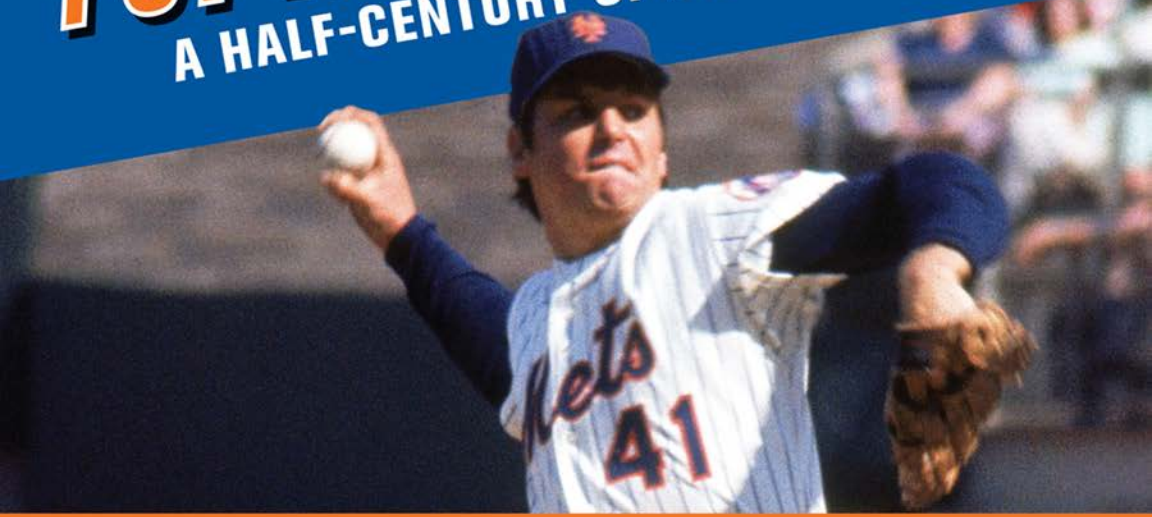




PUT IT IN THE BOOK!
A HALF-CENTURY OF METS MANIA



HOWIE ROSE



WITH **PHIL PEPE** FOREWORD BY **MARV ALBERT**

PUT IT IN
THE BOOK!

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A Half-Century of Mets Mania

Howie Rose
with Phil Pepe



TRIUMPH
BOOKS

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In 1986, a pretty special year as I recall, I met my wife, Barbara. On our second date, she told me that she grew up a Mets fan, and started to reel off the names and uniform numbers of the 1969 world champion Mets. When she came to No. 17 and immediately remembered that it was worn by Rod Gaspar, I was hooked. I guess you could say she had me at Gaspar.

My older daughter Alyssa's first college roommate was actually named Lindsey Nelson (although she spelled her first name differently), but seriously, now. Lindsey Nelson?

My younger daughter Chelsea's first college dormitory was a building called "Shea." I'm not kidding. It could have been named absolutely anything, but it was named Shea.

With material like this, did you think I would wind up working for the Cleveland Indians?

Barbara, Alyssa, and Chelsea are the central figures in my life. If they have been made to feel at any time that my job came before them, I deeply apologize. Family is everything, and I have been blessed with parents, a brother, and a sister who have supported my ambition from its inception. They have my undying love and appreciation.

Barbara, Alyssa, and Chelsea have my heart, my soul, and layers of love that I never knew existed before they came along. This book is dedicated to them.

—Howie Rose, July 2012

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FOREWORD

This was back when I was starting out as a young broadcaster, working for radio station WHN in New York. I spent a lot of time at the station in those days and—this was long before there were cell phones—we would actually pick up a ringing phone in the newsroom.

One day I took a call and it was obvious that the youthful voice on the other end belonged to a teenager who was attempting to sound older than his years. He said his name was Howie Rose and that he called to tell me he'd started a fan club for me. I said I was flattered and offered to help in any way I could.

There were several more phone calls after that, including one in which he asked me—and he was always very polite—if he and a friend could pay a visit to the WHN studios someday to observe what goes on at a real radio station. My first thought was a cynical one—*aha, very clever, that's the reason he started the fan club, so he could get behind the scenes*—but I soon learned that wasn't the case at all; he was serious about the fan club, and he was serious about radio.

I realized early on that not only was Howie a terrific young man, but that he was extremely knowledgeable, had a photographic memory for sports, and, for someone so young, a genuine insight into broadcasting.

