

A story about Dodger fans' frustrating 32-year wait throughout the many transitions of the Los Angeles Dodgers between their championships of 1988 and 2020.

**\The Blue Light at the End of the Tunnel:
The Los Angeles Dodgers, Their Fans and the Long Road Back**
By Linda M. Wilson

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POST-CINDERELLA

It was early 1988, and I had just bought a brand new car, a white Nissan Sentra. Drove it off the lot with eight miles on the odometer. And as the year progressed, the stars must have aligned, because both the Lakers and the Dodgers won championships in their respective seasons, so, as a fan of both teams, I christened my new baby with bumper stickers acknowledging both accomplishments. The October success for the Dodgers was the pinnacle of my sports fan memories, as it was the least expected title of all. Every baseball fan who's old enough to remember, regardless of which team he or she follows, can still see an injured Dodger Kirk Gibson's fist pump as he limped around the bases after hitting a walk-off, pinch-hit home run to shock future Hall of Famer Dennis Eckersley and the Oakland Athletics. Gibson had been in so much pain that he wasn't even in uniform when the game started that night. That was one element of the mystique of the moment, the other one being that Eckersley had been untouchable all season long in the closer role. It was also Gibson's only at-bat in the World Series.

And that was just Game 1. It's one of those iconic moments in baseball history that will live on forever, frame by frame. Hall of Fame broadcaster Vin Scully's call concluded with the unforgettable words, "In a year that has been so improbable, the impossible has happened."

A jubilant occasion, indeed, and it set the tone for the rest of the series. Four days later, the Dodgers clinched the world championship in Game 5 played at the Oakland Coliseum. Against the odds, the underdog Dodgers of Southern California had beaten the heavily favored team from Northern California. It was their sixth title in franchise history, and the second under the tutelage of Hall of Fame manager Tommy Lasorda. The championship was also their second of the 1980s, and their fifth since arriving in Los Angeles 30 years earlier. At the time of the last out in 1988, I was 14 months shy of my 30th birthday.

I had been born shortly after the Dodgers won the 1959 World Series; they played in three more in the 1960s and three more in the 1970s as I was growing up. So World Series appearances were frequent,

as the Dodgers had built an organization around developing talent and staying competitive.

It wasn't likely that this overachieving Dodgers championship team would repeat its miraculous feat in 1989, even if they improved the following season (and meanwhile, Oakland's would-be dynasty appeared in three consecutive World Series from 1988-90). But L.A.'s World Series upset was "one moment in time" and that home run was one of the most dramatic ever hit in baseball history. In fact, the highlights reel of that magical 1988 World Series was set to the hit song "One Moment in Time" by Whitney Houston, seemingly a perfect fit.

On October 20, 1988, I watched Game 5, as Orel Hershiser pitched the Dodgers to victory in Oakland, while drinking beer with friends at Tuba Man, a local sports pub of sorts in the North Park neighborhood of San Diego. That win sealed the world championship. The next morning, I bought a dozen donuts at the nearby Golden Donut shop, took them in to my office, and shared them, propped alongside the *L.A. Times* headline announcing the Dodgers' triumph, so that coworkers could celebrate along with me. That alone brought many chuckles since most of my coworkers were Padre fans.

Nobody knew when the next championship would come for our team, but it certainly couldn't be too far off. Winning, and producing solid players, was expected in this organization. And as the '90s approached, the Dodgers were in the process of developing several future National League Rookies of the Year.

In September of 1989, I drove across country on a three-week-long trip in which I visited friends and relatives in several states. All along the way, I proudly displayed my Dodgers and Lakers world champion bumper stickers although in various enemy territories, and it didn't matter to me that the Dodgers weren't going to return to the Fall Classic this year; it would only be a matter of a few years until they were back on track.

