

APRIL 8, 2016, 6:18 PM

LAST UPDATED: FRIDAY, APRIL 8, 2016, 11:56 PM

Mets celebrate flag day; new season, new optimism at Citi Field

BY ANDREW WYRICH

STAFF WRITER | THE RECORD

NEW YORK — The last time the Mets played at Citi Field, their fans watched in near-silent disbelief as the Kansas City Royals sealed a come-from-behind victory in extra innings and celebrated the end of a 30-year championship drought on the Mets' home turf.

On Friday afternoon, as the Mets prepared for their home opener against the Philadelphia Phillies, a near sellout crowd of die-hard fans braved an early spring chill, eager to purge their memories of the disappointing end to what had otherwise been a magical season.

And they were loud.

The crowd may not have been quite as deafening as it was in October for the Mets' first postseason berth in nearly a decade, but it made itself heard even before the first pitch. As every player was introduced by radio announcer Howie Rose, each was given a standing ovation. Even the team's support staff and trainers were vigorously cheered.

As past Mets stars Rusty Staub, Edgardo Alfonzo and John Franco raised the 2015 National League championship pennant in right field, fans said it capped an unexpectedly electrifying 2015 season. Now, after a long but shorter-than-usual winter, Mets fans said they expect another exciting season of baseball in Flushing.

"How can you not feel good? Coming off a World Series, it's hard not to be excited," said Andrew Casey of Montclair, who was wearing a shirt with the word "Loyal" written in Mets script. "I don't really like having high expectations, because you can get disappointed easily, but it's a good feeling. We've been through some tough times, but right now it's just awesome."

Fans said they were unusually optimistic heading into this season — in fact, they said, it felt almost surreal to know that their team has a good shot at returning to the World Series.

If fans seemed eager to forget how last season ended, they were happy to view its signature moments — Wilmer Flores hitting a home run after nearly being traded, for instance, or sweeping the Washington Nationals on their way to the division title — as signs of more good things to come.

"If you're a Mets fan, you're always a little optimistic," said David Burke of Ramsey. "But I'm more optimistic than I've been in years. Expectations were tempered a bit last year, but they are higher for me this year."

Fans said the team's starting pitchers will be the catalyst for a second-straight run at a World Series championship, and the team's experience playing on baseball's grandest stage will help them this season.

Some fans said they hope the Mets will follow the example set by the 2015 Royals, who avenged a wrenching World Series loss to the San Francisco Giants in 2014 by winning it the following year.

"There are a lot of parallels to the Royals," said Todd Summer, a former Upper Saddle River resident who traveled from his home in San Diego to see the game. "I think these guys are still hungry. It's a mix of young kids and veterans who want to accomplish something."

Despite the optimism, there still were signs of the early season jitters that are more commonly associated with Mets fans.



DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Fans cheer as the Mets score in the sixth inning against the Phillies at Citi Field on Friday, April 8, 2016.

“I’d say I’m cautiously optimistic, it’s still very early and a lot can still happen,” said Marc Halpern of Glen Rock, who came to the game with his mother. “But with the way free agency is these days, we won’t be able to keep these pitchers together forever. So if we are going to have a special season, it needs to be now.”

Others were just happy to have baseball – and their Mets – back for another season. The team’s 7-2 victory over the Phillies, a division rival, proved an auspicious start.

“All I do is talk about the Mets, and I’m excited about this year,” Janet Dunn of Westwood said as she tailgated with her daughter before the game. “We’re going to take the World Series this year – we’re getting to the point where we will have a consistently good team and not just these one-year teams. For me, this is like Christmas.”

Email: wyrich@northjersey.com Twitter: @AndrewWyrich

SUBSCRIBE TO **The Record** CALL (888) 504-4280