

My Tom Seaver Memories

This past week the world lost one of the greats as George Thomas Seaver passed away at the age of 75 in Calistoga, CA. For many around my age, this was the passing of one of our first sports heroes. The pitcher we knew as “Tom Terrific” and “The Franchise” is one of the biggest reasons I am a sports fan and along with Muhammad Ali, Walt “Clyde” Frazier and Joe Namath formed my personal childhood “Mount Rushmore” of sports legends. So, it really hit me when Seaver passed and opened a floodgate of memories that I felt compelled to write down. This won't be short and definitely not “perfect” (I will blame Jimmy Qualls for any grammar errors), but if you have some time, sit back and enjoy.

In September of 1969 I started kindergarten at Birchwood Elementary School (I shared Mrs. Kelly's afternoon class with my future wife Sandy, but that is a story for another day). I was the fourth Maroney child to go to school there, following my older siblings Richard, Rosemary and Kevin. This was in the midst of a phenomenal New York City sports run that unfortunately I was a little young to truly enjoy. On January 12, 1969 the Joe Namath lead Jets shockingly upset the heavily favored Baltimore Colts to win Super Bowl III. I have no real time memories of this game but have read all about it, watched all the highlights and thanks to the NFL Network, currently have the game downloaded on my DVR (Try to explain to any of us back then the powers of the DVR and you would be locked up in an insane asylum). On May 8, 1970 the Knicks won the NBA Title in a seven-game series against the LA Lakers (This is known as the “Willis Reed game” as he hobbled out onto the court to “allegedly” lead the Knicks to victory. Since years later Willis Reed told me there was no way I ever saw him play, I like to think of it as my guy Clyde's game as he had 36 points, 19 assists and 7 rebounds that night). This is another game I have read all about and watched in replays, but have no memories of watching live. The 1969 World Series, where the Amazin Mets upset the Baltimore Orioles is similar. I can detail each game and have watched them in replays many times and even won a bet against a bar owner years later, who insisted that Seaver never won a World Series Game (as we all know, he won a 10-inning complete game in game #4). But I do have one lasting memory from that Series. On October 16, 1969, I arrived home from school, sat down at the table to eat an orange and watched as my brothers jubilantly celebrated the Mets victory in game #5 (Complete game for Jerry Koosman; ironically with Davy Johnson flying out to Cleon Jones) and the Series win. So, what is my lasting memory of this historic moment? It is my lovely Mother Jane (as I introduced her on Family Feud in 1989, although you may now know her as Nana) yelling at my celebrating brothers that she would not have let them watch the game if she knew they were going to act like this.

Fast forward to the following August, as I am about to become a first grader at Birchwood. I am now a year older and full-fledged sports fan. I know all of my teams are the best and that unlike my father Donald, who suffered growing up as a Brooklyn Dodger fan, I will live a life of Championship bliss (I don't have to write a punchline do I?). On the first day of August 1970 the Maroney family traveled to Shea Stadium for my inaugural Mets game. We sat in the tan colored loge section beyond first base, my brothers got angry at me when I couldn't see the lineup on the scoreboard (I was looking for the handwritten one they used to show on TV) and I got to see Tom Seaver pitch live and in person for the first time. I think I have a pretty good memory and looking at the scorecard from the game (Thanks to the Ultimate Mets database), I was pretty close. I remember the Mets beat the Padres and Seaver pitched a complete game (the good old days before pitch counts). For years, before I looked it up, I would hear about Seaver striking out 19 Padres (then an MLB record) including the last 10 against the Padres in 1970 and wondered if that was our game. It wasn't, but Seaver k'd 13 defeating the Padres 4-2. I did remember Seaver getting a hit (remember pitchers wearing jackets when they ran the bases, apparently that added the ability to throw more pitches) which actually it

turns out was a fielder's choice. But I remember well that the Mets won (of course because my teams always win [Please don't tell first grade me the truth]) and I was thrilled.

