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Lefty O'Doul

Dennis Snelling

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LEFTY O'DOUL

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**LEFTY
O'DOUL**
BASEBALL'S FORGOTTEN AMBASSADOR

DENNIS SNELLING

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For my first grandchild, Ellie Noelle Snelling,
and the next generation of readers

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LEFTY O'DOUL

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1

Butchertown

Shortly after celebrating his sixty-first birthday in March 1958, Lefty O'Doul invited a friend of his, sportswriter Harry Brundidge, for a stroll along the streets of San Francisco. O'Doul was, as always, in excellent spirits and chattered incessantly; he was excited that his old team, the New York Giants, had pulled up stakes and was about to open the new baseball season in his hometown. Recently retired after forty years in professional baseball, the two-time National League batting champion, legendary hitting instructor, and successful Minor League manager would soon be opening a restaurant on Geary Street bearing his name, around the corner from a pub he had owned in the 1940s.

As the two men strode through historic Union Square, Brundidge noted O'Doul's always impeccable appearance—this day his sartorial selection featuring an alpine hat with a feather and a herringbone jacket—and marveled at his friend's countenance, which made him appear twenty years younger than he had the right to. O'Doul was on a first-name basis with world-famous athletes, movie stars, and politicians, and the city seemed to belong to him—*San Francisco Examiner* columnist Charles Einstein famously wrote about O'Doul's habit of riding in the front seat of taxis and steering the driver to destinations based on route instructions that were always the most direct, if not always the most legal. In those circumstances, police would invariably halt the vehicle until spotting O'Doul, at which point an officer would smile and wave the driver on his way.¹

It appeared to Brundidge that the city was devoid of strangers; O'Doul recognized everyone crossing his path—and they him—as he greeted each person by name and spoke softly in rapid, staccato half-sentences, punctuating their delivery with animated facial expressions. Brundidge began to understand why San Francisco Seals owner Charlie Graham had dreaded walking down the street with Lefty O'Doul—it wasn't a walk so much as a never-ending series of interruptions. O'Doul had an easy air about him—a generous spirit that shone through; people were genuinely glad to see him. Brundidge thought to himself that the best word to describe his friend was “dynamic.”

During their stroll, O'Doul and Brundidge were suddenly hailed by a group of Japanese businessmen who removed their hats and bowed. “O'Doul-san!” shouted one of the men, clearly delighted at encountering the baseball star. “Konnichiwa!” O'Doul bowed in turn and was introduced to the man's associates.

They shook hands and continued to exchange pleasantries in Japanese. Before parting, the man who had first greeted O'Doul turned to Brundidge and, after apologizing for his rudeness in not addressing him earlier, told the reporter, “In [Japan], O'Doul-san is great national hero. O'Doul [is number one] in Nipponese hearts. Great hero. O'Doul most admired American, including [the] illustrious MacArthur-san.”²

Lefty O'Doul had visited Japan more than a dozen times as a player and ambassador for the game, including momentous trips in 1931 and 1934—the latter headlined by Babe Ruth—and in 1949, when he was asked to help repair U.S.-Japanese relations with a baseball tour. Brundidge remembered arriving in Tokyo in 1945, shortly after the surrender of Japan, and being peppered with questions from Japanese citizens, including Emperor Hirohito's brother, wanting to know about Lefty O'Doul. Prince Fumimaro Konoe, who twice served as Japanese prime minister, told Brundidge that O'Doul should have been a diplomat rather than a ballplayer.

Pleasantries concluded, the Japanese businessmen continued on their way, as did O'Doul and Brundidge. While they walked, Brundidge remained struck by the adulation accorded O'Doul in

his hometown by men who had traveled several thousand miles and recognized him during a chance meeting on the street.

• • •

San Francisco was a young city full of ambition in the late 1860s. It was rough—not only around the edges, but through and through—and when its aspiration to become a major metropolis collided with the incompatibility of unsightly industries located within its city limits, especially butchering and meatpacking (and the unpleasant by-products), pressure was brought to force the butchers, prosperous though they were, to leave. City fathers acquiesced, banning the slaughtering of animals within the town proper, compelling the meat merchants to relocate their livelihood to marshy land purchased from the state of California, at the outlet of Islais Creek—a former Ohlone fishing spot just southeast of the city on what was known as Hunter’s Point. The area was almost immediately dubbed “Butchertown.”

