

## **SHEA IT'S SO**

*When The Mets Owned New York: 1984-90*



The late 1980s were the glory era of the New York Mets. Between 1984 and 1990 the franchise won a World Series, two division titles and finished second in the NL East five other times—all of which would have been playoff seasons by the wild-card standards of today.

It's an era that can be looked back with both fondness and regret. Fondness for the championship run of '86 and the great players that came through Shea Stadium. Regret in that it didn't turn into a dynasty. But wherever you stand on the fondness/regret spectrum, there's no doubt about this—it was a lot of fun to follow this team if you were a Mets diehard.

It was the time of Dwight Gooden and Ron Darling, of Darryl Strawberry and Lenny Dykstra, Gary Carter and Keith Hernandez, all with Davey Johnson orchestrating from the dugout. And it

all happened at a time when the New York Yankees were going through a relative dry spell. In the 1980s, it was the Mets who owned the Big Apple.

*Shea It's So* covers all seven seasons from 1984-90, including game-by-game narratives of each postseason series and further laying out the case of why Strawberry was robbed of the MVP award in 1988. These eleven articles are all published individually on TheSportsNotebook.com. They have been edited and pulled together for compilation.

## 1984

The Mets came into the season as the heir to hard times. The franchise had captivated baseball in 1969 with their miracle run to a World Series title. A subsequent 1973 run to the National League pennant was almost as shocking. But after winning seasons in 1975-76, the franchise had fallen and couldn't get up.

From 1977-83, they failed to win as many as 70 games in a season. That included a four-year run with Joe Torre as the manager. It included a year-plus with George Bamberger, who had recently turned around the Milwaukee Brewers. And if you were looking for an out with the strike year of 1981? No such luck—pro-rated out, the '81 season was going to be as bad as any other during the seven-year drought.



It was time for changes in Queens. The Mets had already brought in Keith Hernandez, an All-Star first baseman from St. Louis. They called up Darryl Strawberry and the talented rightfielder won Rookie of the Year in 1983. They had another group of rookies coming up for 1984. And in Davey Johnson, they found the right manager to put it all together.

Hernandez and Strawberry continued to be the best everyday players in 1984. Hernandez batted .311 with an on-base percentage that was a sparkling .409. Strawberry hit 26 home runs, stole 27 bases and drove in 97 runs.

Offensive support came from second baseman Wally Backman and third baseman Hubie Brooks, with on-base percentages that ranged from .340 to .360. Leftfielder George Foster was now 35-years-old and no longer what he'd been during his glory days in Cincinnati. But he still went deep 24 times and drove in 86 runs.

Mookie Wilson provided speed and defense in the outfield. Kelvin Chapman was a solid reserve infielder. Rafael Santana was starting to emerge at shortstop. None were outstanding, and the catching spot was a weak point, but it was enough for the Mets to finish in the middle of the 12-team National League in runs scored.

The pitching only ranked 8th in the NL in ERA, but it was the area where the excitement came from. Walt Terrell was a reliable arm coming into his prime and he finished with a 3.52 ERA in his 33 starts. A rookie named Ron Darling got started on a stellar career that would extend into the broadcast booth in his post-playing days. Darling also went to the post 33 times and his ERA was 3.81. Sid Fernandez, a 21-year-old lefty got 15 starts and posted a 3.50 ERA.

But the buzz in Shea Stadium came when 19-year-old Dwight Gooden took the mound. He won 17 games, finished with a 2.60 ERA, won Rookie of the Year and finished second in the Cy Young voting. A star was born.

The Mets played good baseball right out of the gate and started 15-8. They were in first place in the NL East in early May, before settling in at 22-19 by the Memorial Day holiday. New York was only 2 ½ games out.

The league alignment prior to 1994 was two divisions per league with the winners going directly to the League Championship Series. With no Central Division in existence, the Cubs were the team setting the early pace in the NL East. The Philadelphia Phillies had won this division in '83 and were in second. The Mets were tied with the Montreal Expos (today's Washington Nationals) for third.

New York slumped out of the holiday weekend and was four back in early June. Then they won 13 of 17, a stretch that was capped with a series win over Philadelphia. The Mets nudged into first place again, leading by a half-game at the All-Star break. The Cubs were hot on their heels and the Phils were 3 ½ out. The Expos fell out of contention, a development that would bode well for the Mets by the coming offseason.

The late part of July was good for the folks in Queens. They went 11-3 out of the break, took a 3 ½ game lead on Chicago and were up five on Philadelphia. The Cubs were coming into Shea Stadium for a four-game set on the final weekend of the month.

Gooden took the ball on Friday night and allowed just four hits in eight innings. The 2-1 win pushed New York's lead to 4 ½. All was right with the world.

Only it was all downhill from there. It started on Saturday afternoon. Relief pitcher Doug Sisk came on for Darling in a 3-3 game in the eighth. Eight runs later, the Mets were on their way to an 11-4 loss. In the Sunday doubleheader, the bats went silent. They got just twelve hits over the twinbill and were a combined 0-for-8 with runners in scoring position. Losses of 3-0 and 5-1 narrowed the lead to a game and a half.

New York followed that up by losing three straight to a mediocre St. Louis Cardinals team. The Mets were a half-game back of Chicago when they went to Wrigley Field for another four-game set, this one starting on August 6.

Gooden started Monday's opener and there would be no reprise of his last start against the

Cubbies. He was down 6-0 after four and the Mets lost 9-3. Tuesday was a doubleheader. Darling and Ed Lynch got the starts. Neither got out of the fifth inning. Losses of 8-6 and 8-4 pushed New York deeper into the hole.

The finale on Wednesday afternoon was going better. A two-out/two-run single by catcher Mike Fitzgerald gave the Mets a 5-3 lead going into the bottom of the seventh. Terrell and reliever Wes Gardner couldn't hold on. Chicago scored four times, won 7-6 and New York was facing a 4 ½ game deficit.

The NL East race stayed mostly stable in the balance of August and the Mets were five games out on Labor Day. They had a couple more head-to-head series with the Cubs ahead in September, so this was still very much a race.

But New York lacked consistency and in an ironic foreshadowing of 1985, the Cards were their nemesis. Twice, St. Louis swept two-game sets from the Mets. New York couldn't get traction against lowly Pittsburgh. The split of the six games the Mets played with the Cubs wouldn't have been sufficient in any case. Set against the backdrop of these missed opportunities against lesser teams, the NL East turned into a runaway.

New York was still able to finish with a nice 7-2 stretch and that got them to 90 wins. Whatever disappointment they felt had to be mitigated by just how far the franchise had come in a single year under Johnson.

They were also taking steps to get better. A late August trade had brought Ray Knight to play third. That gave the Mets the opportunity to move Hubie Brooks. They used Brooks as the lead piece in a four-player package that got Hall of Fame catcher Gary Carter out of Montreal, who decided to start rebuilding.

A new era of winning was underway.

## 1985

The Mets of 1985 were an exceptionally well-balanced team. If you look at the team-wide numbers, they were third in the National League in both runs scored and ERA. Offensively, they were third in home runs, fourth in batting average and fifth in walks.

If you broke it down individually, they had home run hitters in Gary Carter, George Foster and Daryl Strawberry. They had base stealers in Strawberry, Wally Backman and Mookie Wilson. Keith Hernandez was just steady, finishing with an on-base percentage of .384, driving in 91 runs and playing fabulous defense.

There was a nice blend of experience and youth. Strawberry was only 23-years-old and already in his third year. Foster was 36, a one-time MVP with the Cincinnati Reds. Hernandez was

battle-tested, having won a World Series ring in 1982 with the St. Louis Cardinals. Carter had been a clutch player for the Montreal Expos in their 1981 playoff run.

The pitching staff was marked by live young arms. Ron Darling was 24-years-old and finished 16-6 with a 2.90 ERA. Sid Fernandez finished with 2.80 ERA as he split eighteen decisions. Some veteran help came from Ed Lynch, with 10 wins and a 3.44 ERA. The bullpen was anchored with a lefty-righty team of Jesse Orosco and Roger McDowell, each with 17 saves.



But no one electrified baseball more than Dwight Gooden. Gooden had the most dominating pitching season in the modern age of baseball. He won 24 games, finished with a 1.53 ERA and worked 276 innings in the process.

In a year where the National League produced great starting pitchers in St. Louis' John Tudor and Orel Hershiser with the Los Angeles Dodgers, Gooden was a unanimous choice for the NL Cy Young Award and finished fourth in the MVP voting.

It didn't take long to realize this season was going to be fun. They opened the season at home with the Cardinals and started with two extra-inning games. Carter won the Opening Day game with a walkoff home run in the tenth. In the second game, Tudor and Darling duelled, gave way to the bullpens and the Mets won in the 11<sup>th</sup> when Danny Heep drew a bases-loaded walk. The Mets won eight of their first nine games.

