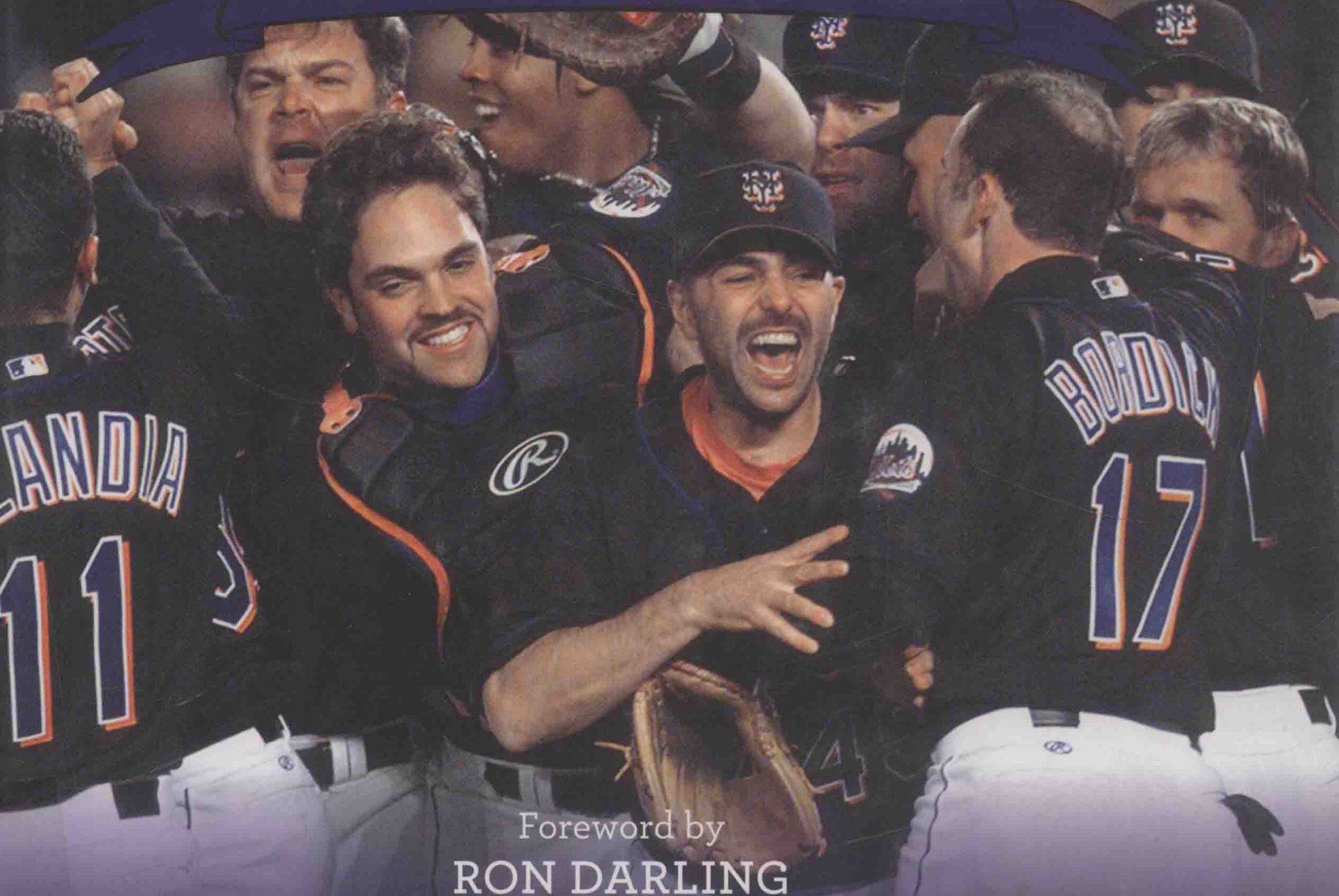


DAILY NEWS

the Mets

A 50th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION



Foreword by
RON DARLING

By Andy Martino and Anthony McCarron

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常州大学图书馆
藏书章

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Stewart, Tabori & Chang
NEW YORK

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FOREWORD

by Ron Darling

To be honest, I had never given the New York Mets much thought before they traded for me in 1982. Historically I had the vaguest of notions that they had posted the worst record in baseball history with 120 losses in their very first season in 1962, but had in their eighth season won their first World Championship.