The balance of the day ran a gamut of emotions, we stopped at Howard Johnson's in Westbury on the way back (boy do I miss the fried clams), Richard discovered, as we pulled in the driveway, that he didn't have his glove, which he had brought to the game and we returned to our South Huntington home to find it had been burglarized while we were out. A Mets game, HoJos and the Police at the house. That's a full day. Nothing ever came of the Police investigation, but my brothers and I who shared a room were left with a "souvenir" of the event as the burglar had entered through a small window in our room and for months there was a handprint on the windowsill. We figured we had to leave it there in case they caught someone.

I went to a game or two a season over the years but few leave the lasting memory of the first. I'm not sure if I saw Seaver pitch again in person during the seventies, but I did find out my teams were not always going to win (a painful lesson I still am learning). Seaver continued to be fantastic, winning Three Cy Young awards and leading the Mets back to the World Series in 1973, losing in seven games to the Oakland Athletics. On June 15, 1977 the Seaver era would sadly end as The Franchise was traded to the Cincinnati Reds in Exchange for Doug Flynn, Pat Zachary, Steve Henderson and Dan Norman (Rumor has it that the Dodgers offered a package of prospects that included future Cy Young Winner Rick Sutcliffe and future World Series MVP Pedro Guerrero, but the Mets didn't want to send him to a team from his home state that was in First Place). I continued to follow Seaver's career closely. At the All-Star Game at Yankee Stadium in 1977, Tom received a huge ovation during introductions. On June 16, 1978 Seaver finally completed his elusive no hitter almost exactly one year after the trade (The pitching dominant Mets would have to wait nearly 34 more years for Johann Santana to throw their first and still only No-Hitter. Former Mets have thrown 14 no-hitters [including perfect games by David Cone and Philip Humber] lead by Nolan Ryan's seven). In 1979 Seaver lead the Reds to the NLCS but lost to the Pittsburgh Pirates and in the Strike Shortened 1981 season Seaver went 14-2, but lost out on his fourth Cy Young Award to Fernando Valenzuela.

During these years the Mets became the worst team in baseball. For years playing Little League I hoped my team would be the Mets and, in the Spring of 1978, I got my wish. Naturally we followed the lead of our Major League namesakes and won only two games (Fortunately the Phillies were worse). While it was the last season of organized baseball that I played, as I became a Lacrosse goalie in Junior High, two great things came out of that season. One, I became a catcher for the first time and loved it, wishing I had started earlier. Years later, I nudged my son Michael Jr. into catching and have enjoyed years of watching him play. He will be a Senior in High School this year and I hope he gets to have a season. (Please don't tell him he is better than I ever was). Secondly, I met my good friend and fellow long-suffering Mets, Jets, Knicks, Rangers and St. John's basketball fan, Stephen Franklin. Stephen and I remain friends to this day and often text during Mets games with a group of our Huntington friends. Even bad baseball brings great memories.

As I got older, I always wanted to go to opening day at Shea. Most years that was the best day to be a Met fan. Missing school would not have been an issue for me, but I couldn't miss Lacrosse practice. So, in 1983 having graduated High School, I could go to the home opener. That spring, my father had his Gallbladder removed and was out of work on medical leave, which gave me the opportunity to take him to a game for the first time. What a day it was April 5, 1983 (The day after the late Jimmy Valvano lead his Wolfpack to their own Miracle title). The Mets had reacquired Seaver in an off-season trade, in exchange for Charlie Puleo, and he would be starting against the Phillies and Steve Carlton. A pitching Matchup of future Hall of Famers. I was able to get us a pair of tickets in the loge behind first base and we were able to see up close as Seaver walked in from the bullpen before the game. The crowd roared and we all knew what a special moment we were a

part of that day. Seaver struck out Pete Rose (the All time Hit leader) to start the game. The Phillies lineup included future Hall of Famers Joe Morgan, Mike Schmidt and Tony Perez. Seaver scattered three hits over six scoreless innings (maybe he started the pitch count thing that day), while striking out five. Doug Sisk pitched the last three innings to complete a 2-0 Mets win. Unlike watching on TV (My dad invented what we call “the Don Maroney Rule”, a rule I continue to rebel against, where you would go to bed with your team winning because if they blew the lead you didn’t want to see it anyway) we did stay for the whole game and always would, but I did teach my dad over the years about running to the car to beat traffic.