On Memorial Day, New York was 24-15 and a half-game back of the Chicago Cubs, who had won the NL East in 1984. Montreal was only a game out and St. Louis was lurking, at 4 ½ back. In early June, the Mets slumped. They lost five of seven games at home to the Dodgers and Cardinals, then dropped three of four in Philadelphia and were swept at Montreal.

A series with the Cubs, who were starting to slump, proved to be salve on the wound. The Mets swept that series, but then promptly lost eight of ten. The slump included being swept in St. Louis, with the Cardinals getting a walkoff win of their own in the finale. St. Louis was surging and moved to the top of the NL East. New York fell as many as five games out in early July, before suddenly righting the ship, winning twelve of thirteen and going into the All-Star break within 2 ½ games of St. Louis.

New York went 12-6 out of the break and pushed into first place by a half-game on August 5. They went on to win nine straight, but St. Louis kept pace. A homestand with NL West teams, including the division-leading Dodgers, didn't go well. The Mets went a sluggish 4-5 on the homestand while the Cardinals heated up and flipped the standings. New York went from a game and a half up to three games back.

Showing baseball often doesn't make sense, the Mets went west to face the same teams they had just struggled with at home...and calmly went 7-3, pulling back to within a half-game. When they hosted St. Louis for a big three-game series starting on September 10, the NL East race was a dead heat.



Howard Johnson, a 24-year-old third baseman that would eventually become a star, made the first big impact on the series. “HoJo” hit a grand slam in the first inning. Darling didn’t pitch great, as the Cardinals chipped away, but the starter held the lead and turned a 5-4 game over to McDowell, who got the last eight outs and secured the win.

Gooden and Tudor staged an epic pitchers’ duel on Wednesday. Gooden threw nine shutout innings. Tudor threw ten. Unfortunately for the Mets. Orosco gave up a home run in the tenth and it resulted in a 1-0 loss. In the finale, the Mets got back to scoring quickly. Successive two-out doubles in the first inning from Strawberry, Heep and Johnson keyed a four-run rally. By the end of two, the score was 6-0.

St. Louis again clawed back though, and this time they tied it 6-6 in the ninth, Orosco again giving up a big home run. In the bottom of the ninth, Wilson singled, was bunted over by Backman and scored on a base hit from Hernandez. In a series that lived up to its billing, the Mets left with a one-game lead.

There was still a lot of baseball left though, and the Cardinals just picked up and started winning, while the Mets began to struggle. New York went 9-7 over the next sixteen games—not bad, but not good enough to keep up with St. Louis who reclaimed first place, grew the lead as big as 4 ½ and still held a three-game lead when New York came to the heartland for one final series.

It was the final week of the season, so the Mets realistically needed to sweep and pull even going into the final weekend. Darling faced Tudor in the opener, and unbelievably, Tudor *again* threw ten shutout innings against the Mets. Darling gave nine though, and this time Orosco came through in relief, with two clean innings. When Tudor was removed, Strawberry homered in the 11<sup>th</sup> and New York was still alive with a 1-0 win.

Gooden got the ball on Wednesday and aided by three hits and a home run from Foster, the ace won 5-2. Thursday night’s finale would be the big one, but the Mets couldn’t quite get over the hump. Aguilera struggled and gave up four early runs. The Mets got to within 4-3 but came up short.

The Mets and Cardinals went their separate ways for the weekend with the race all but settled, as St. Louis held a two-game advantage. Both teams won on Friday and St. Louis clinched on Saturday.

It was another year in second place for New York, but under Johnson’s leadership the Mets were getting closer.

## 1986

They won 108 games and were the National League’s best in most every significant statistical category. They scored the most runs, and were tops in on-base percentage, slugging percentage and batting average. They were third in home runs. The pitching staff was dominant,

the best in the league in ERA.



Dwight Gooden was only 21-years-old and coming off an amazing Cy Young year in 1985. Gooden wasn't quite that good in '86, but he still won 17 games with a 2.84 ERA. Ron Darling won 15 games with a 2.81 ERA. Bob Ojeda, acquired in an eight-player deal with the Boston Red Sox prior to the year, was actually the best of a great group, with 18 wins and a 2.57 ERA. Sid Fernandez was the weak link—he “only” had a 3.52 ERA and sixteen wins.

These four arms went to the mound a combined total of 128 times. It covered up for a bullpen that was good, but not deep.

Roger McDowell and Jesse Orosco were a righty/lefty combo at the end of games. They combined for 22 wins and 43 saves. Doug Sisk was solid in setup work, with a 3.06 ERA. Otherwise, the only other arm was Rick Aguilera and he spent as much time as a fifth starter as he did in the pen, making twenty starts and finishing with a 3.88 ERA.

The lineup was keyed by Darryl Strawberry. The “Straw” hit 27 home runs, drove in 93 runs and posted a .358 on-base percentage.

A feisty 23-year-old centerfielder named Lenny Dykstra had a stat line of .377 on-base percentage and some surprising pop with a .445 slugging percentage. Another little spark plug was second baseman Wally Backman and his .376 OBP.

There were excellent veterans in Gary Carter (24 home runs/105 RBI), Keith Hernandez (.413 on-base percentage) and Ray Knight (.351 OBP). The one disappointment in the veteran group was lefffielder George Foster. Foster had hit 73 home runs the previous three seasons with the Mets. But his production tanked at age 37, signaling the end of his career and he had to be released in August.

Johnson was able to fill in the gap though. Mookie Wilson provided the speed, with 25 steals. Kevin Mitchell provided some thunder, with a .466 slugging percentage. Danny Heep was a steady contributor off the bench with a .379 OBP. There were simply no weaknesses on the 1986 New York Mets.

After losing three of their first five games to the Phillies and Cardinals, the Mets took off. They won eleven straight, including a four-game sweep in St. Louis. By May 10 they were 20-4. Before the spring was over, they won seven of eight against the Astros and Reds, who would end up 1-2 in the NL West. On Memorial Day, the Mets were soaring at 27-11. They were four games up on the Montreal Expos and the rest of the division was submerged under. 500.

New York kept it rolling, sweeping the defending NL West champion Los Angeles Dodgers three straight out of the holiday. In early June, they took two of three from the Phils and swept the Pirates four straight. The record reached 43-16 and the lead was bumped to 10 ½ games.

There was a brief dip where the Mets lost five of nine, including four of six to the Expos. But in late June they ripped off another sweep of the Cardinals and won three of four from the Astros. Even though they lost three in a row to the Reds and the lead was “cut” to 9 ½ games, June 30 was the last time New York’s divisional margin was less than ten games.

At the All-Star break, the Mets were 13 ½ games ahead of the Expos and 17 ½ ahead of the Phillies. But all of baseball was only wondering now how this team would fare in the playoffs. As it turned out a four-game series in Houston turned out to be a sneak preview of what was ahead in October.

After winning the opener 13-2 and losing 3-0 on Friday, the Mets and Astros played two wild games over the weekend. On Saturday, New York trailed 4-0 in the ninth inning to eventual Cy Young winner Mike Scott. They got home runs from Dykstra and Strawberry and tied the game before McDowell gave up a home run in the bottom of the ninth in the 5-4 loss.

Sunday was more of the same. The Mets were down 4-2 in the eighth and then scored three times, with Hernandez and Mitchell each going deep. In the bottom of the eighth, Sisk and Orosco melted down, gave up four runs and New York was back in an 8-5 hole. Undeterred, the Mets used three hits, a walk and a hit by pitch to tie the game at 8-8 in the ninth. McDowell pitched three shutout innings and helped extend the game to the 15<sup>th</sup>, but he eventually gave up the winning run and lost 9-9.

The Mets had lost three of four, but they had proved they could rally against the Astro bullpen. It’s something that would save them in October.

After that series, it was just about formally clinching the NL East. The lead was twenty games in late August and the Mets went on a 15-3 run through a soft part of the schedule. The clinching itself ran into some snags. New York came into second-place Philadelphia needing one win to wrap it up and lost three straight. They went to St. Louis, scene of their heartbreak in 1985 and lost again. The Mets were able to clinch a tie the next night, but the Phillies also won and delayed the celebration.

On September 17, in the afternoon at Wrigley Field, New York made it official. Gooden tossed a complete-game six-hitter, the Mets won 4-2 and the champagne could start flowing.

The 1986 New York Mets spent the regular season showing their greatness. In October they showed their resilience.

## **1986 NLCS**

The Houston Astros were a turnaround story under rookie manager Hal Lanier. This battle turned into an incredibly tense, taut National League Championship Series that had the Mets



giving thanks for their survival.

Houston had one advantage working for them right out of the gate—with homefield determined by a rotation system rather than merit, the NLCS would open in the Astrodome. And the Astros had the hottest pitcher in baseball, eventual Cy Young winner Mike Scott, who had recently thrown a division-clinching no-hitter.

New York countered with Gooden. Game 1 had the makings of a pitchers' duel and it proved exactly that.

Houston's power-hitting first baseman Glen Davis homered to lead off the second inning. The Astros later got a double from Kevin Bass and loaded the bases with one out. Scott came to the plate and struck out, so the inning ended 1-0, and Gooden immediately settled into a brilliant night of pitching. But the damage was done.

