the Navy with an insatiable compassion for those in the service with less ability and good fortune than he had known. He planned and established a baseball school in Tampa, Fla., with three weeks of tuition and training free to anyone, young or old, who wished to avail himself of its facilities.

He procured contributions of equipment from manufacturers and asked the applicants to bring only uniforms, shoes, gloves and fifteen dollars a week for room and board. He solicited teachers from big-league players who would be his enemies on the ball field later in the year. Every star solicited not only taught without charge, but paid his own expenses. The school provided invaluable early training for veterans, and more than two-thirds of the young players received contracts from teams in organized baseball.

Feller then joined the Cleveland Indians at Clearwater and. when interviewed, declared that he was out to fulfill a childhood ambition to be the outstanding pitcher, not of the season, not merely of the decader, or century, but the very best pitcher in all baseball history!

JOE LOUIS....?

Joe Louis belongs to the ages. In the past such a pronuncement would be reserved for a inmortal poet, a colorful here on the battle fields, an intrepid discoverer, or a brilliant scientist. When a prize fighter ascends such a lofty plane in the esteem of his fellowmen he must be something inspiring, noble, and rare.

The Negro race has enshrined Louis in the temple of their aspirations. The brilliant truimphs of his gentlemen gladiador have injected new hope in the minorities of tne world. infusing in the infortunates added strength to attain their ends. However the greatest tribute to this athletic marvel is that the peoples of the world do not appraise him because he is a Negro but because of his accomplishments. Joe Louis has transcended the limted bounds of racial confines to become the pride, the hope, the inspiraton of the common man of all races.