The move proved fortuitous, as San Francisco quickly became a center for the beef industry, which employed more than three thousand people; one company, Miller & Lux, emerged as one of the largest meatpacking operations west of Chicago. The old problems resurfaced, however. Despite the natural barrier of Potrero Hill, which hid many of the less desirable aspects of Butchertown, within a few years the muck, the dung, and the stench and pollution from the slaughterhouses, tanneries, and tallow works spawned concern on the part of city officials. Instead of cleaning up and properly disposing of the offal produced by their trade, butchers often extended their slaughterhouses out over the ocean, filling the water with bloody remains that—sometimes—washed out to sea. Rats proved a constant problem, and hogs were often stationed under the wooden floors to devour carcasses dropped into the basement. This was an embarrassment to officials attempting to convert their city from a roughshod, ramshackle outpost into the “Paris of the Western Hemisphere,” as San Francisco began vying for the coveted, and lucrative, role of trade center to Asia and the Pacific Rim. There would be repeated crackdowns.

Butchertown also produced Lefty O'Doul—nearly all of his family members were butchers. Lefty's paternal grandfather, Augustus, was born in Louisiana to parents of French and Italian ancestry and had come to California to make his fortune.³ For a time, Augustus partnered with his cousin and fellow bayou native Emile Peguilan in a sheep butchering concern.⁴ O'Doul's grandmother, Catherine Fitzgerald, was born in Ireland—family lore has Catherine insisting Augustus add a proper Irish apostrophe to his last name of Odoul before she would marry him.

Lefty O'Doul's father, Eugene, was born in 1872, the second of five children, four of whom were boys. In 1895 Eugene O'Doul married Cecelia Suhling, a native Californian born to German parents; two years later, Eugene and Cecelia's only child, Francis, was born on Connecticut Street, the same day as President William McKinley's inauguration, an event that dominated San Francisco newspapers, especially those of a Republican bent. (The family moved repeatedly—some accounts state that O'Doul was born on Galvez Street, while city directories show the family living on P Street. However, according to second cousin Tom O'Doul, Lefty was born on Connecticut.)

Due to its relative isolation from the center of San Francisco, Butchertown developed a separate and, what seems today, surprising identity. Well into the 1930s, cowboys tended livestock on the nearby hills before driving them through the neighborhood streets to their final destination—it was not uncommon for pedestrians to suddenly find themselves flattened against buildings as cattle passed. There were also stereotypical scenes one might imagine in a tight-knit community of that era: O'Doul and his mates, bare feet pounding heavily against the well-worn wooden plank pathway, racing off to the mudflats near the Chinese shrimp camp on Hunter's Point where they would spend hours digging for clams. Then, once the fog cleared in the early afternoon, they would skinny dip in the surf. Milk and ice were delivered to the neighborhood each day, and on sweltering afternoons the boys, likely as not, would launch themselves onto the back of an ice wagon and grab chips from one of the blocks to stick in their mouths, or down each oth-

er's backs. The Irish lads of Butchertown would often fight the Italians of North Beach, and O'Doul learned early the fundamentals of fisticuffs—Butchertown spawned more than its share of professional prize fighters. Lefty sided with the Irish even though his bloodlines were tied less to the Emerald Isle than to his French and German roots. He would carry a bit of Butchertown inside him throughout his life.

The family suffered through some hard times. O'Doul's uncle August fled to Seattle following a New Year's Day 1900 bar fight that began with an argument over the price of drinks and escalated into a brawl that allegedly resulted in a death. The police ultimately dropped the charges for lack of evidence.⁵ Less than a year later, Lefty's grandmother died suddenly at age fifty-four.⁶ Butchertown nearly burned down in 1904, the result of a carelessly tossed cigar under the plank road.⁷ Then came the 1906 earthquake, which devastated block after block of buildings in Butchertown; in later years, O'Doul vividly recalled the scene he witnessed as a nine-year-old: "A lot of packing houses . . . were on the bay shore and they just shook down. Couple of days later . . . I walked into town. There were beds hanging out of the houses, where the walls had fallen away."⁸ O'Doul's family was fortunate in that they were able to move back into the home they had been renting on Sixth Avenue since 1904, remaining until around 1911.⁹