It was still 1-0 in the eighth when the Mets got their first rally going. Danny Heep and Lenny Dykstra singled and there were two aboard with one out. Scott promptly struck out Wally Backman and Keith Hernandez. In the ninth, Darryl Strawberry singled and stole second with one out. A base hit could tie it, but Scott induced a harmless groundball from Mookie Wilson and struck out Ray Knight. Houston had drawn first blood.

Bob Ojeda took the ball for Game 2. The Astros countered with the veteran fireballer Nolan Ryan. Houston again got something going in the bottom of the second, getting runners on the corners with one out. Ojeda got Alan Ashby to hit a comebacker and got the out at the plate, escaping the jam.

In the fourth, the Mets finally got on the board. With one out, Backman and Hernandez singled, and Gary Carter doubled. The score was 1-0 and there were runners on second and third. Strawberry added a second run with a sac fly. One inning later New York broke it open. Rafael Santana singled with one out and Dykstra did the same with two outs. Backman's two-out single scored a run and Hernandez cleared the bases with a double.

The 5-0 lead was plenty for Ojeda. He escaped a first and second with none out jam in the sixth. The Astros got a run in the seventh, but Ojeda finished the game scattering ten hits and winning 5-1. New York had a road win and three home games ahead of them starting Saturday afternoon in Shea Stadium.

Ron Darling started Game 3 against Astro veteran lefty Bob Knepper. It was Houston that got to Darling in the early going.

Billy Hatcher singled with one out in the first and stole second. He ultimately scored on a bloop hit by Denny Walling, who moved up to second on a wild pitch and later scored on a single by Jose Cruz. One inning later, second baseman Billy Doran made Darling pay for a walk by hitting a two-run homer. It was 4-0 and Knepper cruised through the first five innings with no problems.

New York pushed back in the bottom of the sixth. Kevin Mitchell and Hernandez singled, and an error by shortstop Craig Reynolds brought in their first run. Strawberry then pulled a home run down the rightfield line and it was tied 4-4.

Darling, still in the game, gave the lead back, with some “help” from his defense. After a walk to Doran, a sacrifice bunt attempt resulted in a throwing error by third baseman Ray Knight. Doran made it to third and scored on a groundball out. In the ninth inning, the Astro closer Dave Smith was on, looking to nail down the win—and with Scott scheduled to pitch Game 4 on short rest, the Mets looked in serious trouble.



Backman started the inning with a single. With one out, Dykstra came to the plate. In one of the most famous hits in Mets history, he did the same thing Strawberry had done earlier—homered down the rightfield line. New York might still have to deal with Scott on Sunday night, but with a 6-5 win they were ahead in the series.

Houston took advantage of having their ace on the mound and staked him to an early lead. Davis started the second with a single off Sid Fernandez, and Ashby homered for a 2-0 lead. In the top of the fifth, Dickie Thon hit a solo blast. Not until the eighth did the Mets finally score against Scott for the first time in the series and even that took some ultra-aggressive baserunning.

Mookie Wilson led off with a single and on a groundball out from Ray Knight, took off for third and made it. A sac fly scored the run. At 3-1, a leadoff single in the ninth by Dykstra gave New York three cracks at tying the game with one swing. None of it mattered and Scott had another complete-game win.

The rains came on Monday and Game 5 was pushed back to Tuesday afternoon. Ryan and Gooden were the pitching matchup. Houston threatened early with singles from Bass and Cruz in the second inning, setting up runners on the corners with no outs. Gooden reared back and struck out Ashby, then got a double play ball from Reynolds.

In the fifth, Houston got on the board. Ashby doubled down the rightfield line and a Reynolds single moved him to third. A sac bunt attempt by Ryan didn't work, but Doran's ensuing groundball out was able to score the game's first run.

After the way the Astros had to gut out that run, what happened next seems almost unfair. Strawberry wiped out with a single swing of the bat, a solo blast that tied it.

The two flamethrowers, Ryan the veteran and Gooden the young arm, went toe-to-toe in a masterpiece. Ryan completed nine innings, while Gooden went ten. No one threatened and the game stretched to the twelfth inning.

Charlie Kerfeld was in the game for Houston now and had been outstanding all year as his

team's #2 reliever. It took a soft rally, but New York got him. Backman legged out an infield hit, and then took second on an errant pickoff throw. Carter slapped a groundball back through the box and Backman raced home with the winning run.

The rainout on Monday meant no travel day, so the teams went to Houston and got back at it in a late afternoon start on Wednesday. Game 7 of the Red Sox-Angels ALCS battle was in prime-time, but this one had the feel of a seventh game itself. Scott was waiting in the wings for Houston if they could extend the series and New York players were freely admitting they had no idea how to handle his split-finger fastball. There was a strong sense that this game was really the one that would settle the National League pennant and Game 6 proved to be worthy of those stakes.

It took a while for this game to become a classic. The Astros got to Ojeda quickly. Doran started the home half of the first with a single, Phil Garner doubled him home with one out and a Davis base hit scored Garner. After a walk, Cruz singled and the Astros had a 3-0 lead. Both pitchers settled down and began cruising. It reached the top of the ninth, still 3-0 and Houston fans smelling a Game 7.



New York played with the desperation that believed it was also on the brink. Dykstra began the ninth with a triple and scored on a single from Wilson. Knepper got Kevin Mitchell to ground out, but a Hernandez double made it 3-2 and put the tying run in scoring position. Smith was summoned to try and close it out.

Walks to Carter and Strawberry loaded the bases and when Knight lifted a fly ball to rightfield, it was deep enough to score the tying run.

The bullpens took over and the tension grew. Larry Anderson pitched three innings of one-hit ball for Houston. Roger McDowell ultimately gave New York five innings of one-hit baseball himself. Through 13 innings, Game 6 was still tied 3-3.

In the top of the fourteenth, Carter singled to right off Aurelio Lopez and Strawberry drew a walk. Even though Knight's sac bunt failed, Backman's single to right brought in the run and an unnecessary throw home moved the runners to second and third. Lopez got Howard Johnson to pop out and kept the score 4-3, something that would prove critical when Hatcher homered down the leftfield line against the Mets' best reliever, Jesse Orosco. It was 4-4 and the game would go on.

Lopez was still on for the top of the sixteenth. Strawberry doubled and Knight drove him in with a single, taking second on yet another undisciplined throw home. Two wild pitches brought Knight in. Backman walked, was bunted up and scored on a Dykstra single. It was 7-4 and surely this game was finally over?

Not so fast. Houston came roaring back. With one out, pinch-hitter Davey Lopes worked a walk off of Orosco. Doran and Hatcher each singled. The lead was cut to 7-5 and there were runners on first and second. Walling hit a groundball to first and while the Mets weren't able to turn a double play, Hernandez cut down Hatcher at second base and kept him from scoring position. Which proved vital when Davis singled to center. It was a 7-6 game, but had the fast Hatcher had been at second, he would have surely tied the game again.

Bass came to the plate and the count ran full. Orosco finally got the third strike and an extraordinary Game 6 had come to an end. The Mets were going to the World Series for the first time since their championship season of 1969.

Given the impact Scott had on the series—two complete games, giving up only eight hits and one run combined and a presence that completely loomed over the games he wasn't pitching in, it was appropriate that he win the NLCS MVP, and that's what happened.

On the New York side, Dykstra was the best choice, having gone 7-for-23 with a memorable game-winning home run. Strawberry was only 5-for-22, but the magnitude of his hits gave him an outsized impact. Orosco was the winning pitcher in three games, even though he gave up three runs in eight innings of work.

The drama of the 1986 NLCS was just the beginning of an October ride that would push the respiratory faculties of Mets fans to the brink.

## **1986 WORLD SERIES**

Boston had been a surprise winner of the AL East and then staged a dramatic comeback to beat the California Angels in the ALCS. The World Series opened on a Saturday night in Shea Stadium, with Ron Darling against Red Sox lefty Bruce Hurst. Both pitchers would dominate.

New York missed an early opportunity in the third, putting runners on first and second with one out, before Hurst got Keith Hernandez and Gary Carter to kill the threat. No one else threatened until the top of the seventh when the Red Sox made a move, with considerable help from the Mets.

Jim Rice drew a walk, took second on a wild pitch and scored on an error by New York second baseman Tim Teufel, in for starter Wally Backman only because Hurst was a lefty and Teufel was a right-handed bat. This softest of runs was all that was needed. The teams combined for just nine hits and all were singles. Boston's 1-0 win gave them an early hold on the series.

The Red Sox could now give the ball to their ace. Roger Clemens was a 24-game winner who won both the Cy Young and MVP awards in 1986. He faced off with Dwight Gooden. Pitching continued to dominate through two innings as neither team could get a hit. In the top of the third, it was Gooden who blinked first.

Boston shortstop Spike Owen worked a walk. Clemens came to the plate and dropped down a bunt. An error by Hernandez left both runners on. The top of the order came up and in succession, Wade Boggs doubled, Marty Barrett singled and Buckner singled. It was 3-0 and there were still two on with none out. Rice's fly ball to rightfield moved Barrett to third base, but Gooden buckled down to strike out Dwight Evans and Rich Gedman and keep the score as is.

