

THE 1962 METS

Featuring

ROGER CRAIG: Veteran starting pitcher who had spent a dozen years with the Dodgers organization.

JIM HICKMAN: Rookie center fielder from the Cardinals organization.

JAY HOOK: Starting pitcher from the Reds organization who got the victory in the Mets' first win ever.

ED KRANEPOOL: Local high school phenom signed by the Mets and brought to the majors at the end of the season at the age of 17.

ROBERT LIPSYTE: A young writer who did feature stories on the team for the *New York Times*.

KEN MACKENZIE: Reliever acquired in a trade with the Braves.

FRANK THOMAS: Veteran slugger obtained in a trade with the Braves but most often identified with the Pirates.

WHEN THE AMERICAN LEAGUE doubled the number of big-league clubs to 16 at the turn of the 20th century, the U.S. population was about 77 million. Within 50 years that number had in turn doubled to 155 million and had grown an additional 25 million by 1960. In spite of those massive gains in potential ticket buyers, baseball remained as it was, a 16-team operation at the big-league level. And the recently transplanted Los Angeles Dodgers and San Francisco Giants were the only major-league teams west of Missouri.

That number seemed almost sacrosanct and, as has so often been the case in baseball's attitude toward change, it was going to take external pressure for it to move forward. Because so much of the population was not being serviced by major-league baseball other than via television, the door was open to fill that need. The pressure on major-league baseball came in two forms. First, the Pacific Coast League made some noise about becoming a third major league, going so far as to change from a lettered classification to an open one in 1952, but a general decline in minor-league attendance and the westward franchise shifts of the Giants and Dodgers put an end to that talk. Secondly, the void created in New York by the Giants' and Dodgers' moves could not possibly go unfilled. It inspired William Shea, a New York attorney, to first make overtures about moving existing teams such as the Pirates and Reds to the city and then to create the Continental League, a third major league cut from whole cloth.

Whatever Shea's intentions—and some have suggested that the whole enterprise was a leverage move to get the National League back into New York after his attempts to land an existing team had failed—the Continental League did exist on paper for a full year. From July 1959 to August 1960, ownership groups were in place for seven cities. (All, save for one—Buffalo—would eventually get major-league franchises, some sooner rather than later.) This presence was enough for the major-league owners to finally increase their franchise number to better reflect the market realities around them. The Washington Senators would move to Minneapolis-St. Paul—a Continental League city—and be replaced by a new Senators franchise. The Minnesota Twins would be joined in the American League by a second Los Angeles franchise; both of those teams began play in 1961. (The Continental League had some prescient choices among its locales, but it did not extend itself to the West Coast.) The following year the National League would move into the Sun Belt by awarding a franchise in another CL city, Houston. The second National League expansion team would go to New York.

And therein begins this tale. While the other three new clubs managed to create rosters that would win at least 60 games in their first year of existence (the Angels were especially successful, getting outscored by only 40 runs in 1961 and finishing in third place in '62), the architects of the Mets managed to create a perfect storm of a ball club, one that lost a record 120 games. Although their counterparts did a much better job of hitting the ground running, it was those Mets, under their colorful manager Casey Stengel, who became legendary.

GETTING STARTED

The new teams' rosters were stocked by an expansion draft, the players for which were provided from the major- and minor-league rosters of the existing eight teams. In the first phase of the draft the Mets and Colt .45s would select from lists of 15 players submitted by each of the eight established NL teams. Eight of the 15 players had to have been on the 25-man major-league roster as of August 31, 1961, while another seven could come from elsewhere in the organization. The Mets and Houston Colt .45s were required to take two men from each team at a cost of \$75,000 each. It was from this phase that the Mets landed their first player, catcher Hobie Landrith. (Baseball's most recent expansion teams, which joined the majors in 1998, began operating minor-league teams in the seasons leading up to their debut. Houston and New York had no such luxury.)

The second phase of the draft was dubbed the "premium" phase. Each team designated two more players from its major-league roster, and the Mets and Colt .45s could select no more than one from each club at \$125,000 each. The first player the Mets got in this round was Cardinals pitcher Bob Miller. In all, the Mets spent \$1.8 million on expansion draft day, a fairly sizable amount of money given the level of talent made available and the fact that this money wasn't included in the franchise fee. The Mets' premium picks were Miller, Reds pitcher Jay Hook, Cubs infielder Don Zimmer and Phillies corner infielder/outfielder Lee Walls. Two months after the draft New York shipped Walls to Los Angeles for Charlie Neal and a player to be named later, who turned out to be pitcher Willard Hunter.

Of the four premium choices, only Zimmer could have been considered a regular in 1961. Two of the players the Mets took in the initial draft were deemed expendable by their respective teams after they had been struck by routine maladies the year before. Cardinals catcher Chris Cannizzaro had lost playing time to appendicitis in 1961. Jay Hook had been hit by the mumps. Ironically, it was during a turn as a baseball goodwill ambassador that he caught the disease.

JAY HOOK: When [the Reds] wanted somebody to speak at schools or something where they didn't pay anybody to do it, they thought of me. So we were out in California and I had gone out to speak at the school—actually the guy had been the principal at the grade school I went to in Illinois but had moved

to California. I must have contracted [the mumps] there but they really knocked me out for that 1961 season, which was a shame, because I ended up with mono; at the end of the season they insisted I go get a physical and my blood count was still high. So anyway, I had a terrible year in 1961 [1–3, 7.76 ERA in 62 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings] when we won the pennant. I really didn't get to pitch very much after I got sick. But I think they put me in the draft—they put me as one of the premium draft choices—because they probably didn't think anybody would pick me. My wife Joanne and I were driving home from the World Series in our little Austin-Healey—the kids had gone home early—and we heard over the radio that we'd been sold to the Mets.