Lefty enrolled at Bay View Grammar School, where it was said he excelled at geography—other subjects, not so much. His reputation was that of an extremely likable and unfailingly polite young man with a quick sense of humor and a gift for leadership.¹⁰ O'Doul's education ended somewhere in the vicinity of the eighth grade because his father felt it vital that he learn a trade—specifically the family tradition of butchering. Eugene O'Doul, who was often subjected to good-natured shouts of "Froggy" because of his French blood and bayou lineage, had labored in the slaughterhouses but by 1908 was a salesman. That position eventually enabled him to secure a spot in the Don Biggs Company for his teenage son, whom Eugene's friends playfully dubbed "Young Froggy."¹¹ Lefty, who became a card-carrying member of Amalgamated Meat Cut-

ters Union Local 508, regretted the premature end to his schooling, but his quick mind, insatiable curiosity, and love of people ultimately fostered within him a talent for self-education.

O'Doul always claimed that, prior to abandoning his formal education, he was instructed in the fundamentals of baseball by his teacher, a woman in her midthirties named Rose Stolz, who recognized and encouraged the development of his athletic talent. Under her mentorship, fifteen-year-old Lefty led Bay View to the finals of the San Francisco grammar school championship.¹²

"Sure I had always played some ball ever since I learned to walk," explained O'Doul. "[But] she taught me the essential fundamentals of the game. She taught me to pitch, field and hit. . . . Miss Stolz, alone, is responsible for my success in baseball."¹³ Lefty always took great pride in pointing out that a woman had taught him to play ball.

It was an exaggeration that made for a good story—Rose Stolz was the first to admit she was far from a baseball expert. Her interests tended more toward drama and literature—she had obtained autographs from nearly every prominent actor who had appeared in San Francisco, dating back before the turn of the century.¹⁴ She coached sports at the school despite her lack of knowledge because she saw a need and no one else was willing. As a result, she became a lifelong fan of O'Doul, and he credited her with his success.¹⁵

Rose Stolz did teach Lefty and his teammates to be gentlemen. All of the members of the grammar school team wore carnations in their lapels as they marched to the ballpark for the championship game. "She insisted flowers were not sissy," remembered O'Doul, "and that washing your ears, combing your hair and wearing your Sunday-Go-to-Meeting clothes made you a man. I learned a lot from her."¹⁶

While possessing the same piercing blue eyes and fair complexion as his father, Lefty would outgrow him by a good three inches, rounding out at an even six feet tall.¹⁷ And Rose Stolz was correct. He was indeed a gifted athlete—both fast and strong. Lefty O'Doul would always consider himself lucky, and accordingly made it a priority throughout his life to assist those less fortunate; the discovery of his athletic prowess proved one of his luckiest breaks.

However, after taking the job at the Don Biggs Company, it appeared that O'Doul had abandoned sports in favor of females—or at least one member of the fairer sex—while settling into a life of grueling six-day work weeks, herding sheep through the streets of Butchertown and cutting meat at the slaughterhouse; he relished being on horseback and would always admire the cowboys of his youth. O'Doul's future seemed set. Other than a brief stint pitching for what he called a “bush league” team in the Visitacion Valley Athletic Association in 1914, he largely forgot about baseball.¹⁸

That changed in 1916 when O'Doul's father convinced the nineteen-year-old to join the South San Francisco Parlor of the Native Sons of the Golden West, a social organization open exclusively to native-born Californians and dedicated to preserving California history.

The Native Sons also sponsored a baseball league.

Games were scheduled on Sundays and involved some eighteen teams, representing various parlors in and around San Francisco. Admission was free but the competition intense; some teams hired former professional players. Contests were generally staged at Ewing Field, Golden Gate Park, or on a ball field located at Fourth and Bluxome, only a few blocks from the present-day home of the San Francisco Giants.

Lefty did not immediately join the baseball team—as enamored as he had been with the game, he was more enamored with his girlfriend and continued passing his Sundays with her. Then, as so often would be the case for Lefty O'Doul, fate stepped in.