I found my way to Shea Stadium as a player, but it was a very circuitous route. And now, thirty years after I was traded from the Texas Rangers to the New York Mets for their most popular player (I was one of the two minor leaguers traded for Lee Mazzilli), I have the honor of opening a book that details their fabulous and unique fifty years in the National League.

The spring in 1982 had been perfect. I was pitching in big league camp with the Texas Rangers. I had been their number-one draft choice in the summer of '81, and as spring training closed I was being told by their manager, Don Zimmer, that I was only a few Triple-A starts from wearing a major league uniform. The day was April 1, and the trick was anyone who thought that an Ivy League athlete could never pitch at the highest level. I got into my car in Pompano Beach, Florida, for the four-hour drive to Plant City to join the Oklahoma City Triple-A squad. Bereft of beaches, Plant City was famous for—of all things—strawberries. When I got to my room at the Holiday Inn, the message light was on. The flashing light usually meant good news, but this time the operator informed me that I needed to return a call to Lou Gorman. I knew Mr. Gorman; he had been a fixture in Northeast schoolboy baseball where I cut my teeth, but I had no idea why he had tracked me down in Strawberryville.

"Congratulations, Ron, you have just been traded to the New York Metropolitan." Whoa. I have been *what*? And who are the Metropolitan? (My initial thought was Bingo Long and his traveling All-Stars, that somehow I had been traded to a barnstorming team!)

I was stunned, floored, and discouraged. I had been the Rangers' top choice and had been paid a healthy bonus, and now they did not think enough of me to keep me an entire year. That trade nearly killed my career, but how was I supposed to know at the tender age of twenty-one that I had been saved? The trade brought me to New York and gave me a whole new life and an entirely different worldview. Things are always different in New York; there's more on the line, and I had been preparing for this moment my entire life. When I was at Yale, I would routinely take the Metro North train (next stop: Bridgeport) to visit and learn—almost like New York was a place to visit but not a place that could welcome a small-town kid. I would always mutter, "I would give anything to get one chance to work and live in this city." I had my chance.

My debut was in September of 1983, and my first three hitters were Joe Morgan, Pete Rose, and Mike Schmidt (I told you this New York thing wouldn't be easy!). I felt embraced by

OPPOSITE: Ron Darling tips his cap to fans after fanning ten batters in a 4-1 Mets victory over the San Francisco Giants, on August 22, 1989.

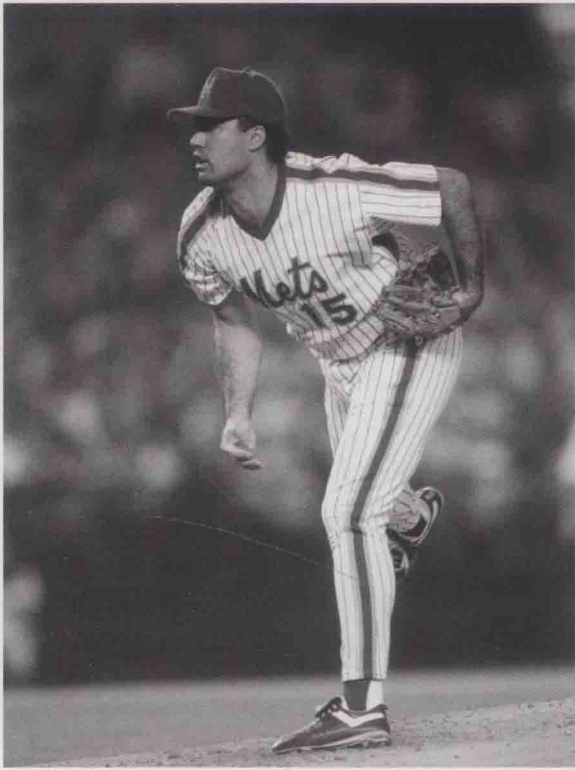
Ron Darling and Keith Hernandez embrace after winning game seven of the 1986 World Series.



