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Tommy LaSorda

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - TOMMY LASORDA
JANUARY 09, 2021

It was announced today that longtime Dodger manager and even longer fixture and face of the Dodgers has died. In July of 1997 he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. At that time, I wrote this piece which I send now without alteration.
Richard Crepeau

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
JULY 30, 1997

In a week in which I could choose to talk of Ben Hogan or Don Shula, I find myself compelled towards one of the best-known men in baseball over the past twenty years, Tommy LaSorda, who will be inducted into the manager's wing at Cooperstown on Sunday. Nellie Fox, Phil Niekro, and Willie Wells will also be honored. The fourteenth manager and the fifteenth Dodger honored, this man, who has been considered one of baseball's great ambassadors over the past twenty years, is an overwhelming fan's choice for a spot at Cooperstown.

From his first managerial job in Pocatello in 1965 when his team finished second, LaSorda was a fan and player favorite, as well as a favorite of those in the Dodger organization. By 1972 he had arrived at the top of the Dodger minor league system managing the Albuquerque Dukes to a first-place finish. In 1976 he took over as the Dodger head man for a few games, and in his first full year as manager in 1977 he won a National League pennant. He is one of only four managers to spend twenty years with one team-the others: Walter Alston, John J. McGraw, and Connie Mack. In total he spent forty-seven years in the Dodger organization.

Tommy's career was highlighted by two World Series victories, four National League pennants, and seven divisional titles.

My first and most vivid memory of Tommy LaSorda came when he was still the third-base coach for the Dodgers. One Saturday NBC Game of the Week Tommy was wired and the announcers kept in

touch with him. The idea was to instruct the fans in the art of giving signs. LaSorda talked constantly and late in the game, with nothing much happening, he put his finger up his nose. When asked about the sign he said that he was instructing the batter to pick a good one.

This was vintage LaSorda; slightly crude, very funny, and essentially harmless.

The memories of LaSorda are many and varied. For those who made it to Vero Beach for spring training there was the sight of Tommy riding on to the field in a golf cart while the P.A. system blared out "Hail to the Chief." There was Tommy talking and waving to everyone in sight, and some not in sight. And there was Tommy the Hugger, something he did not just at spring training for the special people in attendance, but something he did on a daily basis in the dugout or on the field after the game. If there is one image of Tommy LaSorda that will be best remembered it very well might be Tommy hugging.

Then there was Hollywood Tommy, marginal member of the Rat Pack, buddy to Sinatra and oh so many celebrities of our time. Tommy held court in his office and sometimes on the field with the movers and shakers. His office was full of pictures of himself and Frank, and Sammy and Dean.

There was Tommy the non-stop talker, Tommy the ultimate Dodger who bled Dodger Blue and looked for help from the Great Dodger in the Sky. He always had a word for everyone and always a great quote for the newspaper guys. He loved everyone and everyone loved him. He seemed to be willing to go anywhere, do anything, to promote the game. There was even talk of making him Commissioner during the recent strike.

When he heard the news of the vote of the veterans committee naming him to the Hall of Fame, tears streamed down his face, and of course those tears were Dodger Blue.

Tommy was good for baseball, but he was hardly a saint. His endless talk could be harshly critical at times. It could also be colorful, as in blue, but not Dodger blue. There is a now legendary tape of LaSorda's facility with the language in which he responds to a question about Dave Kingman's three home run, twelve RBI performance against the Dodgers. A good half of it is bleeped material, and it is one of the funniest responses you will ever hear anywhere.

There is Tommy the strategist, and nearly everyone can sight chapter and verse here. Pitching to Jack Clark with first base open in the National League playoffs in 1985 with two men on and two out in the ninth inning is probably the favorite of most, but there are many more. The Cards won the game 7-5 and the playoff series on Clark's home run.

One of the Dodger minor league pitching coaches once told me that Tommy had a serious weakness in handling young players whom he would humiliate when they made a mistake, thereby destroying the confidence of some to the point where they could not recover. On the other hand, he never questioned a veteran's errors.

Then there is Tommy the Father, the saddest chapter in his life, denying the homosexuality of his son, even after Spunky died of AIDS in 1991 at age 33. It was a low point for Tommy LaSorda, and the best proof we have, that he was human after all.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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