New York bounced right back in the bottom of the third, scoring its first runs of the Series and they also started with the bottom of the order. Rafael Santana singled and Gooden beat out his bunt. Lenny Dykstra sacrificed again to put runners on second and third. A single by Backman scored one run and a RBI groundball from Hernandez scored another to cut the lead to 3-2.

Over the next two innings, the Red Sox broke it open. Dave Henderson, a hero of the ALCS, led off the top of the fourth with a home run. In the fifth, Rice started with a single and Evans hit a two-run blast. It was 6-2 and everything was set up for Clemens, but he couldn't get settled in. In the bottom of the fifth, he issued a walk to Backman and Hernandez singled. Manager John McNamara pulled the trigger and pulled his ace before he could qualify for the win.

Reliever Steve Crawford gave up a run-scoring single to Gary Carter, but was able to strike out Darryl Strawberry and keep the score 6-3. The Mets stopped hitting and the Red Sox kept going. In the top of the seventh Boston got five straight singles, with Rice, Evans, Gedman, Henderson and Owen all coming in succession. Two runs came in. Another was tacked on in the ninth.

The Red Sox finished the game with 18 hits, double the combined output of *both* teams from Game 1. Every starter had a hit, seven of the eight position players had multiple hits, six drove in runs and six scored runs. It was a complete team emasculation of Gooden in the 9-3 win.

Only once before in history had a team lost two straight at home to open the Series and then went on to win it. And the first time had come in 1985, when the Kansas City Royals did it against the St. Louis Cardinals. What were the odds it was going to happen two years in a row? The Mets were in serious trouble as the Series went to Fenway for games on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday night.

Prior to the season, the Red Sox and Mets had made an eight-player trade in which the focal points were New York getting lefty starter Bob Ojeda and Boston getting a talented young closer in Calvin Schiraldi. It was Ojeda on the mound as the Mets tried realistically to save their season in Game 3.

And the New York offense came on the attack against Red Sox starter Oil Can Boyd. Dykstra opened the game with a home run to rightfield. After Backman and Hernandez singled, Carter doubled to score another run and set up second and third. With one out, Danny Heep singled both runs in and Ojeda had a 4-0 lead before he took the mound.



Boston got a run back in the third when Dave Henderson singled, Boggs walked and Barrett hit an RBI single. But that was the only noise the Red Sox would make all night. The Mets put it away in the seventh.

With one out, Santana and Dykstra singled and with two outs, Hernandez drew a walk and Carter knocked in two runs with a base. They added another run in the eighth. The game ended 7-1 with Ojeda giving up five hits in seven innings of work.

With the Mets still facing a desperate situation, they went back to Darling for Game 4. The Red Sox should have considered the same tactic and returned to Hurst—both he and Clemens had worked on short rest in the ALCS and this was a customary short series approach at the time. Boston's fourth starter, Al Nipper, was easily the biggest liability in the rotation.

The Red Sox threatened early, loading the bases with two outs in the first and Gedman starting the second with a double. Darling escaped both times and in the fourth, the Mets got after Nipper.

Backman led off with a single and Carter homered over the Green Monster. Strawberry doubled down the left field line and scored on a single from Knight.

Darling was continuing to pitch well and made the 3-0 lead stand up. The Mets threatened to add to the lead in the sixth when Carter doubled and reached third with one out. But he was thrown out at the plate by Rice attempting to score on a fly ball. Nipper, to his credit, at least gave his team a chance.



But the Mets broke it open against Crawford. In the seventh, Mookie Wilson singled with one out and Dykstra homered with two outs. Carter again homered over the Green Monster in the eighth. The lead was 6-0 and even though Darling left after seven innings and the Red Sox scored twice in the eighth, they never got the tying run to the plate in the 6-2 final.

Through four games we already saw two big twists, with the underdog Red Sox grabbing the early lead and the Mets then showing their resilience in front of the Fenway crowd. Hurst and Gooden were on the mound for a crucial Game 5.

Not only had the road teams won all four games, but the home teams had never even led. That changed in the bottom of the second with Henderson tripled into the Fenway Triangle in rightcenter and scored on a sac fly from Owen. Boston got another run in the third. An error by Santana and a walk opened the door and Evans hit a two-out RBI single to make it 2-0.

Hurst was again in complete command and not until the fifth did New York threaten, putting runners on second and third with one out. He struck out Dykstra and got out of the inning. The

Red Sox then added some insurance in the bottom of the inning.

Another triple to the Triangle, this one from Rice, got it rolling. Don Baylor, the DH was only able to start in the Fenway games, singled in the run and Evans followed with another single. Gooden was lifted and Sid Fernandez came on. Henderson doubled to left for another run and it was 4-0.

The last two innings got a little bit interesting. Red Sox fans serenaded Strawberry with “Dar-ryl, Darryl!” taunting chants, and drawing an equally mocking doff of the cap from Strawberry. And on the field, the Mets made a bit of a move. Teufel homered in the eighth, the first time the Mets had scored off Hurst in seventeen innings. In the ninth, with two outs, Wilson doubled and Santana singled to make it 4-2 and bring the tying run to the plate. Hurst again struck out Dykstra to close the win.

Boston was one win from their first championship since 1918 and the fans were feeling it. This World Series was shaping up as one in which the overall series was competitive, but the individual games were at least modestly one-sided. All that was about to change as they headed back to New York for the weekend.

The Red Sox gave the ball to Clemens and the Mets countered with Ojeda. Boggs started the game by beating out an infield hit and with two outs scored on a double by Evans. In the bottom of the second, Owen singled with one out. Boston again finished the rally with two outs, with a single to right by Boggs moving Owen to third and a base hit from Barrett bringing him home.

Clemens cruised through four with the 2-0 lead before New York made a counterattack. Strawberry started it with a single and stole second. Knight singled to center to cut the lead in half. Wilson singled and moved Knight to third. There was still none out and the infield was playing for the double play. Clemens got it, with Heep grounding into a 4-6-3 twin-killing that brought the tying run in through the backdoor.

The Mets again threatened in the sixth, with runners on first and third, one out and Carter and Strawberry due up. Clemens K'd them both and one inning later the Red Sox got the lead.

Ojeda was removed for Roger McDowell. Barrett walked and then took second on a groundball out from Buckner. Rice grounded to third, but a throwing error by Knight set up a second and third situation. Gedman came to the plate and singled to left, but in a play that would loom large, Rice was thrown out at home by Mookie Wilson. Boston had a 3-2 lead, but it could have been more.

Prior to the eighth, Clemens was removed and there were debates about whether he asked out or McNamara made the decision on his own. Given how well Clemens was pitching, and his competitive nature, it seems unlikely the pitcher would have asked out on his own. Schiraldi was summoned.

Lee Mazzilli came up as a pinch-hitter, batting in the pitcher's spot, and singled to right. Dykstra laid down a bunt that wasn't handled and everyone was safe. Backman bunted again and there

were runners on second and third. Hernandez was intentionally walked to set up the force at home, but Carter did his job and lifted a sac fly that tied the game. Strawberry had the chance to give his team the lead, but flew out to center.

The Mets got in position to win the game in the ninth, with a walk and yet another muffed bunt putting two aboard with none out. This time, Schiraldi punched out Howard Johnson, then got Mazzilli and Dykstra to send the game to extra innings.

Rick Aguilera, a combination fifth starter/long reliever, had come on for the ninth. In the tenth, Henderson greeted him with a leadoff home run. After hitting the home run that saved the Red Sox in the ALCS, Henderson was in position to become a New England hero. That outcome seemed even more likely after, with two outs, Boggs doubled and Barrett singled him in.

Schiraldi was still on to hold the 5-3 lead. He got Backman and Hernandez to fly out. Carter came up and kept the game alive with a single to left. Moments earlier, Kevin Mitchell had been in the clubhouse making arrangements for his flight into the offseason, so certain was he that the game was over. He had to rush back into his pants when summoned to pinch-hit. He singled. Knight singled.

The score was now 5-4, runners were on first and third and Mookie Wilson was at the plate. Bob Stanley was called into the game. Earlier in the year, Stanley had been booed by the fans. His response was that they would love him in October when he got the last out of the World Series.

With that opportunity in front of him, Stanley and Gedman couldn't get on the same page and an inside pitch skipped past the catcher and tied the game, with Knight moving up to second. It was then that Wilson hit the groundball we've all seen countless times, the one that skipped through the legs of Buckner and gave the Mets a stunning 6-5 win.

Buckner has to be defended on three different counts—the game was already tied when he made the error. It was also a deep groundball and with bad heels, Buckner did not run well and there's a good chance Wilson beats the ball out. Knight would have to stay on third and keep the game going, but it's far from a guarantee this even ends the inning. And there was still a Game 7 to play.

