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MILLER, Mo. -- Mickey Owen was the Brooklyn Dodgers catcher known for his passed ball in the 1941 World Series that led the New York Yankees to a championship. But later in life, the popular All-Star never passed on giving an assist to a youngster.

Owen had a 13-year major-league career, including a 1949-51 stint with the Cubs. He retired to his central Missouri roots in 1954. In 1959, Owen founded the Mickey Owen Baseball School along old Route 66 in Miller, about 25 miles west of Springfield. Notable pupils include Yankees coach Joe Girardi, actor Charlie Sheen and former Birmingham Baron Michael Jordan, who was awarded a summer scholarship to the school when he was 13.

Owen died earlier this month from complications of Alzheimer's disease. The native of Nixa, Mo., was 89. But his school is still going as if it were the summer of '59.

A tapestry of six baseball diamonds, batting cages and forest green cabins are set off the highway in a lush grove of tall oak trees. The 15 cabins are homes for summer players, ages 8-19. Players come from the Midwest, Japan, Puerto Rico and South Africa. They live on the 77-acre grounds for one or two weeks. Each cabin is named after a vintage major-league team. Eight to 10 players are assigned to a cabin. There is no "Devil Rays" cabin. During the summer of 1976, Jordan stayed in the "White Sox" cabin. The cabins are not air conditioned.

This is baseball unplugged.

The oak cabins were built by Nello Lenzi, an Italian immigrant from Taylor Street who loved Cubs catcher Ernie Lombardi. His grandson Ken Rizzo was a student of Mickey Owen's. Today, Rizzo is the school president. He has been with the Owen organization since 1972.

Rizzo, 59, grew up in Elmhurst and played baseball at Willowbrook High School. He was an All-Big Ten catcher at Illinois. Rizzo and his younger brother Chuck attended the school during its first full summer of operation in 1960. "I flew down from Chicago on Ozark Airlines," Rizzo said during a conversation on a recent steamy afternoon at the school. "It was the middle of the night. I was 14. We drove on old 66 with canopy oak trees all over the road. I thought, 'I'd never make it out of here alive.'"

The school was off to a rocky start. Even Owen didn't think it would last another year. Rizzo's father, Phil, was a Chicago-area public accountant who helped Owen keep the school alive by balancing the books.

"Mickey was totally involved from the beginning," Rizzo said. "From the construction to directing the program. He'd get us up at 6 in the morning by running bat handles across the slats of the cabin. But his business acumen was not great. He was great in PR, and he was forward-looking."

During the early years of the school, Owen did his advertising in tiny square boxes in the back pages of the Sporting News and Boy's Life. He recruited his baseball pals, such as Preacher Roe, Lloyd Waner and Pepper Martin, to teach at the school.

"Players don't do that today," Rizzo said. "They don't have the time."

The room fell silent. Young ballplayers could be heard chatting it up on distant fields.

In 1964, Owen was elected sheriff of Greene County. After taking office, he relinquished his interest in the school while leaving the name. "He was a four-term 16-year Democrat elected in a staunch Republican district," Rizzo said. After his final term ended in 1980, Owen ran unsuccessfully for Missouri lieutenant governor. He still visited his school every summer.

A fraternity of former major-leaguers kept the school going. Former White Sox pitcher Jerry Nyman was camp director in the mid-1970s, and he still works with the school's winter program in Surprise, Ariz. "The school was started by a basic fundamentalist, if I can use that phrase," said Nyman, now minor-league pitching coordinator for Tampa Bay. "We just kept going with what Mickey did. We played baseball. We don't make kids go sit in the shade and listen to lectures."

Rizzo added, "We've had close to 30,000 students: Ross Baumgarten White Sox pitcher; Steve Rogers Expos pitcher; Mike Marshall Dodgers outfielder. Allard Baird Royals GM was in our summer and winter programs. Martin Sheen brought Charlie down here."

Summer tuition ranges from \$525 (one week) to \$825 (two weeks). Players eat all their meals on the camp grounds. As Rizzo spoke, cook Heidi Estes was preparing baked chicken, green beans, fresh mashed potatoes with gravy and chocolate pudding for 50 budding ballplayers. The staff of eight coaches teaches taste and decorum as well as baseball nuance.

"Tradition is lost nowadays," Rizzo said. "The traditions of running on and off the field. Not warming up on the infield. Nobody is allowed to wear their cap askew. Backwards or askew." Rizzo did not laugh. He continued, "This program not only builds baseball players, but it builds character. They can experiment to be as good a ballplayer as they want to be without fear of retribution or fear or failure. The only time we do not play baseball is Sunday morning."

During the summer, Rizzo is at the camp from 7:30 in the morning until 7:30 at

night. The school's summer season in Missouri runs from the end of May to the second weekend of August. During the winter, the school runs similar programs in Bradenton and Clearwater, Fla., and in Arizona. Player evaluations are posted on the Internet for college and pro coaches.

Kids are taught the basics, and while the school has a back-in-time atmosphere, modern techniques such as video instruction are used. "The fundamentals of the game have not changed," Rizzo said. "The young people who come here need to know how to run, field, throw and hit. We are of the St. Louis Cardinal philosophy. You play team ball. You hit behind the runners. You don't have to hit home runs to win ballgames. We take a no-nonsense approach." Just as Owen did.

Owen was a scrappy catcher, who in 1942 became the first player to hit a pinch home run in an All-Star Game. In 1941, he set a National League record for catchers with 476 consecutive chances without an error. But in the 1941 World Series, Owen's Dodgers were holding on to a 4-3 lead in Game 4. Owen dropped a two-out third strike on a 3-2 count to Tommy Heinrich. The Yanks went on to score four runs after the passed ball and won 7-4 for a 3-1 lead in the series. The Yankees prevailed in five.

"I don't mind being the goat," Owen once said. "I'm just sorry for what I cost the other guys." The '41 World Series was one moment in time. Mickey Owen's real payback is still being played out along a winding road in the heart of America.