ROGER CRAIG: [The move to the Mets] had some possibilities because in 1960 I had had a collision with Vada Pinson and broken my clavicle and I came back and pitched after a doctor said I'd never pitch again. I came back eight weeks later and nearly had a complete-game victory against the Cardinals. I didn't really feel that bad because baseball is a business and sometimes you just have to move on.

JIM HICKMAN: Like anybody, I was glad to go to the big leagues; I was glad to get there.

ROGER CRAIG: I saw it as a chance to get a new start and pitch every fourth day. I was looking forward to playing for Casey Stengel—which, as it turned out, I really enjoyed for those two years. I knew we were going to lose a lot of ball games because we had a lot of guys—including me—that were near the end of their careers. I learned a lot that really helped me when I became a pitching coach and a manager later on.

Some were disappointed that they weren't taken in the draft, like Braves pitcher Ken MacKenzie, who turned out to be the only '62 Met who fashioned a winning record (5–4).

KEN MACKENZIE: I'm actually part of Mets history as the first non-draftee to join the team, although that requires

a bit of explaining. The expansion draft occurred while I was playing in Puerto Rico and I remember being really depressed when neither the Colt .45s nor the Mets chose me. To put it more accurately, I wanted to get away from the Braves. I was stuck in a logjam in Milwaukee: the pitching staff had Warren Spahn, Lew Burdette, Bob Buhl, Carl Willey, Don Nottebart, Bob Hendley, and Don McMahon. Moe Drabowsky was also on that team. There was no place for me and I knew it. I hadn't pitched much for the Braves in '60 or '61 (15½ innings total), and I was going to be 28 in '62. In '61 (Milwaukee manager) Chuck Dressen sent me down to make room for this young catcher named Joe Torre. I told Braves general manager John McHale that I was going to quit. Now back then someone like me was worth money to the club—about \$25,000 would be the going rate. I was sold a couple of times for that amount. Players were being moved all over the place for numbers like that; it was the bottom price. So McHale said, "No, you go to Louisville and have a good season and I'll do something with you at the end of the season if you don't figure in our plans." That sounded good to me.

I did pitch well in Louisville and the Braves put me in the expansion draft. I was ready to quit when I didn't get picked. But, a few weeks later, while we were still in Puerto Rico, I got a letter from New York. The letter informed me that I had been purchased from the Braves by the New York Metropolitan Baseball Club. They had bought me from Milwaukee along with Johnny Antonelli, another lefty. The letter was on *Continental League* stationery—they were recycling the stationery. I didn't think to save it . . .

Slugger Frank Thomas came to the Mets via a trade with the Braves on November 28, 1961. The deal angered him, but not because it was to an expansion team.

FRANK THOMAS: I was kind of disappointed because, number one, I was promised that wouldn't happen. When I went in to talk contract with John McHale, I said to him: "If

you have the intention of trading me, please, don't let me sign. Let me dicker with the club I'm going to go to." Then I asked him, "What are your intentions for me come 1962?" And he said, "Well, you're going to be our left fielder." I said, "If that's the case, then you bring out whatever contract you want me to sign and I'm doing it, because you're giving me the chance to play regularly again." That was in September. In November I was up hunting with my friends when my wife called and said, "You just got sold to the Mets." He lied to me.

Ed Kranepool came to the team later, signed for a nice bonus at mid-season right out of high school in the Bronx, and was brought up through three levels of the minor leagues, and finally to the big club, in the course of one summer.

ED KRANEPOOL: When I reached the majors the final bonus was over \$100,000—a lot of money back then. We didn't have a draft back in '62; you could sign with whomever you wanted to and you negotiated your own deal. The talks went very quickly. Bubber Jonnard [the Mets' chief scout] wanted me and he made no secret of it. I did give [White Sox scout] Steve Ray the last option. I told them what the Mets had offered so Hank Greenberg [a part-owner] and the White Sox could match it, but they didn't. That was fine with me. I wanted to stay in New York and the Yankees hadn't really pursued me. They knew the Mets were at every game and it was a foregone conclusion that they would go at me hard.

SPRING TRAINING AND A ROUGH START

It is not generally remembered that the '62 Mets played fairly well in spring training, further proof that anyone who puts stock in spring games is missing the point of the exercise. New York finished exhibition play with a .500 record. While no one thought they would contend, few saw what atrocities were in store for the team.

ROGER CRAIG: There were a bunch of really good ball-players there: Gil Hodges, Frank Thomas, Richie Ashburn, Gus Bell, Felix Mantilla. We felt that even though we all came from different places we might be able to blend together and do something. It was a fun feeling. Casey Stengel brightened up the clubhouse even during the season when we were really losing. He would make you feel like today's another day and we have a chance to win. In spring training it was a lot of fun. It was a novelty.

JAY HOOK: It was a pretty optimistic feeling, because we had a number of guys who had had wonderful careers already. We had a manager who had won a number of pennants with the Yankees; Casey had a great relationship with all the writers; so, you know, as Mets we probably got as much publicity, if not more publicity, than the Yankees did.

ROBERT LIPSYTE: I went down there assuming that they were going to be terrible. What did I know? I was not a baseball writer. I was not particularly a sports fan. I had not followed this stuff closely.

The general feeling at the *Times* was that this team was going to be so bad that it would be a feature writer's delight. It was not going to be a good assignment for sports guys who had been hunkering in the corner since 1957 when the Dodgers and Giants left town. It was seen as a feature writer's story rather than a real baseball writer's story, which is why they sent me.

KEN MACKENZIE: None of us suspected what would happen with the Mets that first year. We had some names on that club, you know. Charlie Neal, Don Zimmer, Frank Thomas, Felix Mantilla—whom I knew could hit from when he was with the Braves—Richie Ashburn, Gil Hodges, Gene Woodling, Gus Bell, Roger Craig. We also had guys like Elio Chacon, but he was really a fringe player. We thought we had a baseball team.