Mets fans from day one. They had been lovable losers from 1973 (last play-off experience), but Mets fans were loyal. Expecting little but always hoping something amazing would happen that day. Every game was a fresh start, and every win could jump-start a streak. My first full year in 1984 saw a bunch of youngsters win ninety games and throw our hats into the stands after the last home game. I had never seen anything like it. We hadn't done anything yet and they enjoyed our abilities and effort.

The real foundation of my love affair with Mets fans came during my first off-season. I treated myself to a fifth-story walk-up on 53rd Street and set out to learn about the city. I started working on the lecture circuit to pay the rent and did everything: bar mitzvahs, little league banquets, and Chamber of Commerce dinners. With my trips around the city, there was a real connection to the fans. They were starving for a winner, and I took it all in. I learned why Bronxville was different from Manhasset, and just how far Staten Island was from Astoria. I learned the difference between a Brooklyn accent and a Bronx accent. I learned what it meant to cross the George Washington Bridge into New Jersey during rush hour and to catch the leaves changing along the Palisades Parkway on the drive to Bear Mountain on a crisp November morning. I learned where to find the best pizza, the best pastrami, the best bagels. I went to the library to read about Robert Moses and to study how the suburban sprawl of the metropolitan area came about. I became a New Yorker and a Met at the same time . . . and I never looked back.

And now here I am, thirty years later and still lucky enough to have affection from Mets fans wherever I go. But my perspective has changed. I went from being a player—knowing that the business of baseball could send me packing at any moment—to being a lifer. Without realizing it, I've shed my boyhood connections to New England teams and traded it in for the Mets colors of this slaphappy band of devoted followers. Mets fans are



LEFT: Ron Darling pitching against the San Francisco Giants.

RIGHT: Ron Darling acknowledges the crowd prior to throwing the ceremonial first pitch before the start of the game seven showdown between the Mets and the St. Louis Cardinals in the 2006 National League Championship Series.

part Chicken Little, part Charlie Brown, and part *Candide*. Hoping for the best with the worst around the corner. When is one of our great pitchers going to throw the first no-hitter, or when is a homegrown everyday player going to live up to his promise?

One of the things I miss most about Shea Stadium is a small platform behind the Ralph Kiner TV booth where I could secretly watch Mets fans filing in for another home game. It was my very favorite time to be in the stadium. The fans who were coming in were my audience—more than ever before—more than when I was a player. Mets fans aren't bandwagon types; it's not part of their DNA. They are in for the duration. They're invested. And now, so am I.

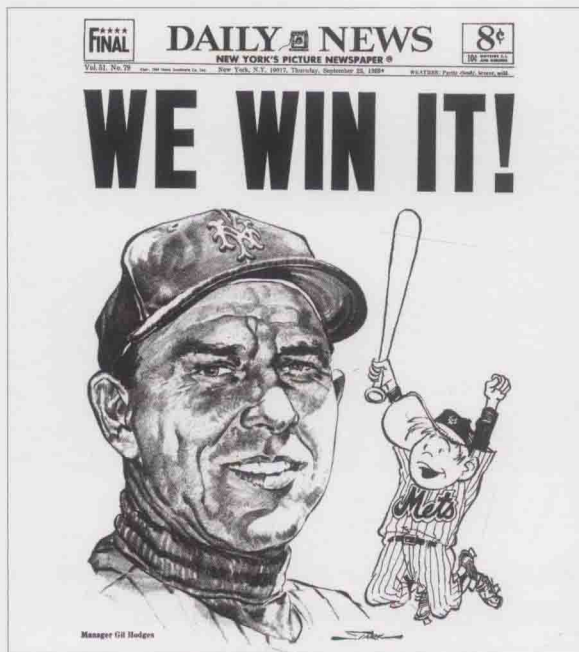
To this day, whenever I am preparing for a game and I see the Mets all-time leaders list flash on the scoreboard, I still get a thrill. Wins, strikeouts, innings pitched . . . my name is right up there with Tom Seaver, Jerry Koosman, and Dwight Gooden. I'm not delusional though: My numbers are not in the same league—it's kind of like being the fourth Charlie's Angel or the fifth Beatle—but I will take it anyway, because it's the New York Mets and their pitching rich culture. It means something, and it means I am part of something.