It was a Game 7 that was delayed by rain, and McNamara used the extra day to get Hurst on the mound. Hurst had already been voted Series MVP once, when the preparations were being made for the Boston celebration. He could really seal the deal by winning his third game on Monday night.

Darling was making his own third start, as the Series would end with the same pitching matchup that it began. It wouldn't be quite the pitcher's duel this time around.

Any thought of the Red Sox just rolling over after the events of late Saturday night were dispelled in the second inning. Evans and Gedman hit back-to-back home runs to start the frame. Henderson walked and with one out Hurst bunted him out, and then Boggs knocked in the run with a single.

It was 3-0, although a fatalist Red Sox fan might recall that in 1975 Boston also led the seventh game 3-up and that was also against a 108-win team, Cincinnati's Big Red Machine.

Hurst continued his extraordinary pitching through five innings, allowing just one hit and Darling also settled in. New York came back in the sixth.

Mazzilli and Wilson each singled with one out and Teufel worked a walk. Hernandez delivered a two-run single to center and with runners on the corners, a productive groundball from Carter tied the game 3-3. Hurst would leave after the sixth, turning it over to Schiraldi, a circumstance that no one in Boston could possibly feel good about.

Knight greeted Schiraldi with a home run to start the seventh. Dykstra singled, moved up on a wild pitch and scored on a base hit by Santana. McDowell, now in the game for Darling, stayed in to bat for himself with the 5-3 lead and bunted up Santana. McNamara made a pitching change, going to the lefthanded Joe Sambito. After an intentional walk to Wilson and a real walk to Backman, Hernandez hit a sac fly to make it 6-3.

Now the Mets were in command, and the Red Sox were the ones that refused to go quietly. In the top of the eighth, Buckner and Rice singled and each scored on a double from Evans. There was nobody out, the score was 6-5 and the tying run was on second. Jesse Orosco came on for McDowell. Gedman hit a line drive, but it resulted in an out. Henderson, out of miracles, struck out. Baylor grounded out.

The Mets were three outs away, but insurance wasn't going to hurt. Nipper was now in the game and Strawberry took his revenge for the Game 5 taunts, homering to right. Knight singled and eventually scored on a single from Orosco, who helped seal his own save.

The drama was finally over. At 8-5, Orosco took care of business in the ninth, striking out Barrett to end it.

Knight would be named Series MVP, going 9-for-23 for the series and the Game 7 home run that put his team ahead to stay. Carter was 8-for-29, had the two-homer game in the must-win

Game 4 and finished with 9 RBI—no one else on the Mets had more than five. Kudos also to Darling, who pitched 17 2/3 innings in his three starts and only gave up four runs.



On the Red Sox side, Hurst would still have been a reasonable pick in defeat, going 2-0 and giving up just five runs in 23 innings pitched. Henderson went 10-for-25 and had what looked to be the Series-clinching home run in Game 6. Evans was 8-for-26 and also drove in nine runs—and like the Mets, no one else had more than five.

Given all that, I find the Knight selection to be shaky. If I had a 1-2-3 ballot, it would go Carter-Hurst-Knight.

One thing we can say for certain—the 1986 World Series had plenty of heroes. It's time to focus there rather than the unfair goats horns that have hung on one man.

## 1987

They were both young and established and were widely expected to repeat as champions. That didn't happen, as they couldn't quite overcome a slow start.

None of the problems were due to complacency. The Mets did not stand pat in the offseason. They let Ray Knight walk in free agency and put Howard Johnson at third base. It proved to be the right call—Knight only had two unproductive years left in the majors, while Johnson finished 1987 with an on-base percentage of .364, a slugging percentage of .504, hit 36 home runs and stole 32 bases.

And that wasn't even close to the most significant offseason move. New York pulled the trigger on an eight-player deal with the San Diego Padres, with the focal point being giving up Kevin Mitchell in exchange for outfielder Kevin McReynolds. That one didn't pan out quite as well. It was no fault of McReynolds, who hit 29 home runs and drove in 95 runs. But Mitchell turned into an outstanding power hitter and eventually won an MVP award in 1989.

The core of the championship team was still back in the fold though. The Mets had the most prolific offense in the National League and it was led by Darryl Strawberry. The gifted rightfielder posted an OBP of .398 while hitting 39 home runs, stealing 36 bases, driving in 104 runs and scoring 108.

Strawberry and HoJo were the most complete offensive players, but there was a lot of help. Keith Hernandez put up on OBP of .377. Lenny Dykstra's OBP was .352 and though he didn't have home run power, Dykstra ripped 37 doubles and slugged .455. Gary Carter was in decline, but the future Hall of Fame catcher still hit 20 home runs.

What really separated the Mets' offense though, was the quality Davey Johnson had on his bench. Mookie Wilson had a stat line of .359 OBP/.455 slugging. Tim Teufel's numbers were .398/.545. Dave Magadan, a future MLB hitting coach, was at .386/.443 and Lee Mazzilli was at .399/.460. No team in the majors got this kind of production from as many bench players as the Mets.

The pitching, after being the best in baseball in 1986, took a step back. They were still very good, ranking third in the National League in ERA, but their modest regression mirrored that of the team's.

No one really stood up and had an "ace" caliber year. Dwight Gooden went 15-7 in his 25 starts with a 3.21 ERA and was the best, but it marked a decline from his Cy Young status two years earlier. Sid Fernandez, Rick Aguilera and David Cone all were solid, but unspectacular, with ERAs in the high 3s. Ron Darling struggled to a 4.29 ERA, and 21-year-old John Mitchell finished with an ERA at 4.11.



Perhaps more important than different ERA numbers though was the lack of continuity. New York's pitching just couldn't keep healthy. The loss of Bob Ojeda was the biggest problem, and Darling was the only one to exceed 30 starts. The story of Terry Leach was one of the better ones in 1987, as he made 12 starts, 32 relief appearances and went 11-1. But had Davey Johnson known this journeyman was going to be his star, it would have been an indicator that 1987 wasn't going to be the cakewalk the championship year had been.

After a 6-2 start, a mid-April series in St. Louis was the big warning sign. In the series opener, New York got eight hits and two walks from the top four hitters in the lineup, but were shut down below that, missed opportunities and lost 4-3.

On Saturday, they came out blazing and scored five runs in the top of the fourth. Darling gave them all back in the bottom of the inning. Trailing 6-5 in the ninth, the Mets got consecutive two-out RBI singles from McReynolds and HoJo. They gave it back in the ninth when Carter committed a throwing error on an attempted steal of third. New York took the lead again in the 10<sup>th</sup> on a walk, bunt, productive out and wild pitch. They did more than give it back in the bottom of the inning—after three singles tied it 8-8, a walk was followed by a grand slam and a 12-8 loss.

The Mets lost the finale 4-2 when Fernandez couldn't get through five innings. It was the low point of an opening movement to the season that included a series loss to the Cardinals at home, a 6-10 stretch in May and saw New York limp into Memorial Day with a record 19-22 and trailing St. Louis by 7 ½ games.



The holiday marked a modest turn back upward. The Mets began a sweep of eventual NL West champion San Francisco and played pretty well in June, going 16-12. By the All-Star break they were still 9 ½ games back of the Cardinals, but the record had improved to 47-49 and New York moved from fifth to third place.

In late July the Mets began a serious push and it started in St. Louis. In the Tuesday night opener they overcame a 4-2 deficit when Teufel delivered a two-run single in the eighth that led to a 6-4 win. On Wednesday some of the April appeared to resurface when they let a 4-3 lead in the ninth slip and the Cards tied the game. Enter HoJo, who ripped a two-run blast in the 10<sup>th</sup> for the 6-4 win. And on Thursday, McReynolds' two-RBI triple keyed a 3-0 first inning lead and Gooden went eight strong innings for the 5-3 win.

New York followed that up by taking two of three in Montreal. In August they took four of six games from San Francisco and then returned home to win another series with a good Expo team that would win 91 games. The Mets were looking like the team everyone expected and even though they still trailed by 3 ½ games on Labor Day, all the momentum was on their side as the stretch drive beckoned.

The lead was narrowed to a game and a half when St. Louis came to old Shea Stadium for a highly anticipated series on the second weekend of September. Strawberry ripped a two-run blast in the first inning of the Friday night opener and the Mets were leading 4-1 in the ninth inning. Then, the NL East race made another stunning pivot.

Roger McDowell, on in relief, allowed one run and there was a man aboard when he faced Cardinal third baseman Terry Pendleton. McDowell gave up a two-run shot and the game was tied. The meltdown continued in the 10<sup>th</sup> when the Cards got two more runs and won it 6-4. And that avalanche continued into Saturday as Gooden was shelled, giving up five runs in the first inning of an 8-1 loss.

New York salvaged the finale with a 4-2 win behind a good start from Cone. They were still within 2 ½ games. But it was the blow they couldn't recover from. The series held stable over the next couple weeks and the Mets were still pinning their hopes on a final three-game series in St. Louis. It never came to that—in the first part of the final week, while the Cards were taking three of four in Montreal, the Mets were losing two of three to the mediocre Phils. The race was clinched on Thursday before the final showdown could begin.