ROBERT LIPSYTE: To my shame, along with my little portable Olivetti typewriter, I brought along my glove. What kind of insanity was that? Joyce Carol Oates once said that the comparison between the fighter in the ring and the ringside reporter was maybe as great as the difference between men and women. Professional athletes are like another species. I remember the first time I went to bat during spring training. This was batting practice thrown by Cookie Lavagetto, one of the Mets coaches; kind of soft, little tosses but they were the fastest thing I had ever seen. Later I went onto the field with the glove I had brought and kind of gathered in a soft fly which felt like a bullet in my hand. As mediocre or bad or as second-rate as this expansion team might have been, you can't forget that these were professional athletes. They had been stars since they were 12 years old and they took an enormous amount of pride in themselves. At that level, particularly then, before there was such an explosion of talent, the difference between a guy who was on the world championship team and the cellar team really wasn't all that great. They were all wonderful, superb talents.

ROGER CRAIG: On paper, with all those names, we looked halfway decent. Then the games started. We lost nine in a row to start, then we won one, then lost a bunch more. We were a bad defensive ball club and the pitching was so-so at best. We found out pretty soon that it was going to be a long season.

CASEY

Never an entity to pass up a chance to trade on a local favorite, the Mets tabbed for their very first manager Casey Stengel, a man whose New York baseball roots went back to his playing days with the Brooklyn Dodgers beginning in 1912. He had also played with the Giants in the '20s and had managed the Dodgers to no good end a decade later. Most famous and recent, though, was his incredible run at the helm of the Yankees. Beginning

in 1949 and ending with Stengel's unceremonious dumping at the end of the 1960 World Series, when he was 70 years old, his Yankee teams had won 10 pennants and had gone on to grab the world championship seven times. In a more litigious era Casey would have been able to make a strong case against his former Yankees employers for age discrimination. As it was, he departed with dignity and the Yankees kept on winning. His affiliation with the new Mets franchise made him one of the few people who could say that he'd been an employee of all four New York ball clubs.

Actually it was Stengel's old boss, George Weiss—himself a victim of Yankee ageism—who in his new role as Mets team president hired him to pilot the expansion club. Stengel had turned down the Tigers' opening and seemed ready for retirement when Weiss convinced him to return to the National League. (It's interesting to note that had Stengel taken the Tigers' job prior to the 1961 season and kept it through July 24, 1965, the day he broke his hip and retired for good, his career winning percentage as a manager would have been some 35 or 40 points higher.)

There is a tendency to think of Stengel's tenures with the Yankees and Mets as being polar opposites in terms of seriousness. After all, it was said that rooting for the Stengel-era Yankees was like rooting for U.S. Steel. Certainly there was no greater contrast for such a team than the happy-go-lucky expansion Mets. Really though, how completely serious could any team be with a character like Stengel running the show? This was, after all, the man who over the years had fired off such wry pearls of wisdom as, "The secret of successful managing is to keep the five guys who hate you away from the five guys who haven't made up their minds." In his biography of Stengel, Robert Creamer tells of the time in 1960 that the Yankees took part in a staged group satire. He writes, "In Chicago one night, Stengel and his players mocked [Bill] Veeck's famous exploding scoreboard (the first to put on an extravagant display when a home-team player hit a home run) by lighting sparklers after a Yankee hit one over the fence and parading around in front of the dugout waving them at the crowd." That certainly sounds like a '62 Mets anecdote—except for its obvious American League pedigree, of course.

FRANK THOMAS: I enjoyed playing for Casey. You know, you hear a lot of stories about Casey and everything like that, but I was in the field most of the time and didn't know some of the things he pulled on the bench. Casey was the type of

manager that if he wanted to light a fire underneath a ballplayer he would make sure that in the clubhouse with the writers around him he would be close enough to that particular ballplayer to make sure that the ballplayer heard what he had to say. This is something that he did with Jim Hickman. I kind of told Jim that he was trying to light a fire under you and that you were a better ballplayer than what you were showing. And Casey thought that by doing this Jim would say, "I'll prove to that old son of a gun that I am a better ballplayer." But Jim went the other way. Casey used reverse psychology with him and it didn't work. After he left the Mets, Jim had a great year with Chicago. Hit a lot of home runs [32 in 1970, with 115 RBIs].

JIM HICKMAN: Playing for Casey was great. Everybody doesn't get that opportunity and I didn't realize what a great opportunity it was until after it was over. I had a hard time understanding him. He'd give us some of those little talks in spring training that year and I just wondered what he said when he finished. You know, maybe in a couple of days it would kind of come to me. Sometimes it would take a day or two for it to hit you.

KEN MACKENZIE: We were coming back from the airport on the bus one night. Casey and I were probably the only two Mets who lived in Manhattan. So there were probably only two or three writers on the bus with Casey and me. Casey was getting off at the Essex House up on 59th and I was going to take the bus down to Grand Central, the last stop, and from there go on to the Village where my wife and I were living.

Casey is a row in front of me and he starts talking about this pitcher he's got and how he had thought he might fire him, but then he talked to a guy from Vanderbilt and he decided to give this player another chance and now he's pitching pretty good so he's going to keep him.

This went on for 15 or 20 minutes until I finally realized he was talking about me! The guy from Vanderbilt had been

Ben Garrity, my former manager at Louisville. I knew I had been on the hook, but I never knew until then just how close I had come to getting sent out. Obviously I had a game or two in the interim that had changed his mind. I guess, in a way, he was sending me a message.

ROGER CRAIG: Casey was a heavy drinker and he'd be out drinking a lot at night and we'd be playing these hot day games in spring training and he'd fall asleep on the bench all the time. The crack of the bat would wake him up and he would jump. One time he jumped out of a nap and said, "Get me Blanchard down in the bull pen." Of course, Johnny Blanchard had been his catcher with the Yankees.

Whenever we flew, our trainer Gus Mauch carried a small suitcase and Casey would hide different kinds of liquor in there. One time I went to the back of the plane to use the lavatory and Casey said, "Mr. Craig, I'd like to talk to you. What would you like to drink?" And he opened up his suitcase and there was all this whiskey and stuff in there.