Then, in January 1990—fifteen months after the 1988 World Series ended—my oldest nephew, Justin, was born, into a family of base-

ball fans (though of other teams than the Dodgers). The Dodgers as a National League franchise also celebrated their centennial season in 1990, with the 1988 miracle still relatively fresh in their minds. By this time, the Athletics were defending world champions, and I assumed that our baby, the firstborn of the next generation, would just grow up and be a Padres fan like many in the family were. As his father and uncles had done before him, Justin grew up with a passion for playing and watching baseball, so we shared that much in common. In the first two years of Justin's life, the Dodgers had a couple of seasons in which they were in the playoffs hunt, but then came the disaster of 1992, when they finished 63-99, with an assortment of players that was much different from the one that won the World Series four years earlier. Also, early that season, the riots in response to the Rodney King beating verdict in late April and early May had the city of Los Angeles on edge; games in several sports were moved or postponed, and a year that was starting out badly for the Dodgers got progressively worse. Not to be overlooked, though, one of the few bright moments of 1992 was the emergence of their first baseman, Eric Karros, as the National League Rookie of the Year.

Additionally, between 1989 and 1992, the Dodgers began bringing several players who were L.A. area natives, but who had achieved greatness elsewhere, back to Southern California to play now as Dodgers. Hall of Fame catcher Gary Carter played for one season in Los Angeles in 1991. Hall of Fame first baseman Eddie Murray was there for three years (1989-91), outfielder Darryl Strawberry for three years (1991-93), and Eric Davis from 1992-93. All four had played on world championship teams between 1983 and 1990, and Strawberry went on to win three more with the Yankees later in the '90s. While there certainly was some benefit in having players who had excelled with other teams, none of this translated into any team success for the Dodgers during that time frame.

In 1993, the Dodgers' new catcher, Mike Piazza, repeated Eric Karros' feat from the previous year. For the second consecutive season, the Dodgers boasted an NL Rookie of the Year, as the team clawed its way

back to .500 from its horrible finish the year before. Korean pitcher Chan Ho Park would make his major league debut the following year, and right fielder Raul Mondesi would play his first full season with the Dodgers, dazzling fans both offensively and defensively en route to becoming the '94 NL Rookie of the Year—the third straight for L.A. The future looked promising.

I took Justin to his first major league game at what was then San Diego Jack Murphy Stadium in June 1993. The Padres were hosting the Dodgers, and routed them that afternoon. I expected the little three-year-old boy to cheer for the Padres, but he knew I was rooting for the Dodgers. Over the years, though, Justin grew up and became a Cardinals fan. So much for family influence.

Baseball had also expanded by adding two National League teams in 1993—the Colorado Rockies and Florida Marlins. The World Series in both 1992 and 1993 was won by another expansion team, the Toronto Blue Jays, who had become an AL franchise in 1977.

But the players' strike which halted the season in 1994, combined with exorbitant free agent contracts and the rising costs of attending a ballgame, left fans around the league with a sour taste in their collective mouths. When the 1995 season began, a few weeks late after the strike was settled, many were slow to return to the ballpark. Also, in 1994, a new playoff format had been implemented which divided each league into three divisions each, and added a wild card playoff team for both leagues to the mix. However, since there were no playoffs that year, it would have to wait until the following season to be implemented on the field.

The strike ended in early April 1995, and fans trickled their way back to supporting their teams. When in September, the Dodgers clinched the National League West for the first time in seven years, there was reason for their faithful followers to feel upbeat. Japanese pitcher Hideo Nomo had arrived on the scene, “The Tornado” taking the baseball world by storm as he claimed the fourth consecutive Rookie of the Year award won by a Dodger. (That string would end at five in 1996.)

The realignment of leagues in baseball in 1994 had also removed the Dodgers from competing in the same division as the upstart young Atlanta Braves, who were on their way to dominating the National League during the regular season throughout the '90s. The Braves, though they usually struggled in the postseason, were now the class of the NL East, leaving the NL West behind.

In October 1995, the Dodgers made their first trip to the playoffs since 1988, but the excitement of their return didn't last long as they were swept out of the first round by the Cincinnati Reds. An NL wild card appearance in 1996 yielded the same results, three losses and out, to the then defending world champion Braves. In back-to-back years, this Dodgers team had been competitive throughout the season, but sported an 0-6 record in the postseason.