According to a 1932 interview conducted by Ed Hughes of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, O'Doul insisted, “I wasn't what you call crazy about the game. I also had liked the girls some too, and one in particular at that time. But it seems that this particular charmer liked another fellow, also. I had an engagement to take her to a picnic one Sunday, but the other kid got there first. That left me with an afternoon on my hands.”¹⁹

So, instead of squiring an attractive female that summer day in 1916, Lefty accompanied his father to a Native Sons baseball game being played by the Butchertown-based South San Francisco Parlor. One of the team's scheduled pitchers was ill (according to

another account, he was missing following an unlucky night shooting craps.) South San Francisco's manager, Jack Regan, who had been attempting without success to persuade O'Doul to play for his team, finally convinced him to take the mound.²⁰

"I won that game," recalled O'Doul, "and made quite a hit all around. Guess it gave me the yen to be a big league star."²¹ O'Doul gave up the slaughterhouse—and the girl—and grabbed what he recognized was an opportunity. He went undefeated for South San Francisco and was also their best hitter. At least that's the way the story is always told—and it is technically true.

Four weeks into the season, O'Doul threw a one-hit shutout, and followed up the next Sunday with a four-hit, 3–2, victory, pushing his team's record to five wins without a defeat.²² On the first of October he tossed another shutout, allowing only three hits, and it was announced that the San Francisco Seals of the Pacific Coast League (PCL) had signed him for the 1917 season.²³ O'Doul's instant success was unusual, as was the reaction of his family. At a time when parents almost never encouraged ball playing by their sons, Lefty's had no qualms. "My dad didn't think a thing about it," remembered O'Doul. "He was elated, if anything."²⁴

By the end of the month, South San Francisco was 13–0, and only the Stanford Parlor, at 13–1, remained within striking distance. It was announced that those two teams would meet for the league title on November 12 in a game played at Recreation Park, home field of the Seals, with a special admission charged to raise funds for homeless children.²⁵

More than three thousand were on hand for the championship contest—O'Doul had never before played in front of a crowd that size. There was considerable interest in the game throughout the city. Ping Bodie, a Seals outfielder bound for the Philadelphia Athletics, offered ten dollars to the first player hitting a home run. A local judge matched Bodie's offer for a triple. The A. G. Spalding Company supplied gold watch charms intended for each member of the winning team. As a measure of O'Doul's popularity, the game was halted when he came to bat in the second inning so fans could present him a floral horseshoe for good luck.²⁶

Stanford, which featured two former PCL players in its lineup, took the lead in the third inning on a walk, two stolen bases, and a bad throw by the South San Francisco catcher. But O'Doul, batting sixth in the order, tied the score in the fifth with a single—one of his three hits that day—stole a base, and then scored on a daring play that brought fans out of their seats. On a grounder to deep short, O'Doul, emboldened by his first opportunity to perform on a grand stage, displayed the reckless daring of a young man unfamiliar with failure; instead of stopping at third, Lefty kept on going, startling the shortstop to such a degree that he scored when the infielder's throw to the plate went awry. South San Francisco added three more runs in the sixth, and the game seemed well in hand.

But O'Doul, presaging a career-long tendency for his arm to tire after seven innings, faltered in the eighth. He hit a batter, walked two others, and allowed a pair of hits. In all, he surrendered seven bases on balls as South San Francisco lost, 5–4.²⁷ Jack Regan reacted by filing a protest that Stanford had used an ineligible player, second baseman Jack Kennedy. The protest was upheld, and the teams were ordered to replay the game on Thanksgiving Day.²⁸

On the day of the rematch the grounds were clumpy with mud, the result of recent rainstorms. The atmosphere was nonetheless festive, with bands playing and local dignitaries jockeying for attention. O'Doul relished getting a second chance. He once again batted sixth and pitched, and once again collected three hits. But he surrendered two runs in the first inning and was knocked out of the box by the fifth, at which point he was shifted to centerfield. Stanford won, 6–3, yet for some reason had again used Jack Kennedy.²⁹ Eagle-eyed Jack Regan again protested, and once again he was successful. Wisely resisting any thought of yet a third “championship” contest, those in power declared South San Francisco the winner, and both of their defeats—and thus O'Doul's—were wiped away.³⁰

Having obtained his first extended look at Lefty O'Doul, an impressed Al C. Joy of the *San Francisco Examiner* looked forward to the coming season and speculated, “Frank O'Doul may be considered by San Francisco next spring for a position other than that of pitcher. This boy takes a healthy clout at the ball and is a streak on the bases.”³¹

The San Francisco Seals were an important baseball franchise, a member of one of the highest rungs of baseball outside of the Major Leagues, within a circuit that served as a direct conduit to the big time—in reality, to those in the west, they *were* the big time. Baseball had become immensely popular there during the last two decades of the 1800s—people from all over the country had settled in the Bay Area, bringing the game with them. A remote outpost at the edge of a vast continent, California retained much of its wealth of baseball talent, providing a home for several fast teams that could give the “Major Leaguers,” who often barnstormed the state each winter, a run for their money.