ROBERT LIPSYTE: I loved covering Casey. I think he's one of the great misunderstood guys in all of sports. He was extremely smart and very aware of what was going on. I liked him enormously. If you spent a whole day—or a whole night as was often the case since he would close the bar every night—listening to him very carefully and would catch who he was talking about at the beginning of the monologue and kind of follow it through the twists and the turns and the riffs and the diversions, he would tell a wonderful story with a lot of wisdom and a lot of great baseball history. There was this tendency, particularly on the part of columnists who would kind of breeze in and out and didn't have a lot of time, to listen to him for just an hour and scribble down what he was saying about "... this guy ... that guy ... this feller ..." and call it "Stengelese" and make him "the old Professor," this kind of nutty old guy. This was fine with Stengel because I think he saw his function at that point was to divert the press

from just how bad the team was while still keeping the Mets in the news.

ED KRANEPOOL: He was a consummate PR man for the Mets 24 hours a day. They needed that. The great thing about Casey was that he took the press off the players, away from how badly the team was doing. So the reporters wrote about the losing—they had to—but it wasn't really negative.

ROGER CRAIG: Casey was a media delight. He could entertain! Everybody talks about Stengelese, but I have to say, he was very intelligent and very sharp. He was in his 70s then and he could carry on 10 different conversations with 10 different sportswriters at one time and that confused some people, but he knew exactly what he was saying. He'd be talking to one guy, remember what someone else had asked him, and go back to that on the fly.

JAY HOOK: He was a legend and he loved the game. I analyzed Stengelese and came to realize that he'd be talking about one subject and thinking about the next subject he was going to talk about and he'd jump to that subject, but he hadn't finished the first one so he'd go back to it. So he'd have two or three lines of discussion going on at the same time.

ED KRANEPOOL: That act he put on in front of the cameras before the game was just that. All show business. The red light went on and you might as well walk away from him because he was going into that double-talk, rambling about stuff that happened 50 years before for the reporters. But when he talked to you one-on-one or in the clubhouse, you knew exactly what he was saying. He was not only clear but articulate. I hope I'm as sharp as he was at 75.

KEN MACKENZIE: One day Roger was on the mound and Casey took him out after Roger got into some trouble and brought in Galen Cisco. On the way back to the dugout, Roger said to Casey, "So you're going to blow this one too, you old

goat.” He and Casey sat next to each other in the dugout and Casey put his hand on Roger’s knee and said, “You know, you’ve lost a few yourself.”

After the game Roger—his locker was next to mine—said, “You know I really feel like shit, what I said to the old man. What should I do?”

I said, “I think you should apologize.” He goes into Casey’s office for a few minutes and when he came back I asked him what had happened.

Casey had told him, “Forget it, Roger. I know you want to win and so do I.”

ROBERT LIPSYTE: He could be very sarcastic and nasty. We had taken over this big, old formerly posh hotel in St. Petersburg. The team was staying there and they had some black players. There were some complaints from some of the old-line guests about black players in the pool. So Casey ruled the pool off-limits for all players. So I asked him about that story and he said, “That’s right, and I also said they can’t screw the whole season. Now you put that in your *New York Times*.” More pointedly he was likely to introduce a couple of second-rate rookies to the press as “the future of the Mets! I want you guys to look at these guys carefully and interview them because on their shoulders is the future of this team.” So everybody would spend time with them and, of course, they’d be cut or sent back to the minors the next week.

KEN MACKENZIE: Casey was guilty of using pitchers who had a hot hand too often. He’d keep running you in there until you got your brains beat out and then you sat for nine days or two weeks. He would overwork you, then underuse you, and you can’t establish a pitching rhythm that way. That’s an advantage relievers have today. It’s all scripted. They pretty much know in advance who will pitch the fifth, the sixth, and so on unless someone gets their ears pinned back early. To my mind,

Casey was a seat-of-the-pants manager, at least with us. There didn't seem to be any great plan from one game to the next. He just made it up as he went along. He managed the way he talked.

ED KRANEPOOL: I loved playing for him. Casey was a gentleman who spent a lot of time with the young players, passing on all the information he had. He kind of took me under his wing. He didn't want to expose me too quickly.

JAY HOOK: He was probably the most quick-witted person I have met. He was *so* quick-witted.

ROGER CRAIG: A lot of managers can't handle a great ball club like Casey did with the Yankees. He was so witty, so funny, and so sharp that he kept us very loose and I'm sure he did that with the Yankees, too.

ED KRANEPOOL: He spent a lot of time with the younger players like me and Larry Bearnarth, taking us around the bases and making us sit next to him in the dugout to learn the game. He wasn't going to teach anything to Frank Thomas or Richie Ashburn. They already knew.

KEN MACKENZIE: In one of the last games of the season, Casey put Jim Hickman in center field and Richie Ashburn at second base. Richie had been in the major leagues for over 14 years and he had never played anywhere but center field before. I'm not sure but I think someone might have been hurt. But to tell you the truth, it didn't matter. On that club, Ashburn was as good a second baseman as anyone else they could have put out there. Really, I didn't notice any difference.

JAY HOOK: My wife and I had two kids at the time and they looked at Casey and his wife Edna as a third set of grandparents. They never had any children. She was a silent-movie star and they lived out in Glendale, California. When we'd go to a press luncheon or something, he'd come and get our two

kids and take them and they'd sit with Casey and Edna. When I got traded to Milwaukee, his first comment was, "Well, Edna's going to be upset with me."

