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You better believe Mets fans are ready for a change in fortune

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Every year, Seth Bendian asks the pint-size pitchers and sluggers who report to his Teaneck baseball camp about their Major League allegiances. The invariably lopsided results of this informal poll serve as an annual reminder to Bendian that he is outnumbered — a long-suffering Mets fan adrift in an ocean of Yankees pinstripes and navy blue.

“I’ve been running this camp for 27 years, and it’s always something like five to one in terms of Yankees fans opposed to Mets fans,” Bendian said with a hint of resignation.

By most objective — and semi-objective — measures, North Jersey is Yankees country. Analyses of preferences that people make public on Facebook suggest that fandom in Bergen and Passaic counties is heavily weighted toward the Yankees. Mets fans say they have endured an endless stream of gaffes, missteps and late-season meltdowns in relative isolation while Yankees supporters publicly celebrate a string of playoff appearances and World Series victories.

But with the Mets — led by dynamic pitching and a reinvigorated offense — clinching their first postseason berth in nearly a decade on Saturday, the team’s long-suffering fans in North Jersey are daring to wonder if a change is in the air. Momentum and excitement are on their team’s side, and the core of young players looks like a foundation to build upon.

“Having been a Mets fan my whole life, it’s been a long, hard journey — you often wonder what it’s like to root for a winning team,” Bendian said, laughing. “But this could be the tip of the iceberg. I’d say there is a five-year window right now where you might see a shift in fans’ loyalties.”

If a sea change is possible, it will not happen overnight. In Bergen County, Yankees fans outnumber Mets fans by 66 percent to 14 percent, according to a recent New York Times analysis of Facebook “likes.” The numbers in Passaic County are nearly identical, with 65 percent pulling for the Yankees and just 12 percent rooting for the Mets.

The gap, fans said, is a direct result of the divergent fortunes of the two teams. The Yankees have won 27 World Series championships, including five since 1996. The Mets, meanwhile, followed their Game 7 loss in the 2006 National League Championship Series with heartbreaking September collapses in 2007 and 2008 and a stubborn resistance to investing in talent, a trait that many fans blamed on the Wilpon family’s involvement with Bernard Madoff.

Having weathered all of this, Mets fans have begun to emerge from the shadows and into seats at Citi Field. Paid attendance this year has topped 2.4 million, the most since the stadium’s inaugural season in 2009, according to BaseballReference.com. Games have drawn crowds of 31,374 on average, compared with 26,528 in 2014.

The Yankees continue to outdraw the Mets, but the more than 2.9 million who have passed through the turnstiles at Yankee Stadium this year do not match the 3.4 million who attended games last year — Derek Jeter’s final season — or the nearly 3.3 million who showed up in 2013.



JIM ALCORN/SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

The Mets monopolizing TV screens at Mickey’s Sports Bar & Grill in Lyndhurst, to the pleasure of Joe Kinsley, left.

Mets fans also are tuning in to watch the team on TV. The average number of viewers has risen to more than 242,710 this year from 147,656 in 2014, according to cable station SNY.

For North Jersey Mets fans, these numbers represent a welcome change from the dreary status quo.

John Dorval, 26, remembers growing up as the only Mets fan in his elementary school in Hawthorne. As all of his friends seemingly reveled year after year in Yankees championships, the Mets rewarded Dorval for his loyalty with heartbreak — most stingingly when they lost to the Yankees in the 2000 World Series.

“I’ve never wanted to jump ship, but I grew up with all of these Yankees dynasties — the talk from my friends was relentless; it was all about the rings,” Dorval said. “I was crushed in 2000 during the Subway Series, and I was a senior in high school in 2006 when the Mets lost — that Game 7 was a killer.”

Historically, Mets fans keep an eye on the future, if only because they seem to have no alternative. But instead of saying “Wait till next year,” many fans seem to think the future is now.

“They say in baseball that winning solves everything,” Dorval said. “We’re seeing that now — we have this young core of players coming up. If the Mets have five or 10 years of sustained success, I bet they’d change a lot of minds and hearts around here.”

The excitement among Mets fans this season became more palpable as every win, or loss by the division rival Washington Nationals, pushed the team closer to the postseason.

“This season is like heaven almost,” said Rob Williams, 42, of Kearny as he watched the Mets play the Braves on TV at Mickey’s Bar and Grill in Lyndhurst on Wednesday. (The Mets lost after giving up three runs in the ninth inning.) “We’ve finally gotten to the point where the team is relevant, and it’s exciting to be a fan. It’s been a lot of fun this season.”

Another Mickey’s patron, Joe Kinsley, 42, of North Arlington, said he has seen more Mets caps pop up around North Jersey as fans emerge from a kind of self-imposed hibernation.

“We’ve all been here, but a lot of Mets fans were in hiding the past few years,” he said. “We’ve all been here for years, but some of the fans just didn’t want to admit they supported the Mets over the past decade.”

Brian Kaplan of Mahwah said this year was the first in a long time when he was excited to be a Mets fan, but he cautioned that it will take more than one successful season for the team to reassert its grip on the region.

“You look around and you’re seeing more Mets caps, and the games are exciting,” Kaplan said. “The Mets have a chance to be good for years to come — but they will have to consistently win to make the city cheer for them again.”

Tim Eigo, 63, of Teaneck has allowed himself to be swept up in the excitement of the Mets’ late-season surge, even as he says the team’s perch atop the National League East standings is at odds with its perennial status as underdog.

“Being a fan, you’re meant to suffer most of the time, so the one time you don’t, it feels great — the magical moments feel amazing,” Eigo said. “Rooting for the Yankees is like rooting for General Motors. With the next half dozen years or so, the Mets could certainly make this a two-team town.”

Or could it be a one-team town — with the Mets at the top of the heap, as they were for the magical 1986 season?

“This is definitely Yankees territory, but when I was a kid there were just as many non-Yankees fans as Yankees fans,” said Ron Gastelu, 75, of Rutherford. “If we are in the race for a few years, why couldn’t this be a Mets town? The Yankees lost Jeter; they don’t have a face anymore. The Mets have young stars who you recognize.”

Not so fast, Yankees fans say.

“The Yankees are royalty,” said Ed McCabe, who grew up in Ridgewood. “Maybe some of the younger kids will root for the Mets, but North Jersey just identifies with the Yankees.”

Others Yankees fans like Robert Astarita of Ridgewood put it more bluntly: “I don’t think the Mets will overtake this area.”

Despite the indifference from Yankees supporters, the excitement has Mets fans invoking Tug McGraw’s famous rallying cry, “You gotta believe!”

“Mets fans are resilient,” Bendian, the Teaneck baseball camp owner, said. “It’s nice to see fans wearing their hats and shirts and jerseys proudly. It’s exciting to think that we could be better than the Yankees for a few years. Will we ‘take back New York’? Who knows? The bottom line is this year has been different.”

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