It was a bitter ending and in fairness to the Mets, the injuries in the pitching staff were the paramount reason. They still won more games than postseason participants in San Francisco and eventual champion Minnesota. But 1987 was the warning that dynasties don't come too easily.

## 1988

More than any other team in this period, the 1988 New York Mets capture both ends of the emotions Mets fans may feel about the entire era--the excellence and the regret.

New York had a great offensive team in 1988. Darryl Strawberry had an on-base percentage of .366, hit 39 home runs and finished with 101 RBI. Strawberry was the key to a lineup that led the National League in runs scored, and also finished first in OBP and slugging percentage.

Leftfielder Kevin McReynolds hit 27 home runs and had 99 RBI. Howard Johnson at third base hit 24 home runs. Wally Backman posted an OBP of .388 and Lenny Dykstra stole 30 bases. Keith Hernandez didn't have a vintage year, but still had a tolerable OBP of .333.

Davey Johnson had depth, with Mookie Wilson and Dave Magadan each posting solid offensive numbers. Gary Carter, now 34-years-old, was past his prime at the plate, but still an adroit handler of pitchers.

There was still plenty of good pitching for Carter to handle with Dwight Gooden, Ron Darling and David Cone. Gooden won 18 games with a 3.19 ERA. Darling was a 17-game winner at a 3.25 ERA.



And Cone, age 25, had the best year of them all, going 20-3 with a dazzling 2.22 ERA. Only a historic year from the Dodgers ace Orel Hershiser kept Cone from the Cy Young Award. The Mets rotation was rounded out by Bob Ojeda (2.88 ERA) and Sid Fernandez (3.03 ERA), who would have been aces on a lot of staffs.

Johnson's bullpen wasn't deep, but it was competent at the end of games. Randy Myers saved 26 games with a 1.72 ERA, and Roger McDowell saved 16 more with a 2.63 ERA. Johnson also got good work out of Terry Leach, who finished with a 2.54 ERA.

The Mets wasted little time getting out of the gate strong. They took five of six April meetings with the St. Louis Cardinals, who had won the NL pennant in 1987. New York was 32-15 and held a 7 ½ game lead over the Cards on Memorial Day. But the surprising Pittsburgh Pirates were staying right with the mighty Mets and New York's lead on Pittsburgh was only 3 ½ games.

New York and Pittsburgh played six times in June, and the Mets won four of those games, pushing their lead over the Pirates as high as 7 ½. The last week before the All-Star break didn't go very well though, with five losses in six games and Pittsburgh climbed back to within 3 ½ by the break. In the meantime, St. Louis had completely fallen apart and the race was already narrowed to the Mets and Pirates.

The Mets went 7-6 coming out of the break and the lead dwindled to two games, as the Pirates came to Shea Stadium in New York for a four-game weekend series that would end July. New York's pitching came through.

Ojeda took the ball on Friday night and threw a complete-game three-hitter. A scoreless tie in the eighth inning was broken up when light-hitting shortstop Kevin Elster—batting with two outs and Ojeda on-deck—hit a home run to win it 1-0. On Saturday, Johnson homered and drew three walks, while Fernandez took his turn throwing a shutout, going seven strong innings and Myers closed a 3-0 win.

Strawberry hit a two-run blast in the first inning on Sunday and staked Darling to an early lead. Darling actually gave up a run in this game, but still threw a complete-game six-hitter and made the Strawberry home run stand up in a 2-1 win. Gooden was hit hard in Monday's finale, a 7-2 loss, but New York had pushed their lead back out to four games.

There were a pair of series between the Mets and Pirates still on deck for September, but New York made sure they didn't matter. From August 22 to Labor Day, the Mets won nine of eleven, including a 5-0 record against the NL West-leading Dodgers. By the time of the next New York-Pittsburgh meeting, the margin in the NL East was nine games.

The race was all but over, and the Mets put the exclamation point on it with a 22-6 run to close the season, getting to 100 wins and finishing fifteen games ahead of the Pirates.

## Darryl Strawberry Deserved The 1988 National League MVP



As the Mets won 100 games and blew away the NL East, Strawberry made his case in both the traditional stats as well as more modern methods of player evaluation.

If you're a traditionalist, can I interest you in Strawberry's 39 home runs, easily the best in the National League? That goes with his 101 RBI, second in the league.

If you like the modern stats, Strawberry slugged .545, also the best in the NL. Combine that with a Top 10 finish in on-base percentage (.366) and his combined OPS (on-base plus slugging) was the league's best. In an era where teams placed more value on stolen bases, Strawberry swiped 29 bags.

Compared to the competition, it was a statistical tour de force for a team that made the playoffs. Now let's look at the resume of Los Angeles Dodgers' rightfielder Kirk Gibson, whom MVP voters chose for the award.

Gibson's OBP of .377 was a little higher than Strawberry's, but his .483 slugging percentage was well behind the Met rightfielder. That was a direct consequence of Gibson's 25 home runs being well-behind Strawberry. Gibson's 76 RBI were rather meager for a player his team relied on to drive in runs. And while he was good on the other end, scoring runs, he was only marginally better than Strawberry here (106-101 for Gibson).

Both players did their work in pitcher-friendly parks, so there's no advantage to either one there. So there's no statistical case whatsoever to be made for Gibson over Strawberry.

Nor did the voters at the time even attempt to say there was. The case for Gibson rested on his intangibles. He had come over from Detroit in the offseason and it was said his fiery intangibles ignited a Dodger clubhouse that had gone through a couple bad years and turned them into a 94-win NL West champ. The specific example cited was a spring training incident. Gibson was the victim of a prank and threw a complete tantrum over it. Legend has it that the Dodgers were so inspired by his "get serious" approach that they became a new team.

Maybe so, but that's a very thin reed to base an MVP case on. Pranks are a part of the baseball culture, so it's hard to see where this was really gross misconduct to begin with. And if it were, are Gibson's backers saying veteran manager Tom Lasorda had so little control of his clubhouse that he needed a new player throwing a fit to get everyone in line. And that if he did, it was so compelling as to justify making that player the MVP based on it?

It gets even worse when you realize Gibson wasn't even the most valuable player on his own team. Orel Hershiser had one of the great pitching years of all-time. He went 23-8 with a 2.26

ERA and closed with a historic flourish, a record-setting 59 straight scoreless innings to key a Dodger runaway in their division. Orel's case for MVP is much more legit than Gibson's.

Returning to Strawberry, he did everything necessary to win the MVP on the field except be a media darling. Admittedly, his historic case looks a little worse on the surface in light of Gibson first hitting a big home run in the NLCS to help beat the Mets and then hitting one of the most legendary home runs in MLB history, a walkoff to win Game 1 of the World Series, and start the Dodgers on their way to a title. But the voting took place before the postseason, so I ask the historical jurors who are reading this to disregard that bit of evidence.

Darryl Strawberry finished in the top three of the MVP voting twice in his career, including a third-place finish in 1990. He never won the award. He should have in 1988.

## 1988 NLCS

The two big markets of the National League battled in the 1988 NLCS, as the Mets faced the Los Angeles Dodgers and were a heavy favorite. The series had the best pitchers, the top MVP candidates. And the series went the full seven games, with several surprising plot twists, before the Dodgers finally prevailed.

Orel Hershiser had set a major league record when he threw 58 consecutive scoreless innings in September for the Dodgers and he would win the Cy Young Award. He was naturally LA's Game 1 starter against the Mets' Dwight Gooden, the 23-year-old who already had the 1985 Cy Young Award under his belt.

New York was the deeper team all-around and had won 100 games, compared to 94 for Los Angeles. Homefield advantage was determined on a rotation basis though, and it was the NL West's turn. The best-of-seven series began in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles quickly manufactured a run in the first inning off Gooden, as Steve Sax led off with a single, stole second and scored on a two-out base hit to rightfield by Mike Marshall. The Mets' ace quickly settled down though and the anticipated pitchers' duel emerged.

It was still 1-0 in the seventh when LA manufactured another run. Mike Scioscia doubled to start the bottom of the inning, moved up on a groundball out and scored on a base hit by sub-.200 hitter Alfredo Griffin.



Hershiser kept the shutout into the ninth inning. Greg Jeffries got a leadoff single, and scored on a double from Strawberry. With one out, Hershiser was removed for closer Jay Howell. A walk to Kevin McReynolds put the tying run aboard. Howell struck out Howard Johnson and got to within one out of a win.

Gary Carter came to the plate. He was no longer a productive offensive player. But he was still clutch and a double to



centerfield cleared the bases. The Mets had a stunning 3-2 win and with their win over LA's ace on the road, seemed in complete control.

Dodger manager Tommy Lasorda had to turn to a rookie, Tim Belcher, to essentially save the season. David Cone, a young 22-game winner, was on the mound for the Mets. Once again, Marshall got a first inning RBI for Los Angeles, coming through with two outs after Mickey Hatcher had walked and moved to second on a balk.