ROBERT LIPSYTE: The most telling moment with Stengel came one day before a spring training game. We were just standing there talking when an old man came down to the railing dragging a surly teenager. He reaches out and touches Stengel. He said, "Excuse me, Casey, do you remember me? I played against you in Kankakee." [As a player, Stengel had spent a season there in 1910, 52 years before.] Stengel looks at me and kind of rolls his eyes. Then he turns and he looks up at the guy and he immediately sees the situation with the surly teenager and he says, "Yeah, it's you! The old fireballer! I was glad when you left the league, you gave me such a hard time!" He grabbed the guy's arm and he talked for a while about the old days and the minor leagues and then he says, "Whoops, I gotta go now. I've got this really bad team I have to manage. So listen, if you decide to make a comeback I could use you, and if that kid of yours is half as good as you are, send him around. I'll give him a bonus."

I watched him walk away and the dynamic between the kid and the old man had changed. So I said to Casey, "Do you really remember that guy?" And he just shrugged his shoulders. Here's the kicker: Later on I told this story to one of the other reporters, an older guy who was one of the men responsible for creating the Old Professor/"crazy old Casey" stories. He said that he does that sort of stuff when you're around because he sees you as this young, liberal guy. "You also might notice that when you're around and he sees people that are quadriplegics or blind people, he'll go talk to them."

And I said, "Okay. If you agree that he's this manipulative genius, then why do you keep writing this crap about him?"

"My editor and the fans really like this nutty Old Professor stuff," he said. That was kind of a journalistic revelation for

me. I was still a kid. I said to myself, “So this is how we do this stuff?”

KEN MACKENZIE: The reporters knew how to play off Casey and it was great fun. One night in Milwaukee I threw a pitch to Del Crandall, the weakest hitter in the Braves lineup, and he hit a shot that Frank Thomas just caught at the left field fence. Casey told the reporters afterward, “If you’re going to throw high, you’ve got to have lightning.” And one of the reporters said, “No, Casey. He’s been hit by everything *but* that.”

ROGER CRAIG: The main thing I learned from Casey was that you have to keep a good clubhouse atmosphere. In his own way he was strict. I think that for most successful managers it all starts in the clubhouse. You’ve got to let them know you’re the boss and don’t let things get out of hand. If you see a problem you’ve got to nip it in the bud. There will be certain players that are not going to like you and they will try to get you fired. One time I asked my coach with the Giants, Norm Sherry, if my players liked me. He said, “They’re afraid of you but they respect you.” And that’s how I wanted it. Casey was different. Unlike him, I would show my frustration at times. Not during a game. I would never show a player up. After the game or maybe before the next game I might have a meeting to discuss it. Casey, though—maybe because he was older—I never saw him mad.

FINALLY, A WIN

The Houston Colt .45s won their first game 11–3 and the two after that by shutout. The year before, the brand-new Los Angeles Angels also won their first game, while the new version of the Washington Senators got their first win in the second game of the ’61 season. This sort of good fortune did not grace the Mets. They lost on Opening Day in St. Louis and kept right on losing for the better part of the next two weeks. Symptomatic of this nine-

game opening drought was starting third baseman and former Dodger Don Zimmer. He started all the games, often at the top of the order, and managed three singles and two walks in 37 plate appearances. He scored one run and had no runs batted in.

The Mets finally got their first win in Pittsburgh when Zimmer sat down and Jay Hook tossed a five-bitter at a Pirates lineup that differed little from the one that had clinched the world championship in Casey Stengel's Yankee swan song just 18 months before. Hook also had a two-run single in the game. His other legacy from that season was the revelation that he, practically alone among all the men who have ever thrown one, could actually explain why a curveball curves.

JAY HOOK: When I was going to grad school at Northwestern University the Russians were launching the Sputnik satellite. Sputnik was a spheroid and we got to talking about the dynamics of a spheroid coming back into the atmosphere. It's the same dynamics that govern a baseball curving and it's the same dynamics that govern an airplane's wings. Basically wing theory. So over coffee some of the grad students and I worked up the dynamics of a curveball. Bob Lipsyte came up to me one day and said, "I've got 13 inches of column space in the *New York Times* to fill. Explain to me why a curveball curves." So I drew a ball with a boundary layer buildup and the force vectors and all this and I wrote out Bernoulli's Law.

ROBERT LIPSYTE: Jay Hook was very smart and he drew me diagrams about the gas dynamics law for an article I did for the *Times*.

JAY HOOK: Of course, who's going to believe a ballplayer on something like that? So he goes over to Columbia University and gets the head of the physics department and gets him to look at my stuff and the guy said, "Yeah, that's Bernoulli's Law of Basic Wing Theory. He got it right." Later on, a company called Sarcoscope probably saw Lipsyte's article and contacted me and had me expand on it. They used Bernoulli's Law in the manufacturing of their steam traps. They paid me a little money to write a thing that they put in this little publication that

they sent out to their distributors. It was called *The Dynamics of the Curveball*.

I think the Bureau of Standards did some calculations one time and discovered that a ball could curve 16½ inches or something like that within the 60 feet, 6 inches—and that was the maximum amount it could curve. You look at the things that affect it: the density of the air, the amount of moisture in the air, how fast you throw it, how much spin you’ve got on the ball—there’s a bunch of optimums that have to come together to get the maximum break on a curveball.

So Lipsyte won \$100 for the best article of the month in the *New York Times* and about a week later I’m pitching in the Polo Grounds and get knocked out in the fourth or fifth inning. After the game Lipsyte came into the locker room to talk to me, and Casey Stengel came by, and he looked at me and he looked at Lipsyte, then he looked back at me and said to Lipsyte, “You know, if Hook could only do what he knows.” I’ve used that line in business and I used it when I taught at Northwestern. I’ve used it in church talks.

ROBERT LIPSYTE: Casey saw the curveball piece and said, “It’s wonderful that he knows how a curveball works. Now if he could only throw one.”