A major leadership role change for the Dodgers also took place during the '96 season when manager Tommy Lasorda retired for health reasons in his 20th year at the helm. He had guided his boys in blue to seven division titles, four National League pennants, and two world championships—but consistency in L.A. was about to become a thing of the past.

There had certainly been frustrations in the last few years during which Lasorda managed. Shortstop Jose Offerman (with L.A. from 1990-95) was a frequent punching bag for letter writers to the *L.A. Times* Sports section. Second baseman Delino DeShields, who had been acquired by the Dodgers from the Expos before the '94 season, lasted three years in L.A., but was more frequently remembered as the answer to a later trivia question than he was for any accomplishments with the Dodgers. That question, of course, was “which future Hall of Famer did the Dodgers give up to get him?” (*Answer*: right-handed pitcher Pedro Martinez, brother of long-time Dodger righty Ramon Martinez.)

Under new manager Bill Russell, even the 1997 season looked favorable, like they might make it to the postseason again, but the Dodgers faltered and the Jints won the division in the final week of the season. This was also the first season in which interleague play took

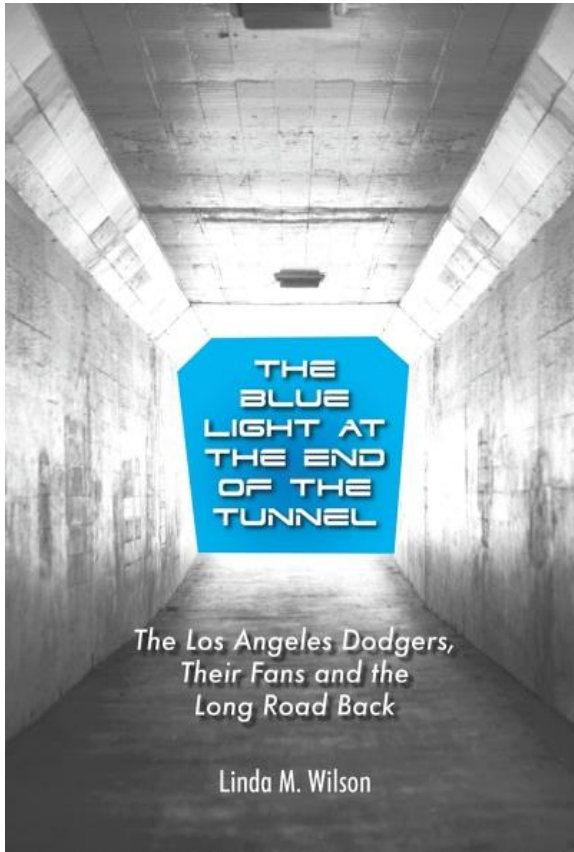
place, as teams from both leagues faced off against each other during the regular season.

By now, Piazza had become a superstar in the sport, a catcher with a flair for the dramatic, blasting home runs regularly, who also called no-hitters for Dodger pitchers in back-to-back seasons (Ramon Martinez and Hideo Nomo). Our team's future was coming into clearer focus, and there were reasons to be optimistic again as the younger players matured.

It wasn't too long afterward that the good feelings ended. Because once the '97 season was over, the world as Dodger fans knew it changed drastically. Owner and president Peter O'Malley, whose family had controlled the Dodgers going back to 1950 in Brooklyn, had announced his intentions to sell the team earlier in the year. This news sent shock waves through the baseball world. Dodger blue supporters had no idea how dismal things were about to get, or how long it would be before they returned to prominence.

Something else was happening in the mid-1990s that would entirely reshape the fan experience in sports. The Internet age began. Aficionados began talking about "websites"—cyber-libraries of information, some of which even allowed interaction with other fans, and provided instant updates about the goings-on both on and off the field. This was uncharted and previously unimaginable territory for the average sports enthusiast.

In 1997, the World Series was won by the Florida Marlins, an expansion team in its fifth year of existence and the first wild card team to win the world championship. I felt certain that the Dodgers were a much better team, but they hadn't even won one postseason game since 1988 and that was almost a decade ago. The year 1997 was also the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in Major League Baseball, and his number was retired around the major leagues to commemorate the milestone.



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