In the second inning, Cone hit a batter, but had two outs and Belcher at the plate. At this most unlikely of moments, the game got completely away from the New York starter. Belcher, Sax and Hatcher all singled in succession. Gibson was intentionally walked, and Marshall singled. The score was suddenly 5-0.

New York made noise to get back in it in the fourth, when Jeffries drew a leadoff walk and Keith Hernandez homered. Los Angeles answered with a run in the fifth, and the game went to the ninth at 6-2. The Mets made it interesting. Lenny Dykstra doubled, then Hernandez and Strawberry singled. With one out, it was 6-3 and the tying run was at the plate.

LA had a deep bullpen and this time Alejandro Pena got the chance to close the door. He got McReynolds to pop out and Carter again came to the plate. This time it was a fly ball out to right and the NLCS was tied.

A travel day and a rainout resulted in the Dodgers bringing back Hershiser on three days' rest for Game 3. Davey Johnson, with a deeper rotation, stayed on schedule and went with Ron Darling. For the third straight game, the Dodgers got out to the early lead.

In the second inning, Marshall and John Shelby worked walks. Scioscia laid down a bunt, resulting in a Hernandez throwing error from his first base spot that resulted in a run and left runners on second and third with none out. Jeff Hamilton picked up one more run with an RBI groundout, but Darling struck out Griffin to keep the game at 2-0.

Sax created another run in the third with his speed, a leadoff single, a stolen base and he came around on a hit by Gibson. The Mets got the run back in the bottom of the inning on a break. Mookie Wilson had K'd for the second out, but the third strike was a wild pitch and Wilson got to first base. A single from Jeffries and double by Strawberry cut the lead to 3-1.

New York tied up the game in the sixth. A Strawberry single and error by Hamilton put a man in scoring position. With two outs, Carter and Wally Backman each delivered RBI singles and it was 3-3. Los Angeles took the lead back against Mets' reliever Roger McDowell on two infield hits and two walks.

In the bottom of the eighth, Howell came on for his second chance to close out a Hershiser win. Howell walked McReynolds to start the inning and Lasorda wasted no time going to Pena. This time it didn't matter. Backman doubled with two outs to tie the game 4-4.

Lasorda went to the Mets' old friend Jesse Orosco, now in the Dodger bullpen. That didn't matter either. Wilson drove in the lead run. Jeffries was hit by a pitch, Hernandez walked with the bases loaded. Strawberry blooped a single. It was 8-4 and that's where it ended.

Any scenario prior to the 1988 NLCS that had the Dodgers winning was surely dependent on Hershiser carrying the Dodgers. The ace was doing his job, but Los Angeles had now lost two of three games where he handed the bullpen a late lead.

New York was in command with Gooden on the mound, against 34-year-old John Tudor. Los Angeles quickly showed their resiliency though. Sax again got a first-inning rally going, with a single and stolen base. Hatcher walked, and both runners moved up on a groundball out. With two outs, Shelby drove each in with a single.

The Mets got to Tudor in the fourth. After a single from Hernandez, Strawberry and McReynolds each homered for a 3-2 lead. In the sixth, McReynolds doubled and Carter tripled to start the inning. With the score 4-2 and the game threatening to get away, Lasorda called on Brian Holton to keep his team alive. Holton got a strikeout, and after a walk, induced Gooden to hit into a double play.

It looked like Holton's work might not matter, as Gooden kept the 4-2 lead into the ninth inning. He was still on the mound when Shelby worked him for a walk. And then this unpredictable NLCS took another plot twist, as Scioscia stunned the crowd with a two-run blast that tied the game.

The game stretched into the wee hours of the morning. With two outs in the 12<sup>th</sup> inning, McDowell was on the mound and Gibson homered. But the Mets had one more rally left in them.

Tim Leary, normally a starter, was in the game for the Dodgers. Consecutive singles by Mickey Sasser and Lee Mazzilli got a rally going with one out, and Orosco came in. After a walk to Hernandez loaded the bases, Orosco got perhaps the out of the series when he induced Strawberry to pop up.

Orosco was a lefty and McReynolds, a good righthanded power hitter, was now up. Lasorda went to the best righthander he could think of—Orel Hershiser. The ace came in and got a fly ball to centerfield to tie the series.

The teams had to be back in Los Angeles by Tuesday night, so Monday's Game 5 required each to come right back and play a noon start on Monday. The Mets appeared to still be flat. LA got three in the fourth, when Rick Dempsey hit a two-out double with two men on and Griffin followed with another double off lefty starter Sid Fernandez.

One inning later, after Sax and Hatcher singled, Gibson homered, Fernandez was out and the Mets were staring at a 6-0 hole. They quickly made a move against Belcher in the bottom of the fifth, when singles by Johnson and Backman were followed by a two-out home run from Dykstra to cut the lead in half.

The game stayed 6-3 into the eighth, when Dykstra doubled and scored on a single by Jeffries to make it 6-4. The bullpens were on fumes and Lasorda dug deep to find Ricky Horton. He was able to get Hernandez, but Strawberry singled to reach base as the tying run with one out. Holton was summoned.

It was time for one more plot twist. McReynolds bounced a would-be single to the left side. But it hit Jeffries, and the runner was out. Carter flied to left. The inning was over, LA added an insurance run in the ninth and closed out a 7-4 win.

By late afternoon on Monday, the Mets had—in about eighteen hours—gone from having their ace on the mound and being three outs from a 3-1 series lead, to trailing the series 3-2, going on the road and having the prospect of Hershiser in Game 7 staring them down.

New York, to their credit, didn't roll over. They went west and Game 6 saw them finally score the game's first run. An error by Hatcher started the game, and Backman singled. McReynolds hit a sac fly to stake Cone to a 1-0 lead.

Each team then missed chances. Gibson's failure to sacrifice bunt short-circuited a Dodger rally in the bottom of the inning and in then Backman struck out with a man on third and one out. The Mets were able to add a run in the third, when light-hitting shortstop Kevin Elster doubled in Strawberry.

New York was able to chase Leary in the fifth, after Strawberry drew a walk and McReynolds homered. Holton came in and did another yeoman's job at limiting damage, but Cone was sharp tonight and the four-run lead was going to stand up. LA got a run back in the fifth, but New York immediately countered with a run of their own in the top of the sixth and the Dodgers never got the tying run to the plate in a 5-1 final.

Los Angeles now turned to the ultimate insurance policy—the best pitcher in baseball on their homefield. Darling was on the mound for New York. If nothing else, the Mets knew if they kept it close, they could break LA's heart late in a Hershiser start.

This time New York couldn't keep it close. In fact, they came apart at the seams. Sax singled and came around to score on a Hatcher double and Gibson sac fly in the first. In the second inning, Scioscia and Hamilton singled to start the frame. Griffin put down a sac bunt and beat it out.

Hershiser came to the plate and grounded to third...but Johnson booted the ball. Sax drove in two runs with a single. Backman booted a grounder. Five runs were in, the score was 6-0 after two innings and the rest of the night was one long party in Dodger Stadium. That's how the game ended, with a complete-game five-hitter for Hershiser.

Hershiser, with 24.2 IP in the series and a 1.09 ERA was named 1988 NLCS MVP. I can't argue with this, but I'll admit I did do some digging to see if another choice might have been more appropriate—after all, even though it wasn't the ace's fault, the fact the Dodgers lost his first two starts had to suggest someone else must have come through.

But while there were certainly heroes—Holton, Scioscia, Gibson and Sax—none had the series-long production to make an MVP choice defensible. So let's stick with the chalk and honor Orel's brilliance.

The magic kept going for the Dodgers in the World Series. They were even bigger underdogs to the 104-win Oakland Athletics than they had been to the Mets. But a stunning walkoff win in Game 1 on a home run by Gibson set the stage for a shocking five-game upset to give Los Angeles its second title of the decade, going with their 1981 ring. The Mets had missed a major opportunity.

## 1989

It was the last gasp of the Davey Johnson era. The Mets took a step back in '89. Here are the most important things to know...

\*Starting pitching drove this team throughout the 1980s and this year was no different. David Cone, Sid Fernandez, Ron Darling and Bob Ojeda all made over 30 starts. Fernandez finished with a 2.53 ERA with the others in the mid-3s.

\*Dwight Gooden pitched well, with a 2.89 ERA, but injuries limited him to 17 starts. The Mets were left without a clear stopper in the rotation, a reason they "only" finished second in the NL in ERA after customarily being the best during this time period.

\*The void left by Gooden led the Mets to swing a big-time deal with the Minnesota Twins for Frank Viola in late summer. New York parted with Rick Aguilera as the highlight of a five-player package that netted Viola, a Cy Young winner in 1988 and MVP of the 1987 World Series. Viola underwhelmed in Shea, making 12 starts after the August deal and posting a 3.38 ERA.

\*It was a time of change for the everyday lineup. Old stalwarts like Keith Hernandez and Gary Carter were being phased out. The star of Queens in 1989 was Howard Johnson. HoJo finished with a stat line of .369 on-base percentage/.559 slugging percentage with 36 home runs. He both scored and drove in over 100 runs and swiped 41 bases.

