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World Series run feels Amazin' for die-hard Mets fans

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Jerry Ghinelli of Wyckoff has been rooting for the Mets — always passionately, if often in frustration — from the moment Roger Craig threw the first pitch for the expansion franchise in 1962.

As a teenager in Corona, Queens, Ghinelli would sneak into Shea Stadium to catch glimpses of the action from the bowels of the ballpark behind home plate, and he fondly remembers pacing across his bedroom with his transistor radio, trying to find the best signal to listen to the Mets capture their first win.

Since then, he has relished the triumph of the 1969 “Miracle Mets” and the thrill of watching Mookie Wilson’s ground ball bounce through Bill Buckner’s legs in the 1986 World Series — high points for a team that has spent the better part of its existence mired in mediocrity — and weathered more heartbreaking moments than he cares to remember.

Now, Ghinelli and other long-suffering North Jersey Mets fans who have been onboard since the beginning are savoring the rush of a rare high point — the unexpected ascension to the World Series by a youthful, charismatic team that they say recalls the upstart squad that captured their imagination, and the region’s, in the fall of 1969.

“I became a Mets fan when they moved into my neighborhood and I’ve suffered ever since,” Ghinelli, 64, said, laughing. This fall, he said, he has watched with wonder as Matt Harvey, Jacob deGrom, Noah Syndergaard and Steven Matz have neutralized opponents’ bats, stirring memories of the revered 1969 pitching staff that included Tom Seaver, Jerry Koosman, Gary Gentry and Nolan Ryan.

“There was tremendous starting pitching then and there is tremendous starting pitching now,” Ghinelli said. “It’s a hallmark of the Mets.”

The parallels don’t end there.

The Mets, who at the start of the 1969 season had never finished higher than ninth place, stumbled through the early weeks of that campaign before reeling off 11 straight wins beginning in May. But a subsequent slump prompted the front office to execute a go-for-broke trade for the slugging first baseman Donn Clendenon. The bolstered roster surged through the final months of the season to finish eight games ahead of the Chicago Cubs in the NL East.

“It was a fun time,” said Mel Collazo, 55, a lifelong fan who commutes to his job as a postal supervisor in Oakland from his home in Orange County, N.Y., in a car with personalized plates that read “41 FAN” — a winking reference to Seaver’s retired jersey number. “They came out of nowhere and just kept winning. You could see the exuberance in the team and in the fans, and as a kid, that really appealed to me.”

Similarly, the 2015 Mets dazzled with an early-season 11-game win streak, giving fans hope after nearly a decade of hapless underachievement. After the inevitable midseason slump, the team’s front office responded by acquiring the power-hitting outfielder Yoenis Cespedes from Detroit. The Mets rallied for a 37-22 record after the trade, snatching the NL East from the Washington Nationals.

The season’s arc has fans like Aaron Stein pinching themselves, consumed with a powerful feeling of déjà vu.

“We were treading water for most of the summer and when the Mets came up and swept the Nationals I really thought we might have something here,” said Stein, 61, a season-ticket holder who lives in Englewood. “Both the 1969 and 2015 team came out of nowhere and



CARMINE GALASSO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Gerald J. Ghinelli, a longtime Mets fan, and season ticket holder, shows off some of his memorabilia, figures of the 1969 Mets team.

got into the playoffs. As a fan, it is the same kind of feeling. This is a likable team and they just came out of nowhere.”

Stein's Mets fanaticism has its roots in visits to the Polo Grounds with his father and brothers during the team's inaugural season in 1962. Though he was an object of ridicule among his childhood friends for supporting the “lovable losers” over the cross-town Yankees, his faith in the team was rewarded in 1969.

As a teenager growing up in Brooklyn, he watched every game the 1969 team played, and when the Mets faced the Baltimore Orioles in the World Series, Stein didn't let his high school classes keep him from watching the team's first chance at glory.

“Right across the street from our high school, there was a small NBC Studios building, so a bunch of us would disappear from class and watch the games on a TV outside of the studio door,” Stein said. “We just spent a few days outside watching baseball games. I'll never forget that.”

Stein, a cardiologist with offices in Englewood and North Bergen, said he has “passed down the gene” of Mets fandom to his children and grandchildren, taking them out of school to attend games and making each ballpark outing to be a family event.

This postseason has been no different; Stein, his daughter Beth and his sons, Gary and Mikey, have attended both playoff series with grandchildren in tow, and the family is considering a trip to Kansas City for an away game during the World Series.

“I partially raised my kids in Shea Stadium; they knew every nook and cranny of that stadium,” Stein said. “It's a bonding experience based on camaraderie and loyalty. I wouldn't have held onto the tickets this long if my kids were not excited and enjoyed the trials and tribulations of being a Mets fan.”

Similarly, Ghinelli, the president of a classic-car storage company in Wyckoff, introduced his passion to his children, Michael, 17, Victoria, 15, and Kristen, 13.

“They've gotten wrapped up in it because I can't stop talking or fretting about this,” he said. “Victoria had to talk me off the ledge during the Dodgers series ... and I think she'll spend the rest of her life reminding me of it.”

Ghinelli shows his passion for the Mets in a collection of memorabilia — including miniature statues of the 1969 starting lineup, foul balls he caught in 1964 and a bat signed by Curtis Granderson — that occupies a table in his office like a shrine. Anyone looking to take measure of his dedication need only consult his schedule for next weekend.

A seasoned runner, Ghinelli registered for next Sunday's New York City Marathon months ago, when the thought of the Mets making the World Series was so preposterous that only the most delusional fan would have entertained it. Now, he said he expects to attend the first two home games on Friday and Saturday nights, run the marathon Sunday morning, and then return to Citi Field that night for Game 5, if it is played.

“I'm ready to go to two games and run a marathon in 24 hours if I have to,” Ghinelli said. “I won't miss these games; I'll run to Citi Field if I have to.”

For Stein, the memories of the Mets' unlikely 1969 championship season remain vivid, and he is hoping to recapture a sense of that exuberance should the team clinch its third World Series title.

“The passion and excitement is the same, but fans now are starved for winning baseball,” Stein said. “Mets fans are loyal. You can see it in people's faces — they are ecstatic.”

Ghinelli echoed that thought from his office in Wyckoff.

“It's hard to believe that the Mets are on the brink,” Ghinelli said. “You just get the feeling that they are going to win it all. I'm starting to feel the same way I did in 1969. You know, miracles happen.”

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