The 1983 Mets were not good, but it was a fun year as a fan. On May 6 (Wille Mays’ Birthday) Darryl Strawberry made his Met’s debut and was NL Rookie of the Year. On June 15 (Sometimes it was a good day) the Mets stole Keith Hernandez from the St. Louis Cardinals for Neil Allen and Rick Ownbey. And every fifth day we had Tom Seaver pitching. I went to a lot of games that summer and most are a blur, but I remember going to a double header in June by myself, because none of my friends wanted to see the last place Mets (I confess I had to look up the games to find the date and the exact details but I had most of it right). A week after acquiring Hernandez, his former team came to Shea for a Twi Night Doubleheader. Seaver pitched the first game and was spotted a six-run lead. He struggled through the middle innings but pitched a complete game (they’re back!) in a 6-4 win. Mike Torrez pitched the second game and my memory was I saw two 2-1 complete game wins. Turns out Seaver’s wasn’t 2-1 and Torrez only pitched seven as Jesse Orosco pitched the 8th and 9th. Seaver was a memory error and I should have known better on Torrez game because Mets Manager Frank Howard must have torn his left rotator cuff with the number of times, he signaled for Orosco that year. Orosco was 13-7 with 17 saves threw 110 innings in 62 games and was 3rd in the Cy Young voting for the last place Mets. He had a good career but never as good as 1983. (I always blamed Frank Howard for that). The memory I know I had right is two games a little over two hours each and I met the boys at the bar by 11!

That winter included the nightmare of Seaver leaving again, because of some obscure free agent compensation rule, as The White Sox claimed him from the Mets. Seaver would go on to pitch well for the White Sox over the next few years winning 33 games including a complete game (again!) on August 4, 1985 at Yankee Stadium for his 300th Career win. (I was not in attendance for the game because Stephen insisted, I could not miss the Whitman Deli softball games that day. Yes, he is still my friend). Seaver would go on to pitch for the Red Sox down the stretch of the 1986 season before succumbing to a knee injury and missing the Post Season. He was however in the Red Sox dugout during the World Series. I have never heard him comment about those games, but it must have been a surreal ten days. The following summer, with the Mets desperate for pitching help, Seaver attempted a comeback, but after being knocked around by several Met back ups lead by Barry Lyons, in a simulated game, he chose to stay retired.

My last memory of Seaver at the ballpark was on July 24, 1988 when the Mets retired his #41. I remember nothing about the game that day. Research revealed that they lost 4-2 to the Atlanta Braves, Dale Murphy and Darryl Strawberry both hit Home Runs and Sid Fernandez took the loss (Interestingly Future Hall of Famer John Smoltz made his major league debut the day before getting his first win going 8 innings allowing only one run in a 6-1 Braves win). I remembered none of that. The first thing I remembered is my friend Jeff Spear came to the game with us. (Spear is from Pittsburgh so his teams have won all the championships that mine were supposed to). I met Spear through my good friend Rich Furst as they were Fraternity Brothers at the University of Pennsylvania. Spear was living in NYC that summer while doing an internship at a Law Firm during his summer break. It has been a while, but we have had a lot of fun at sporting events over the years and Seaver’s passing this week made me think that I can’t wait until we do that again. Another thing I remember is my Mother trying to convince Stephen to go talk to Sarah Seaver, Tom’s daughter who was

sitting a section over from us (He didn't). Lastly, I remember Seaver completing the ceremony by running to the mound and taking a bow. Always classy to the finish.

In looking up that last game I chuckled when I saw that Charlie Puleo pitched three and a third innings in relief for the Braves, yielding to Paul Assenmacher, who got the last two outs. The man the Mets traded to bring Seaver back making an appearance on Tom Seaver Day. As the great Harry Chapin said, "All My Life's a Circle", Seaver starts his career at Shea and ends it bowing on the mound as his number is retired, my father takes me to my first game with Seaver pitching and I get to return the favor, when Seaver comes back. I have so many great memories around sports with family and friends and Tom Seaver was a huge part of that. As I get older, unfortunately a part of life is the passing of those who were important to you. I mentioned my Mount Rushmore earlier, two are now gone. Ali and Seaver RIP and thanks for the memories. Long Live Clyde and Joe Willie!