\*HoJo finished fifth in the MVP voting, but he should have been higher. There was no denying San Francisco's Kevin Mitchell—47 home runs for a division-winning team—deserved to win, but Johnson's all-around excellence should have had him second. He was the only complete all-around player in an offense that finished third in the NL in runs scored.

\*There should have been more help from Darryl Strawberry. But coming off the best year of his career in 1988, Strawberry struggled in 1989. The slugging percentage of .466 was good enough, if below what might be expected. The .312 OBP was bad by any measurement and underscored the Mets' biggest offensive problem—they didn't get on base consistently. HoJo and new first baseman Dave Magadan were the only regulars with OBPs higher than .320.

\*The front office also looked to address the lineup in midseason with a big move. They dealt Lenny Dykstra and Roger McDowell to Philadelphia in exchange for Juan Samuel, who could play both the outfield and second base and could produce offensively. But he didn't in his 86 games with New York this season, settling for a stat line .299/.300.

\*New York was squarely in the race at the All-Star break, with a record of 45-39 and only 2 ½ games behind the NL East-leading Cubs. But the pitching was already showing signs of cracks, notably in a four-game series at Wrigley in early June. The Mets gave up 33 runs and lost three of the games. In late July they were back on Chicago's North Side and gave up 22 runs in losing three straight.

\*Even so, the Mets had a shot on Labor Day. The record was 72-63 and they were 3 ½ games back. The problem was that there were four teams all bunched up, with the Montreal Expos and St. Louis Cardinals also in the mix, so the margin of error was very tight. The Mets had beaten both the Expos and Cards a combined nine of eleven times in early August to keep themselves in the mix. New York went back to Wrigley Field for a two-game set the Tuesday and Wednesday after Labor Day to try and get back in it.

\*Cone pitched the opener and went eight innings, but was still hit around and lost 7-3. Viola got the Wednesday start and pitched extremely well. He didn't get offensive support and left after eight innings with the score tied 1-1. Reliever Don Aase came in and promptly gave up a walkoff shot. The Mets were 5 ½ games back and never got closer the rest of the way.

\*Even though Chicago pulled away with the NL East, New York still recovered enough to push past Montreal and St. Louis for second place. But the final 87-75 record marked the first time under Davey Johnson the Mets failed to win at least 90 games.

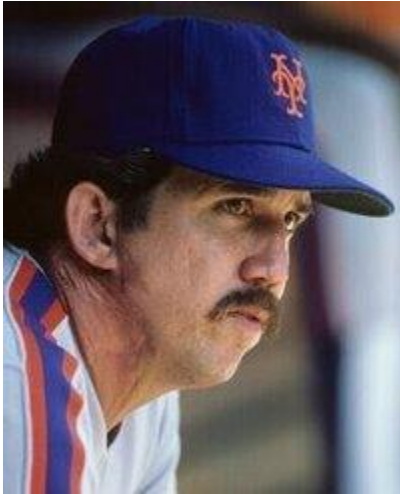
## 1990

Hard personnel decisions were made in the offseason. The Mets parted ways with Gary Carter and first Keith Hernandez. The Mets had good young replacements in Mackey Sasser behind the plate and Dave Magadan at first.

New York also traded Randy Myers to Cincinnati in exchange for John Franco, a deal of good lefthanded closer for another. In the everyday lineup, the Mets moved Juan Samuel to the Los Angeles Dodgers in exchange for Mike Marshall. That deal didn't pan out--Marshall didn't play well and was shipped up to Boston in July.

But plenty of other players did play well and they could hit. Sasser and Magadan each batted over .300. Kevin McReynolds and Howard Johnson each hit 20-plus home runs. New York picked up Daryl Boston off waivers in April and the centerfielder had a respectable year. So did Greg Jeffires at second base. Off the bench, outfielder Mark Carreon and infielder Tim Teufel each hit 10 home runs in part-time duty.

All of which made the Mets very deep offensively. But no one made the lineup go like Darryl Strawberry. The rightfielder had a comeback year. He hit 37 home runs. He drove in 108 runs. His on-base percentage was .361 and he slugged .518. All while playing in pitcher-friendly Shea Stadium. Strawberry took a good offense and made it the most prolific run-scoring unit in the National League. He finished third in the MVP voting.



The Mets' great teams of this decade were built on pitching. The '90 staff wasn't as good as the everyday lineup, but the pitchers did rank fourth in the NL in ERA. Good health was key as the top four arms all made 30-plus starts. Frank Viola led the way with a 20-win season, a 2.67 ERA and finished third in the Cy Young vote.

David Cone pitched well and won 14 games with a 3.23 ERA. Sid Fernandez clocked in with an ERA of 3.46, but a lack of run support left his record at 9-14. The offense saved their runs for when Dwight Gooden was on the mound. With a 3.83 ERA, Gooden won 19 games.

Franco anchored the bullpen with 33 saves and a 2.53 ERA. Bob Ojeda and Ron Darling split time between the bullpen and the fifth spot in the rotation. Alejandro Pena and Wally Whitehurst were respectable in relief.

All in all, the Mets were looking good and expectations were high. But they went to Pittsburgh on Opening Day and Gooden was rocked in a 12-3 loss. The Mets lost that series and by Memorial Day they were 20-22. Davey Johnson, the manager for this entire era of franchise success was fired.

Bud Harrelson was called in to take over with the team in fourth place and 7 ½ games back of the surprising Pirates. The Expos and Phillies were nestled in between the Mets and Pirates in the standings as the 1990 season turned toward summer.

New York was still 23-26 when Pittsburgh came to Shea Stadium in early June. The margin was now 8 ½ and there was no sign the managerial change was providing a spark. Then the Mets dropped the Thursday night opener of a four-game set.

But a different team showed up at Shea the rest of the weekend. The New York offense unloaded and scored 24 runs the next three games, won all three and found their footing. Coming out of this series, the Mets won 16 of 18 going, including a sweep of the Phillies who fell out of the race. New York was within a ½ game of Pittsburgh at the All-Star break, with Montreal a close third.

The time off for the All-Star game slowed the momentum and New York lost three times in a five-game set in Cincinnati. They lost a series in Houston. The finale, a 1-0 loss to Mike Scott must have brought back bad memories of the 1986 NLCS, when Scott's brilliance nearly derailed the Mets' championship season.



New York responded by winning three consecutive series and nudging into first place by a game. Some August doldrums followed, as the Mets went 10-14 and fell three games back. But towards the end of the month they swept home series against San Diego and San Francisco. Montreal fell off the pace. When Pittsburgh came into Shea on the Wednesday after Labor Day, the Mets were within a half-game of the lead.

Viola pitched the first game of Wednesday's doubleheader and was brilliant, throwing eight shutout innings. New York's offense went silent though, mustering only one single off Zane Smith. Pittsburgh got to Franco for a run in the ninth and won 1-0. The bats stayed quiet in the nightcap, a 3-1 loss. And on Thursday night, New York only put together three hits in a 7-1 loss. The offense had been shut down at the worst possible time and the Mets slipped 3 ½ games off the pace.

The margin was still at 3 ½ a week later when New York made a return visit to Pittsburgh for two games at old Three Rivers Stadium. Magadan got the opener off to a good start with a two-run double. The bats then went quiet again, but Cone had all he needed in tossing a three-hitter for a 2-1 win.

On Thursday, the Mets got what they needed with Gooden going to the mound. The presence of Doc did something for the bats. Trailing 2-0 in the fourth, Strawberry unloaded a three-run homer. Gooden got his 17th win, 6-3 and New York was back within a game and a half. There were 2 ½ weeks to play and baseball fans everywhere could look forward to a final Mets-Pirates showdown back here in Pittsburgh to close the season.

But New York couldn't make it happen. Montreal came into Shea and won three straight. The Mets split four with the Cubs, a team they could have made some hay with. The deficit grew to three games. Even though the Mets went north of the border and paid the Expos back with a sweep of their own, the Pirates were now hot. With six games to go, the Cubs came into town and won two of three. One day prior to the final series in Pittsburgh, the Mets were eliminated.

It was a tough way for the season to end and reminiscent of 1987 when a potential Mets-Cardinals showdown to end the season was foiled by New York slumping beforehand. From a historical perspective, this one was worse. It effectively ended the era. The Mets fell to 77 wins in 1991 and another managerial change was made. They would not have a winning season again until 1997.

## **EPILOGUE**

The Mets have had their share of good teams since the end of the 1984-90 era. They've won a couple more National League pennants, in 2000 and 2015. They had a terrific team in 2006 that might have won it all had injuries to the pitching staff not weakened them before the playoffs. Strong seasons in 2007 and 2008 were marred by late collapses that cost them division titles.

But 1986 remains the last time the Mets won the World Series and while the franchise has had some nice multi-season runs, they have never come close to maintaining it for seven years.

They've got a new home now, in Citi Field and a loyal fan base has more than paid its dues to get another sustained run of success.