THE LOSSES PILE UP

The high-water mark of the Mets’ season came at the conclusion of an impressive 9–3 run that lasted from May 6 to May 20. New York began play in that fortnight at 3–16 and finished it 12–19. All nine victories required the Mets to come from behind, which might seem to be a testament to their fortitude but is probably more an indicator of how close to failure they were even when things were seemingly going well. The run proved

to be nothing more than a prelude to disaster, however, as the comebacks stopped coming and the team promptly lost its next 17 games to fall to the prescient winning percentage of .250. A 13-game losing streak came later in the season as well as two seven-game skids. Individual achievements were easily superseded by such group futility. For instance, Frank Thomas, who hit 34 home runs for the season, had three consecutive two-homer games in August—and the Mets lost all three.

FRANK THOMAS: As a ballplayer, every day is another day. You have so much pride in yourself and that's what makes the game of baseball so great. In other words, if you're playing football and lose on Sunday, you have all week to brood about it, whereas if you're playing baseball, you can get beat 15–0 and start fresh the next day. It's altogether different.

JIM HICKMAN: Nobody likes to lose. You know, even though we knew we didn't have a real good ball club, nobody likes to lose, and we didn't enjoy going to the park and losing every day. At that time there wasn't too much we could do about it.

ROGER CRAIG: A lot of guys would give anything to be in the major leagues, so I don't think there were too many people on the team that weren't happy to be there. I do think, though, that as the season went on and it got tiring to lose all the time, that there were a lot of guys who were thinking, "Well, maybe I'll get picked up by some contending ball club and get out of here." There was some of that going around. There were some decent players that could have played a different role with a better club and helped them.

FRANK THOMAS: If you look at my career—I played 18½ years, and 12 of those were spent in last place. Through the minors I was with the Pirates organization and they were almost always last. It doesn't get old if you love the game of baseball. A ballplayer has so much pride in himself, he'll just go out and give 100 percent and let the chips fall where they may.

JAY HOOK: I never felt that we were down. I guess the neat thing about baseball is that there's a new game every day. And I always felt that people were fairly optimistic, that we thought we could compete, and, you know, you hate to be honest but while you're going through it you've still got a game tomorrow.

ROBERT LIPSYTE: These guys were not happy being on a terrible team, especially the older players like Thomas, Gil Hodges, and Ashburn. These were guys who had a taste of what it meant to be a real ballplayer on a real team and they did not like to be made fun of. On the other hand players like Rod Kanehl and Choo Choo Coleman were just happy to be there.

ED KRANEPOOL: We were bad in the sense that we had a lot of name players past their primes and it was tough to compete in the National League, particularly with an older club. We were an expansion team but we weren't young. Remember, in 1962, you got to be 32, 33, they thought you were ancient. Not like today.

ROGER CRAIG: It became more of a job than it was a fun thing. I knew when I walked out there that I wasn't going to get many runs and that I had a good chance of losing. That didn't affect my positive thinking as far as trying to win, but it became more of a job as it went along.

THE DODGERS-GIANTS CONNECTION

It is sometimes said that while expansion teams like the Angels and Colt .45s tried to put together the best team possible, the Mets seemed a little too concerned with reliving New York's baseball past, and it cost them on the field. Their very colors were a combination taken from the uniforms of the departed teams. There is no denying, however, that the specter of the Dodgers and Giants loomed large over the Mets, and nowhere did that

manifest itself more than at the turnstiles. The average attendance for the Mets' games against San Francisco and Los Angeles was 31,538. Against the other seven visiting clubs it was a budget-busting 9,432. The former New York teams went a combined 15–3 at the Polo Grounds in 1962, a year that found them tied for first when the regular season ended. These were teams loaded with stars worth paying to see, regardless of who they were playing: Sandy Koufax, Don Drysdale, Tommy Davis, Maury Wills, Willie Mays, Willie McCovey, Juan Marichal, and Orlando Cepeda.

There was a strong desire to stock the Mets roster with as many former Dodgers and Giants as possible. Don Zimmer, Charlie Neal, Gil Hodges, Roger Craig, and Johnny Antonelli were of this stripe. In the case of Antonelli, a 31-year-old left-hander who had won 19 games for the Giants in '59, it didn't work out.

KEN MACKENZIE: Antonelli almost immediately decided to retire. He was in the tire business or something up in Syracuse and he decided to pursue that. So that left me as the only non-draftee on the Mets. If Antonelli had showed up, I probably wouldn't have made it to Opening Day. They really wanted him. He had been a big winner with the New York Giants, and the Mets were naturally attracted to players who had starred with the Giants or Dodgers. They were good for box office.

ED KRANEPOOL: My teammates were pretty much all helpful. Frank Thomas was my first roommate and my closest friend on the club. We still talk. I'm fresh out of high school and now I have to dress like an adult; I've never stayed in a hotel or been exposed to much travel. Never set foot on a plane until we went to California. Frank helped with that. Gil Hodges worked with me on defense at first base. I was a raw kid who had played first base with a limited knowledge of everything the position demanded. And I played it well, but Gil taught me the fundamentals and secrets. He was always stressing positioning, where to throw the ball. How to block and scoop the ball. Things you don't learn in high school. Gil polished me into a good first baseman. I already had good hands. Gil could see that. But there are ways of stretching out and giving with the ball so that it drops into your glove rather

than throwing your glove forward and pounding it away from you. If your hands are loose when the ball hits your glove and you're extended—as opposed to jabbing at it—then you draw your glove back toward your body and the ball hits the pocket and stays there. My footwork was fair but there are positions that you're supposed to take on and around the base to have an advantage; Gil worked on all that stuff. When the throw was coming from third, I could position myself in one area, from second or short, I'd set up somewhere else. He taught me not to stretch too soon, not to anticipate. If you stretch out and the ball is offline, you'll never be able to recover.

JIM HICKMAN: Every time the Dodgers and Giants came to town the place was full, and it was a different atmosphere as far as the game itself. It was sort of a play-off atmosphere to us, and everybody talked about the two teams that left town. They were tough games. Both the Dodgers and Giants had real good ball clubs. We knew we were in for it when they came to town.

