

Sports Unlimited: Dodgers turn to Mr. Torre, a Giants fan

by Chris Jenkins

LOS ANGELES - Good thing they did put off this big-deal announcement until Monday, because if the Dodgers had staged it a day earlier on Sunday, it would have taken on all sorts of sacrilegious implications. Or religious, depending on the amount of faith you put in the power of baseball.

Truly, while the occasion was the introduction of the latest sucker, er, savior to try to manage this messed-up ballclub, it did have a bit of the feel of a papal visit. The dais for the guest of honor was set up in center field at Dodger Stadium - to be sure, a glorious shrine - and the sun started burning through the late-morning haze as he began speaking into the microphone.

Thankfully, typically, it also was left to Joe Torre to bring the spirits of the City of Angels back to earth.

"Whether we go (to the World Series) or not, I'm not Saint Joe," said Torre. "Believe me."

If there's a man in baseball with absolute credibility - at least in what he says, and pretty much in everything he does - it's the swarthy fellow with the New York nose, the four World Series rings and 12 straight postseason appearances.

Tell you how straight Torre shoots. The Dodgers do everything but spray-paint the hills surrounding Chavez Ravine blue in Torre's honor, using this hire to win back the love of a town grown bored with the disappointment and bickering from its heroes, and the Brooklyn native introduces himself as a die-hard Giants fan from back in his youth.

For that, he apologized. Unnecessarily.

If Torre, 67, can get the L.A. clubhouse's two sides of the generation gap to grin and bear each other long enough to win a pennant - it would be the first in fully two decades - the city would also forgive and forget. If he could just get the Dodgers to play with the esprit and mind-set of some of the great Dodgers clubs of so long ago, people here might not care if Torre lines his office with pictures of Mel Ott and Johnny Antonelli and Willie Mays.

"If anything, I think (Torre) had a much more difficult task in all those years with the Yankees," said former third baseman Ron Cey, one of the links to that past who filled front-pew seats Monday. "There's a \$200 million investment in that bunch. He had an established star at every position. He's been dealing every day

with A-Rod, Jeter, Pettitte, Clemens, Posada, Damon. Those are big-time, big-money players. He's dealing with a different kind of guy here."

Boy, is he. Baseball has a word for many of the kind of players Torre will find in his new clubhouse, a word the young players use to refer to themselves, a word that pretty much says it all in five syllables:

"Pre-arbitration."

By no means is this to pin all the Dodgers' clubhouse problems on the first- and second-year players - James Loney, Andre Ethier, Matt Kemp - who've already been so impressive on the field and plainly are the most vital Dodgers in the lineup. Just as surely, though, they helped create an environment that sucked the life out of the Dodgers and manager Grady Little at the end of last season.

Interestingly, Torre said Monday that he'd already gotten a congratulatory phone call from Jeff Kent, the hard-crusted infielder who had gone public with some veterans' disenchantment over the younger players' lack of respect for them. Being more than a bit contentious himself, Kent is hardly a sympathetic character. According to Torre, though, Kent did sound as if he's softened his expressed desire not to play for L.A. next year.

Torre went from a National League manager of three different clubs, compiling an 894-1,003 record, to an American League manager with 2,067 wins and a reservation in the Hall of Fame. He said he hasn't had time to get to know his new team, admitted he's "really not that familiar with the National League." For those keeping count, too, he's the sixth different manager of this particular NL club in only 10 years.

Still, the Dodgers finally got it right. And it wasn't all that difficult. A no-brainer.

Aside from perhaps a Tony La Russa or Jim Leyland, there isn't a manager in baseball with both the resume and sense of command that comes West with Torre, the stuff that makes a player know who's really boss and who's usually right.

Red Schoendienst once told Torre that "the game belongs to the players," and that's largely true. None of the players in L.A., however, is greater than Torre. Or, as Derek Jeter unfailingly and lovingly calls him, "Mr. Torre."

"It has been far too long since Dodger fans have tasted the fruits of victory or Dodger players have raised a

World Series trophy," owner Frank McCourt said. "We want to win, make no mistake about it, but we want to win the right way."

Wouldn't it be funny if he had to get an old Giants fan - and a Yankee man - to get things back to The Dodger Way?

Sacrilege.

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