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Mediocrity is a memory for amped-up Mets fans

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NEW YORK — Mets fans packed Citi Field on Saturday night for the first game of the National League Championship Series and in a great roar purged the pent-up negative emotions — frustration, anxiety, angst — that come from nearly a decade of mediocrity.

For a fan base accustomed to watching its team drag through the August heat, the reality of high-stakes baseball played in mid-October chill was not only a welcome change, but a sign of good things to come.

“I’m jumping out of my skin,” David Shulman, 66, of Paramus, said before the game. “I’ve got a knot in my stomach, I couldn’t wait for tonight. We’ve waited a long time for this team to be here again.”

The anticipation was palpable as the game got under way. As each Mets player was announced, the sellout crowd roared its approval, and the stadium turned into a swirling sea of blue shirts and orange towels.

The last time Mets fans filled their home ballpark to watch an NLCS game was in 2006. That game, at Shea Stadium, ended in bitter disappointment as Carlos Beltran struck out looking in the seventh and deciding game with the St. Louis Cardinals.

For the ensuing nine years, Mets fans have watched and grumbled as their team twice collapsed late in the season, became mired in a financial quagmire and endured a seemingly endless process of rebuilding.

On Saturday, as the Mets squared off against the Chicago Cubs, fans said all of those issues were a distant memory.

“There doesn’t seem to be a black cloud hanging over this franchise anymore like there had been for almost a decade,” said Marc Hurley of Babylon, N.Y. “I’m hoping that same cloud hangs over the Cubs for at least one more year.”

Mets fans are notoriously pessimistic — or perhaps just conditioned to expect heartbreak — but there was nothing but optimism beaming from fans throughout the ballpark.

“It’s so exciting,” said Hector DeJesus, 35, of North Haledon. “This year has just been insane. I’m pumped. It’s a fun time to be a Mets fan.”

Others, like Fred Petak of East Windsor, said he felt this year’s NLCS was a steppingstone.

“I’m just glad to finally be back here,” Petak said, after grimacing at the thought of the years that followed the 2006 season. “We just have to take the next step — it is just one more step.”

Indeed, there’s reason for continued optimism. Even the most pessimistic fan has to acknowledge that the Mets have the look of a team on the upswing, with a crop of young pitchers that is the envy of baseball, and a homegrown bat or two with great potential.



CHRIS PEDOTA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Bundled-up Mets fans had plenty to cheer about as the Mets made their first appearance in the National League Championship Series since 2006. The home team beat the Cubs, 4-2.



KEVIN R. WEXLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

From left, David Shulman of Paramus, Jon Seligman of Washington Township, Larry Shulman of Paramus and Michael Seligman of Washington Township in the Citi Field parking lot before Game 1 on Oct. 17, 2015.

Laurel Kutzenco of Stamford, Conn., was at Game 7 in 2006. She remembers the thrill of Endy Chavez making his leaping catch over the left field wall and the pit in her stomach after watching Beltran strike out. But Kutzenco said she didn't imagine the same playoff drought following this NLCS. In fact, she said, she expected plenty more trips to the championship series — and beyond.

"This is just a totally different team," Kutzenco said, bundled in a Mets hat and scarf as she waited in line to enter the stadium. "It's not easy being a Mets fan, but I think the mixture of younger and older players this year has made for some really good chemistry. This team is not just a blip on the radar."

Even if the Mets end up losing the NLCS to the Cubs, this isn't a flash-in-the-pan kind of team, fans said.

"It's been 'Happy Harvey Day' all year," said Derek Jacobs, referring to pitcher Matt Harvey, one of the Mets' dominant young pitchers and the Game 1 starter. "I'm cautiously optimistic about this team. But this isn't just a one-year wonder. We've got the young arms, we've got some young bats," the Livingston resident added.

Jon Seligman, 24, of Washington Township said that just being in the stadium at a game that had stakes and consequences felt like he was turning a page as a fan.

"It's been a very frustrating nine years," he said. "Citi Field was empty ever since it opened. But now you're really seeing what Citi Field can really be now — all of that built-up frustration is finally coming out."

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