JAY HOOK: One of the advantages I think we had versus, say, Houston, was that the Dodgers and Giants had been there and they had their own cadre of fans, and they moved out to California and there was a four-year hiatus there where there wasn't National League baseball. I think when the Mets came they were kind of adopted by a lot of Giants fans and Dodger fans. And sure, they could be brutal at times, but most of the time they were really cheering for the Mets.

FRANK THOMAS: We always wanted to play the spoiler.

ROGER CRAIG: Maury Wills was going to run, and you just had to figure out when. He was on his own most of the time, so he would go when he thought he had the jump. By throwing to first base a lot it made him more cautious and it helped my catcher when he did run. He had the knack of knowing when I was going to throw over there. He and Joe Morgan were the best I ever saw at that. Maury and Joe were

often able to steal signs to know when you were going to throw over. One thing about Maury was that when he was going to go, his lead wasn't quite so big. When he was going to go, he'd back off a couple of steps and knowing that helped me hold him there.

JAY HOOK: I remember facing Sandy Koufax. I batted left-handed—and I didn't strike out very much. He threw me a four-seam fastball that kind of rode up that I fouled off. The next pitch he threw me a two-seam fastball that sunk, which was a strike, and the next pitch he threw me was a curveball and I knew it was a curveball and it started out like it was going up behind my head. I knew it could get over the plate, but I didn't think it could get down into the strike zone. But it did. It *really* broke. He had a great curveball.

KEN MACKENZIE: Koufax didn't have one of his greater years that season because he faced us only twice. Struck out 18 the first time and pitched a no-hitter the second time. I've always said he was unfair. I don't know how many people are aware of this, but Sandy has these enormous hands. From the butt of his palm to the tips of his fingers, his hand was at least an inch and a half longer than mine. So when his wrist comes forward, think of where that baseball goes when compared to my stubby hands. I'm back in the arc. Koufax's fastball was a couple of feet faster than mine and it was all there in those longer hands. Which is why his ball would land in the catcher's mitt while mine was still out there getting whacked. He threw a four-seam fastball, straight backspin. His curveball had straight forward spin, so you really had difficulty differentiating the spin between the two pitches. They looked the same coming in because there was no seam showing, whereas with most curveballs there's usually a dot you can pick up. You hear about 12-to-6 curves that break straight down but the true 12-to-6 is very, very rare. Most of them go 1-to-7. Sandy had that 12-to-6, straight over the top. Maybe Ernie Broglio had one, Clem Labine, and that fellow who pitched for the Washington Senators, Camilo Pascual—great curve. When it has that

tight spin, you can hear the ball go *sizzzzzzz*. Koufax's curve would start high, say, around your shoulders and would be down around your knees when it finished up. A real curve. But none of those curveballers could match Koufax's velocity. He would throw a fastball up in the letters and it would look good, but no one could hit it. No one. The key was he not only threw the ball hard—I'm sure he could reach 100—but it had great movement. His fastball wasn't straight and it would hop.

ED KRANEPOOL: With Koufax we knew what was coming. I could read his pitches. For years he gave away his pitches with this little thing he did in the stretch. But it didn't matter when you're that overpowering with a dominating curveball. Right-handers took a lot of those curves for strikes because the pitch started high and broke so late. But when a left-hander sees something high in his eyes, he's going to swing and you can put it in play. I think lefties had better luck against Koufax because they didn't take as many curves. The curveball was his strike-out pitch.

THE MARV MYSTIQUE AND THE "NEW BREED" OF FAN

To say that the '62 Mets were a "cult team" is only a bit of an exaggeration. They were popular beyond their level of achievement, but not as popular as they would become two years later when Shea Stadium opened and the turnstiles really began to whirl. The '62 team's attendance of 922,530 is the second-lowest in club history (not counting the strike year of 1981), besting only the New Dark Ages team of 1979. As noted, when the Dodgers and Giants weren't visiting, the '62 Mets drew as poorly as any team in baseball except perhaps the Chicago Cubs and Kansas City Athletics. In the midst of this, though, a change was occurring, a division between old and new that was epitomized in the difference between attending a Yankees and Mets game. There was an almost romantic cynicism about the proceedings, perhaps best exemplified in the development of the Marv Throneberry mystique.

Marv Throneberry, who died in 1994 and is known for his appearance in Miller Lite commercials, was perhaps most famous for a play that smacks of urban legend. It really did happen, though, on June 17 in the first game of a doubleheader against Chicago. After botching a rundown—a Throneberry specialty—in the top of the first that was instrumental in giving the Cubs four runs, he came to bat with men on first and second and one out in the bottom of the inning and creamed one.

FRANK THOMAS: He hit a triple and got called out for missing first base, and Casey came out to argue and the umpire, Dusty Boggess, said, “Don’t bother, Casey. He missed second, too.” The next man up hit a home run and we ended up losing by a run.

KEN MACKENZIE: Marv thought he was Mickey Mantle. Really. When he jogged, he kept his elbows up behind him like Mickey. At the time some of the guys got their shirts tailor-made. Mickey always wore a wide-collared white shirt. So did Marv. He wore his helmet the way Mickey did. And every once in a while Marv would hit a ball like Mickey—a long way. But not nearly as often. In the field, zany things just seemed to happen around him. He wouldn’t get his foot on first base, he wouldn’t catch balls hit right to him. I also remember him lunging for bad throws and looking awkward when it really wasn’t his fault. Our infielders weren’t known for their consistent accuracy. A lot of those throws put him on the spot.

ROGER CRAIG: I had a good pickoff move, and that year I had a lot of targets for it over there at first base. Now, when Marv Throneberry was playing first, a lot of the time my pick-off throws would hit him in the chest. Finally, he came over to me one day and said, “Don’t throw to first base because I can’t see the ball coming at me because of the white shirts in the background.” So, I looked behind me and all I could see was empty seats on the third-base side and I said, “There’s nobody over there!” He was touted as being the next Mickey Mantle. He kind of copied Mantle the way he swung. He was a nice guy, but he didn’t like me to throw the ball over there.