So, for me, being part of the Mets now means watching all these good people come to the games. Couples arm in arm. Fathers holding their sons' hands. Lifelong buddies settling in for another fun outing on a long list of many. They all have their little rituals, these fans, just as I now have mine as a broadcaster, and I find these moments inspiring. They remind me that ballplayers come and go—and that I have come a long way from my time as a player, when you are taught not to look in the stands and that our world is defined by what happens inside the lines, not outside the lines or in the stands.

But we had it all wrong. The game might be played between the lines, but it lives and breathes outside the lines and in the stands. The fans do matter. They do. In fact, they matter most of all.

INTRODUCTION

Front page from the September 25, 1969, edition of the *Daily News* featuring Mets skipper Gil Hodges.



My introduction to covering the New York Mets came in the summer of 2008, as the team attempted to recover from a historic collapse the year before that left them stunned and out of the playoffs. Manager Willie Randolph was about to be fired, the clubhouse was fractious, and the horrid bullpen was preparing to spoil another pennant race and sink the team further into its malaise.

I watched as the next several seasons brought more misery in Flushing, as the era defined by general manager Omar Minaya fell steadily from its exuberant beginning. An unreal plague of injuries, the failure of Randolph's replacement, Jerry Manuel, stars accused of rape and domestic assault, longtime clubhouse manager and player favorite Charlie Samuels caught betting on baseball and hobnobbing with mobsters . . .

What is it with these Mets, this franchise that seems perennially derailed by woe? Their most promising stars, from Darryl Strawberry to Dwight Gooden to Johan San-

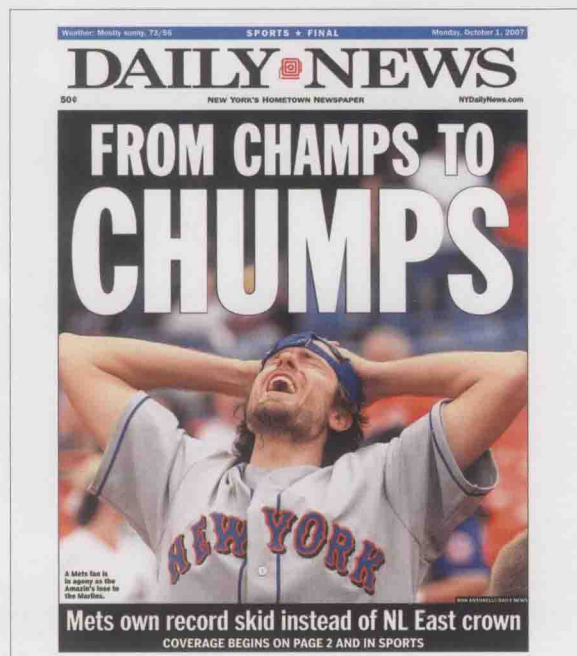
tana, are so often shaded by scandal. Their large-market advantages have delivered just two championships in fifty years and created decades of disappointment. Hell, they began as the worst team in baseball history, finishing 40-120 in their inaugural season of 1962.

But if 1962 introduced the Mets as hapless, it also introduced the oversimplified myths about the team that continue to persist, and prevent us from seeing the true reason for their struggle. The falsehoods began with Casey Stengel's lovable losers in '62 and their symbol, first baseman "Marvelous" Marv Throneberry.