The Seals became part of the Pacific Coast League when that circuit was formed in 1903 by expanding the independent California State League from four teams to six through the theft of Seattle and Portland, the two largest cities in the Pacific Northwest League. (Ironically, the PCL’s golden era would end in 1958, when the Major Leagues utilized the same tactic, picking off San Francisco and Los Angeles and making the PCL decidedly minor once again.)

The circuit managed to survive the 1906 earthquake, which not only destroyed the Seals’ home field, Recreation Park, but league headquarters as well. By that time the San Francisco franchise was under the control of Cal Ewing, who constructed a new Recreation Park farther west from the old one, spanning the entirety of Valencia Street between Fourteenth and Fifteenth Streets, in time for the 1907 season.

The Minor Leagues of that era were far more independent of the Eastern “Majors,” since the “farm system” had not yet been invented. Relationships between Major and Minor League teams were more of the handshake variety, based on personal connections and favors—although Major League teams were allowed to draft a limited number of Minor League players at the end of each season, a source of irritation for local owners desirous of building a strong franchise rather than losing their talent at far below market value.

The PCL possessed a greater independent streak than most, and the league’s franchises unrepentantly hoarded the top-notch athletes residing in their backyards. They also paid well throughout

their history; it is not difficult to find instances of players taking pay cuts when they reached the Major Leagues.

The Seals had featured a number of exciting and interesting players over the years. Future “Black Sox” third baseman Buck Weaver had played infield for them. Ping Bodie, a likeable but incurable braggart, slugged a record thirty home runs in 1910—an incredible number for the Deadball Era. Jimmy Johnston stole 124 bases in one season. Pitcher Spider Baum would win more than 260 games during a long PCL career.

Following a dispute with a partner, Cal Ewing chose to relocate the Seals elsewhere in the city in 1914, erecting an impressive edifice that he modestly christened Ewing Field. While aesthetically pleasing, it was unfortunately constructed in an area of San Francisco plagued by a relentless, Arctic-like fog that rolled in every afternoon from the Pacific Ocean. Patronage declined precipitously. Other owners, alarmed by their plummeting share of gate receipts, pressured Ewing to abandon the stadium after one season, and the debacle led him to divest himself of the franchise at year’s end.

The team traipsed back to Recreation Park and, aided by connections to the Detroit Tigers through new manager Harry Wolverton, won the PCL pennant in 1915, the Seals’ first in six years; one of the key young players supplied by the Tigers was San Francisco native and future Hall of Famer Harry Heilmann.³²

But the Seals slipped to fourth place in 1916 as their pitching faltered. Harry Wolverton was determined to bring in new talent—including a young left-hander from the baseball league fielded by the Native Sons of the Golden West.

San Francisco sportswriter Harry B. Smith was immediately impressed with O’Doul, telling readers that he “carries himself with a lot of confidence.”³³ But in embarking on his first year as a professional, O’Doul was actually unsure of himself for one of the few times in his life. “As a kid from Butchertown,” he remembered, “I was kind of timid, you know, just out of the sticks and all.” Eager to stand at the plate and show what he could do, O’Doul encountered resistance, with one veteran ordering him to drop his

bat and move along. “So I went to the outfield and shagged balls and never got up to the cage again until I got some kind of reputation. That’s the way it was in those days.”³⁴ He was, however, able to demonstrate his athleticism—and competitiveness. During an interview given in 1955, O’Doul claimed that Harry Wolverton placed a ten-dollar gold piece on home plate and had the entire team line up in the outfield and race for it. The twenty-year-old rookie beat everyone, sliding into home plate to grab the gleaming prize.³⁵ As would prove true throughout his career, he attracted attention. Up to now, he had always been known simply as Frank; before the end of training camp, Harry B. Smith was calling him “Lefty” O’Doul.³⁶

The still raw pitcher began 1917 in a San Francisco Seals uniform, granted a look-see consisting of three appearances encompassing a grand total of eight innings.³⁷ In early May, he was loaned to Des Moines in the lower-level Western League for more seasoning against less experienced competition.³⁸ The Midwest proved a quite different experience for the twenty-year-old—especially the travel; road trips could stretch as far as Denver, seven hundred miles west of Des Moines.