ROBERT LIPSYTE: Throneberry was interesting. The writer Stan Isaacs did a lot to help create the Throneberry legend. Throneberry was never going to be a superstar, but he was brought up by the Yankees and was in the outfield with Mickey Mantle. He was one of those guys who had given up a college football scholarship to become a baseball player. He was a very proud baseball player who years and years later told me that he had not enjoyed that time when he was being mocked and he had really always thought of himself as a former Yankee rather than a former Met. Within the dynamic of the team the guys got it and ran with it, especially Richie Ashburn. By then Ashburn had had a successful career with the Phillies. He was the one who really talked to Throneberry about relaxing into this role as the kind of goat/spokesman for this goat team. I remember one time Frank Thomas made a couple of errors at third base and, at Ashburn's instigation, Throneberry said so that the press could hear, "What's Frank trying to do, steal all my fans?"

KEN MACKENZIE: He wasn't very receptive to the Marvelous Marv thing at first. He didn't want any part of it. It was Ashburn who instantly recognized what was going on with Marv. He took Throneberry aside and said, "No, Marv, this is good, just go along with it." It was really Ashburn who encouraged Throneberry to play back with the writers and tell them what he thought about things.

ROBERT LIPSYTE: In many ways what was really colorful was not the team but the response to the team. Had it been happening in Milwaukee or Cleveland or somewhere, it would have just been lost in the fog of sports. But here you had a very hungry and very clever press contingent led by Dick Young of the *Daily News* and his sidekick Jack Lang from the Long Island paper. So they kind of built this into a totem or mythical worst team of all time and they created a whole body of negative statistics. They called them "neggies" in the press box—stuff the Mets were obviously not going to give us. [The '62 Mets] also created "the new breed" of sports fan and in

many ways the things that we saw then, the banners that appeared in the stands, the fans marching around . . . This was the beginning of the rock-and-roll era and somehow there was this kind of melding of this starchy, traditional old ballpark. People in those days went to ball games as if it were church. They behaved. Meanwhile, you had this other thing that was happening, this participatory audience at rock concerts. I think that's what happened: the idea of the celebration of the Mets as the people's team; the celebration of the Mets as part of a new era with their fans, a new breed that had a right to participate. Not to make too much of it, but I'm not so sure that a lot of the bad fan behavior or the madness of fans that we see now in every sport did not begin there.

AS BAD AS ALL THAT?

The Mets scored 617 runs and allowed 948 in 1962, a gap that would anticipate about 50 wins instead of 40. For whatever reason the team was especially bad in the second games of doubleheaders that year. While they went 11–19 in openers, their record dropped to 4–26 in nightcaps, as if to point out a lack of depth in the pitching staff. Only once in 19 tries did they lose the opening game of a doubleheader and manage to come back to win the nightcap.

KEN MACKENZIE: I've gone over this with people again and again. We were often very competitive and we weren't as bad as we looked. If you go back and study the box scores, you'll see we had 39 one-run losses, and a lot of those occurred in the late innings. Had we won just half of those one-run losses, we would have lost only 103 games. Granted, that's still not good, but it wouldn't be a historic total.

FRANK THOMAS: We should have won another 10 or 12 games. Probably more than that if we had had a long man and a closer like they have today. We scored a lot of runs, we just didn't have the pitching.

KEN MACKENZIE: We were shut out only six times.

JAY HOOK: They were bad. We were bad. I include myself in that.

The team did blow late leads in 17 games. That's not counting as double the four games in which they blew a lead then retied it, or took the lead again and blew it a second time. This double whammy happened in both games of a September 8 doubleheader against the Colt .45s.

The Mets had two 20-game losers in the persons of Roger Craig (10–24) and Al Jackson (8–20) and could have easily had a third in Jay Hook (8–19) except that the season ended before his next turn came up. Yet it was another team's 20-game loser that provided one of the great moments in the annals of losing pitcher history. On September 29, the penultimate day of the season, the Mets started Bob L. Miller against Dick Ellsworth of the Cubs at Wrigley Field. At the time, Miller was 0–12 and Ellsworth was 9–19. If Ellsworth prevailed, Miller would have fallen to 0–13, which would have given him a share of the record for most losses without a victory in a single season. If Miller prevailed, Ellsworth would lose his 20th game of the season. In the end, the Mets and Cubs (a team that finished six games behind the expansion Colt .45s) managed just 13 hits off the two pitchers and Miller got his only win of the season, 2–1. Ironically, the other Bob Miller on the '62 Mets—reliever Bob G. Miller, acquired in a May trade that sent Zimmer to the Reds—pitched only 20⅓ innings for New York but won two games.

THE LEGACY

When Shea Stadium opened in 1964, the Mets began to outdraw the Yankees at the gate. For the decade of the '60s—even giving the Yankees the one-year head start of 1961—the Mets outdrew the Bronx Bombers by more than 20 percent. By 1969 and '70 they were doubling Yankee attendance.

ROBERT LIPSYTE: One really great side effect of the Mets was that this fringe journalist named Jimmy Breslin wrote

this slipshod, not-very-good book called *Can't Anybody Here Play This Game?*, which John Hay “Jock” Whitney, the brother of Mets owner Joan Whitney Payson, read and must have liked very much because he gave Breslin a job at his paper, the *New York Herald Tribune*, and launched one of the most significant careers in American journalism.

KEN MACKENZIE: I always felt I was one ticket away from Syracuse. So I was living on the edge all the time. You had no security. If you're eligible every day to lose your job, you feel the pressure even when you're not pitching. You know that if someone else loses, they're apt to start making moves and who knows what will come of that. So it wasn't easy, but you hope you come away having learned how to deal with pressure. I'm not sure I did, but I tried.

JIM HICKMAN: You know, at the time we didn't like it too well. I think it did make me stronger as a player and better at handling adversity. Yeah, I think it did make everybody a little bit stronger.