Throneberry's image was that of a fumbling, bumbling castoff, endearing because of his ineptitude. Everyone, fans and media, seemed to buy into that persona, because the team wasn't winning, and what else was there to pay attention to? One problem: Throneberry didn't think it was very funny, and in fact was hurt by the portrayal. He wanted to win and succeed just as badly as any of us do, and he was instead considered a fool.

Still, that '62 image persisted for the franchise in Queens, even as it won the World Series in 1969 and 1986. The Mets were a blue-collar, outer-borough alternative to the wealthy Yankees and their Wall Street fans. Mets fans at dumpy Shea Stadium were not able to watch as much winning baseball as their counterparts in the Bronx cathedral, but they could take pride in their loyalty to an underdog.

The only problem with all that? At best, it's only partially true (except the part about Shea being dumpy). Generalizations, when examined, rarely prove adequate. The Mets have never been underdogs. They have always been owned by moneyed, New York elite; have often boasted high payrolls; and always enjoyed every built-in market advantage that the Pittsburgh Pirates, Oakland Athletics, and Tampa Bay Rays must live without. They have always wanted to win and have never embraced the snuggly loser image. So why hasn't the franchise been successful, save for a few outlier years?



Front page from the October 1, 2007, edition of the *Daily News* featuring a disbelieving Mets fan following the Amazins' loss to the Marlins, completing an epic collapse that cost the Mets the NL East crown.

As I learned from researching and charting the team's history, a pattern emerges from study of the Mets' five decades: A general manager works to turn a flailing team into a contending one and enjoys a brief flash of success. Then, invariably, underlying flaws ruin the hopefulness of an era and lead to another long period of struggle.

It happened after Bing Devine assembled the pitching staff that won a World Series in 1969 without a particularly deep or complete roster. It happened after Frank Cashen spent the first half of the 1980s constructing the strongest team in Mets history, then watched helplessly as alcohol, drugs, and decline sank everything too soon. It happened when Steve Phillips made several high-profile acquisitions and helped bring a Subway Series to New York in 2000. Phillips lost his job before reaching the playoffs again, and Minaya swept in with ambitious plans and dramatic acquisitions; he saw one postseason, two stunning collapses, and two losing seasons before ownership dismissed him in 2010.

So far, that has been the Mets' story—disappointment and frustration interrupted often by hope and occasionally by success. Rife with human drama and fascinating characters, though, it is a story worth telling and enjoying. Uninterrupted success is boring, and the up-and-down (okay, mostly down) history of the Mets is nothing if not compelling. This is a team that has always obliged New York's desire for big stories, wild characters, crime, sex, drugs, and headlines.

—*Andy Martino*

I've been watching the Mets since I was a kid in the 1970s, when a pair of tickets sitting on my father's bureau meant nights spent dreaming of Shea Stadium until we actually walked the concourses of the Mets' former home and saw the green splendor of the field—and, mostly, a terrible team—for ourselves.

I remember a day when Dave Kingman hit a home

run so far I swore I saw it take a gigantic bounce off the asphalt in the parking lot. I once stood in the Shea lobby clutching the photo album given to fans on photo day that held within its pages a serious prize—Tom Seaver's autograph.

That was the same day I was in a group of kids around Craig Swan, looking for another signature, and he grabbed my pen, signed some other kid's album, and thrust the pen back at me. I was so stunned I just stood there holding the pen, its cap off. Swan turned and inadvertently brushed against it, leaving a trail of blue ink on his shiny pink silk shirt. I know Swan didn't disappoint this autograph-hungry kid on purpose, nor did I wreck his disco-era threads by design.

I have fond memories of the team of my youth, but once I became a sportswriter, I put all that, plus any affection for the team, aside. There were new reasons to appreciate the Mets, anyway. They are newsmakers.

From their flawed stars to their occasional play-off runs to their silly dramas, the Mets have always provided good theater, even during some mirthless, pathetic years. They were born into it, perhaps, because they were the National League replacement for two beloved New York teams, and they are perennially competing on the same block with the baseball-and-myth-making juggernaut from the Bronx.

—*Anthony McCarron*