

WHEN THE MIRACLE METS TAUGHT A LESSON

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“Do the Mets have a chance?” I anxiously asked Mom.

“I don’t think so,” she answered, deflating my hopes.

It was late August 1969 and the team was six games behind the Chicago Cubs. That fall I started fifth grade at Bentley, an Upper East Side private school, where learning disabilities landed me in the dumb class. It was officially Mr. Reynold’s class, but we all understood the track system.

It was the first year that tests were part of the curriculum, and I failed the initial history exam. From then on I frequently suffered stomach aches.

I escaped the pressure during recess, when we played softball in Central Park against the smart class. I often struck out, but once I powered a homer over the park benches that ringed our makeshift outfield. Much like the pre-1969 Mets — who had never finished higher than ninth place — we went winless.

While we continued losing, our Major League counterparts went on a long hot streak. Dad had no interest in sports, but Mom appreciated baseball from attending games during childhood. Watching the Mets became a nightly ritual for us.

“It’s a grounder to short. This could be it. One, two, the game is over and the Mets are the champs!” I remember the announcer saying, as the Mets clinched their division with a game-ending double play. Mom wrapped an arm around my shoulder to pull me close, as I cheered wildly.

“Can the Mets win it all?” I breathlessly asked.

“Anything is possible,” she said.

In Mr. Reynold’s class we saw our softball games and the drama unfolding in Queens as a single phenomenon — a test of the universe’s sympathy for the underdog. We challenged the smart class to a best-of-three softball playoff. Our teachers promised to buy the winners banana splits, so we called our series the Banana Split League.

The Mets won the National League playoff, putting them in the World Series. They would play the heavily favored Baltimore Orioles.

The Mets lost Game One, making me doubt that they could complete their David versus Goliath scenario.

“It’s not over yet,” Mom said, when I admitted my despair. My classmates and I also started poorly, losing the Banana Split League opener. We remained upbeat. “If the Mets can do it, so can we,” we said before Game Two.

Our leadoff hitter smacked a home run on the first pitch, as we won in a rout. We hugged each other after the game, just like the Mets did after winning the pennant.

The World Series was mostly played during school hours. Incredibly, our teachers brought a television into the classroom for the games.

In Game Three, center-fielder Tom Agee made two remarkable catches, saving the game for the Mets. During the first catch the ball stuck out over the top of his glove’s webbing — snow-cone-style — but Agee held on, causing our classroom to explode into cheers.

Game Three of the Banana Split League seemed anti-climactic, after our dramatic win the game before. We

were flat for the contest and lost big. Our opponents hugged each other after the final out, just as we had done earlier.

The Mets, meanwhile, were within a victory of the championship, giving the universe a chance to redeem itself. When school let out near the end of Game Five the Mets led by two runs.

I rushed home where Mom was watching the game with Mr. Scott, our building superintendent, who was fixing a leak. We watched the final outs.

“I put money on Baltimore, but I don’t mind seeing the Mets win,” Mr. Scott said, with a sad smile.

“It’s good for the city,” Mom said, as the Mets embraced each other on the field.

Excitedly I watched the unlikely champions giddily pour champagne on each other, as Mr. Scott went back to work, and Mom prepared dinner.

Even as that fall’s excitement wore off I would recall the Mets upset win, when I faced difficulties in school. And the pride I felt in our game two victory of the Banana Split League came to outweigh the sting of losing the finale.

The following fall I found myself in the smart class. I eventually became an attorney. Somehow I also became a Yankees fan.

Even though I was no longer an also-ran, I identified with the underdog. That fifth-grade mindset influenced my law career, serving vulnerable children in Family Court, while volunteering at social service agencies.

For many people the 1969 baseball season was merely a sports story. But watching the city's lovable losers rise up offered a lesson in hope that resonates with me today.