

BASEBALL '86



THE FINAL FOUR

IT WAS A half-inning that got awfully crowded there at the end, with 1986 telling 1989 to just move over a little bit, give it some room. All of a sudden, you had the ghost of J.C. Martin and the ghost of Al Weis out there at Shea with a couple of new heroes, unlikely heroes, named Backman and Dykstra.

All of a sudden in the bottom of the ninth, it became the sort of October afternoon that you don't forget. Dave Smith threw and Dykstra, known as Nails, nailed it out to right, and 5-4 Astros became 6-5 Mets. Now it was one of the great New York baseball days, and Lenny Dykstra had his permanent baseball place around here. And Shea sounded the way it has in a couple of other Octobers.

Past and present at Shea. Noise and ghosts. Did J.C. Martin, back-up catcher, run inside the baseline in the fourth game of the '89 World Series after his bunt? Maybe he did and maybe he didn't, but Pete Richert's throw hit him, and Rod Gaspar scored the winning run, and the Mets won 2-1 in the 10th. Did Wally Backman run outside the line on that leadoff bunt in the ninth yesterday? Just a touch. But there was Backman safe at first, uniform full of dirt as usual.

'It wasn't flagrant'

"Wally took about what you're allowed to take to avoid a tag," said Davey Johnson. "It wasn't flagrant." The most important half-inning of the Mets' season had started off just fine.

Backman got to second on Alan Ashby's passed ball. Danny Heep flew to center. And now it was Dykstra, No. 4, with his funny little bow-legged walk, walking into Mets history.

"Down to two outs," said Keith Hernandez. "Last two outs. Ballgame over." But Backman, who was at second, said he knew Dykstra would at least get him home. They are a team at the top of the order usually, riding shotgun for each other, and now they were at the bottom, Backman ahead of Dykstra, instead of behind. No matter, Backman believed. "I've got confidence in Lenny," he said. "No matter what the situation."

Backman had been J.C. Martin. Now Dykstra, who has hit nine homers in his major-league career, did his Al Weis turn. Smith threw him an 0-1 forkball and Dykstra hit it over the right-field wall, and no matter what happens from today on, Lenny Dykstra had made sure he is a baseball somebody around here forever. It wasn't the pennant, but as a memory, it should have some legs.

In the interview room, Dykstra was asked if he's hit many bottom-of-the-ninth homers lately to win baseball games.

Remember Strat-O-Matic?

Dykstra said: "The last time I hit a home run in the bottom of the ninth to win a game was in Strat-O-Matic, that game you play with dice. It was against my brother. I rolled some real good numbers that day."

Yesterday, Dykstra rolled "home run" against Dave Smith and the Astros, and the Mets were ahead two games to one instead of behind two games to one, just like that. It is the way it goes in October. Little things, again, become big things. Little guys become big guys.

The other day, Yogi Berra was talking about this series and said,



NAILED DOWN: Len Dykstra, wearing the hero's mantle, has a smile and a clenched fist in the clubhouse.

VINCENT RIEHL DAILY NEWS

Unlikely heroes, Dykstra & Backman

Lenny rolls the dice

"It's always some little guy who beats the hell out of you." The dice went that way yesterday for Backman and Dykstra.

Keith Hernandez said, "Gene Tenace told me in 1982. In every playoff or World Series, it is someone not prominently known, not expected to be the difference, who comes through."

Keith Hernandez also said: "I'll be on my deathbed, dying, delirious, and I'll be saying, 'Lenny, Lenny.'"

Dykstra. Known as Nails. Southern California kid who plays like he came right from stickball and street corners. Runs into a wall now and again. Got knocked down by a Nolan Ryan fastball the other night, got up, singled off Nolan Ryan, turned out to be the beginning of Nolan Ryan's end. Dykstra: Guy who Davey Johnson wasn't sure could hit the ball hard enough to keep the center-field job with the Mets.

"He does like to swing for the fences," Johnson said yesterday. Like he wanted to sigh. "And I'll forgive him today. But he does hit too many balls in the air. If he'd hit the ball on the ground and hit line drives, he'd hit .330 every year." Johnson paused and said, "I'm sure he'll be upper-cutting big-time now."

Johnson stood at the podium. Dykstra stood off to the side, being

MIKE LUPICA



Dykstra. "Is this a bleeping joke or what?" he said, grinning.

Somebody asked him what the joke was.

Dykstra said, "All these people waiting to hear me talk." It was probably the biggest room he ever worked. He went to the podium after Johnson, used the Strat-O-Matic line. Somebody asked him what he was thinking. He talked about hitting a double off Smith in a big situation earlier in the season at Shea. He got a fastball that time. He fouled a fastball back yesterday. Then he had a feeling about a forkball, he said. Dykstra: "Fortunately, the feeling was right."

There was another question about what he thought about before getting in against Smith and Dykstra said, "I wasn't thinking about going up to hit a home run to win the

game." That was only Strat-O-Matic stuff, of course, all the way.

Darryl Strawberry, who hit a three-run homer to get the Mets back into this Saturday afternoon, hits home runs. Dykstra and Backman, they just scuffle around and wait for the Strawberrys to hit home runs. As Hernandez said, "If somebody told you Lenny Dykstra was going to hit a home run off Dave Smith to win the game, Smith who's one of the top stoppers in the league, would you have believed him?"

Maybe yes. Maybe it is exactly the kind of thing you believe in October. They just change the names from year to year, to J.C. Martin or Al Weis, Backman or Dykstra.

AND SO THERE was Dykstra yesterday, jumping into the air halfway between first and second, and there was all of this oldtime Shea noise, and Dykstra disappearing finally into the mess of Mets at home plate.

"Like fourth and goal," he said about finding the plate.

He found a pitch, a swing, and this permanent place. The rest of the series will determine how big a place. Dykstra guessed forkball and got forkball and he became one of those guys Yogi talked about, one of those little guys who beats the hell out of you in October.

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