“What a life!” O’Doul exclaimed during an interview for Lawrence Ritter’s classic book *The Glory of Their Times*. He reminisced about rickety trains featuring equally rickety seats, and locomotives belching thick black smoke everywhere while rattling along all night and the next day to reach Wichita, or some such destination. O’Doul recalled, “If you opened the window you’d be eating soot and cinders all night long. If you closed the window you’d roast to death.”³⁹

The local baseball team, nicknamed the Boosters, had played in the Western League since 1908, and was two years removed from its last pennant. The team’s player-manager, Jack Coffey, had suited up for Boston in the National League nearly a decade earlier, and coincidentally with San Francisco the prior year (thus explaining the pipeline from the Seals to the cornfields of Iowa). Coffey also moonlighted as head baseball coach for his alma mater, Fordham University, where he had played shortstop; his college double-play partner had been Francis Cardinal Spellman, future archbishop of New York.⁴⁰

The Boosters' home field, Holcomb Park, was a typical sports facility of the time, consisting of a wooden grandstand and bleachers extending down each foul line. (It would later achieve notoriety for hosting the first night game under permanent lights in organized baseball history.) The franchise was owned by Tom Fairweather, a Des Moines city councilman and close friend of Chicago White Sox owner Charles Comiskey; Fairweather later served as president of several Minor Leagues into the 1940s.

O'Doul won his debut for Des Moines at Sioux City on May 19, despite struggling through seven innings in the midst of a heat wave that saw the temperature top out at eighty-eight degrees around game time. Exhausted, he was lifted in the eighth after walking the first batter of the inning and hitting the second.⁴¹ He allowed two runs in the same number of innings in relief four days later, one day after unsuccessfully pinch-hitting for pitcher Rudy Kallio.⁴² His next start was an uneven, complete game loss to Sioux City, in which he dug himself a hole by allowing a triple and four singles in the second inning.⁴³

But O'Doul found his rhythm, pitching a three-hitter against the Lincoln Links on June 1 to move Des Moines into first place while toiling in weather similar to that he was accustomed to in San Francisco—temperature in the low sixties with skies threatening rain.⁴⁴ After failing to make it out of the first inning in his next start, he tossed back-to-back five-hitters against Omaha and St. Joseph.⁴⁵ O'Doul also displayed his raw ability as a batsman; on June 18 he smacked three hits in six at bats while tossing a fourteen-inning complete game victory against Wichita, improving his record to 5-2.⁴⁶

Then, when it appeared he had arrived as a professional ballplayer, O'Doul suffered a badly broken middle finger on his glove hand thanks to a line drive smashed back through the box. An infection set in, resulting in several days' hospitalization and knocking him out of action for nearly two months.⁴⁷ The finger never healed properly, remaining permanently crooked—O'Doul would call it his "funny finger."⁴⁸

Lefty finally made his return on August 30, matched against

veteran Harry Gaspar, a former big leaguer who was pitching for the St. Joseph Drummers. Neither man was particularly effective, but O'Doul got the better of the duel, winning 7–4.⁴⁹ Clearly not as sharp as he had been before the injury, he lasted only one inning in his next start, and then surrendered eleven hits and six runs the day after that. Although he won a seven-inning contest against Omaha in early September, Jack Coffey began utilizing O'Doul as a reserve outfielder—his picture-perfect left-handed hitting stroke and impressive foot speed proving hard to ignore.⁵⁰ He remained a reserve through the playoffs, pitching only intermittently.⁵¹

The Pacific Coast League season was longer than that of the Western League, so the Seals recalled O'Doul from Des Moines to serve as a potential reinforcement, although he would not see any action.⁵² Despite his uneven performance—typical for a youngster—he had demonstrated his potential and raw athletic ability. What Lefty O'Doul could not have foreseen was that he would spend the remainder of his four-plus decades in baseball exclusively in either the Major Leagues or the Pacific Coast League.