In many ways, I saw myself in Howie. When I was young, I was the broadcasting equivalent of a gym rat. Like Howie, I wanted to be around radio and television stations and I formed relationships with two sportscasting icons, Marty Glickman and Les Keiter, who were very supportive, inspiring, and helpful in my career. They both graciously allowed me to visit them and observe a radio station at work.

Because of their kindness to me, I felt a duty to pass along to Howie what had been passed down to me by Glickman and Keiter.

Howie continued to keep in touch. He'd send me copies of a newsletter put out by the fan club, and I'd see him at Rangers games at Madison Square Garden. Howie often would bring a tape recorder to the games, on which he'd practice calling the play-by-play. He'd even send me the tapes and ask me to critique them.

All this time, I was getting flashbacks of the beginning to my own career. Howie was doing all the things I did at his age. What struck me about Howie when I listened to his tapes was how advanced he was in terms of capturing the games. I thought he was exceptional. It's rare to hear someone so young who has all the basics of good sports broadcasting: the knowledge of his subject, the articulation, the smooth delivery, the ability to paint a picture so that the listener knows what's taking place on the field, or the ice. Howie had it all when he was young. I have always enjoyed listening to him and following his progress. He was very good right from the start. He was gifted.

Years later, after I had moved on to NBC television, I had another flashback involving Howie, because he worked at WHN doing reports similar to what I did. To complete the cycle, Howie later became my backup doing Rangers play-by-play on radio and filled in when I was off on other assignments. In fact, in 1994, because of conflicts in my schedule, he ended up doing more games than I did, including the Stanley Cup playoffs when he made the "Matteau! Matteau! Matteau!" call, which was sensational. And in the seventh and final game against Vancouver when the Rangers won the cup, I did two periods and Howie did one.

Foreword

Then Howie moved on to do Mets games, first on television and then on radio, a dream come true for him having grown up an avid Mets fan. I always thought his work on baseball was excellent. Baseball on radio is a difficult skill because there is so much time to fill between limited action. What I like most about his work is that in addition to being knowledgeable, he is objective. There's no hedging with Howie.

Because of the demands in my own schedule I don't get to hear Howie as much as I'd like during the winter months. I do listen to him more often during the summers, which are not as hectic for me. I've always liked the sound of baseball done well on radio, and Howie is excellent at maintaining that rhythm and pace. I especially like that he treats every game as if he's auditioning for the next one. There's no let-up; it's all good. He's always sharp.

I started out perhaps opening a door or two for Howie, but our relationship has moved on to where now I am his friend and fan. If I were back in my high school days, I would have started a Howie Rose Fan Club.

—Marv Albert

INTRODUCTION

I have this recurring dream: I've only had it for my entire life. I'm in the broadcast booth in a filled-to-capacity Citi Field, Flushing, New York (though when the dream took hold it was at Shea), on a chilly, late-October night, and I'm sitting behind a microphone. In the air there's a buzz of excitement from the huge crowd, there's eager anticipation. Down on the field a baseball game is in progress, the seventh game of the World Series as it happens. Top of the ninth inning with the home team ahead, just one out away from the top of the baseball world, a position they have not occupied in more than a quarter of a century, and I'm poised to deliver great news to a vast radio audience.

Twice in their rather checkered history, the New York Mets have won the World Series. I rejoiced as a fan in the triumph, but alas, I was not directly involved in the euphoria either time.

In 1969, when as the "Miracle Mets" they stunned the baseball world and won their first World Series, I was a 15-year-old high school student, and a fan, clinging to every word uttered by the broadcast team of Lindsey Nelson, Bob Murphy, and Ralph Kiner.

In 1986, when Bill Buckner let Mookie Wilson's easy ground ball get under his glove and two nights later when Jesse Orosco struck out Marty Barrett for the final out, I was working for WCBS radio as a (ahem!) presumably unbiased sports reporter.

My affiliation with the Mets (as host of their pregame show and *Mets Extra* on radio station WFAN and later as play-by-play announcer for Fox Sports New York/MSG and WFAN radio) began in 1987, the year after they won their second World Series. Since then, although they have had some high points, they have not scaled the top of the mountain, and, in fact, have suffered through close calls, disappointments, and underachievement.

I swear the two facts—my affiliation with the Mets and their failure to grab the brass ring—are purely coincidental. *I think!*

I have seen—and in some cases have had to describe—the following:

- Mike Scioscia's two-run home run off Doc Gooden in the top of the ninth of Game 4 of the 1988 National League Championship Series between the Mets and the Los Angeles Dodgers. The Mets, who had won 100 games in the regular season including 10 out of 11 against the Dodgers, led in the series, two games to one, and in the game itself 4–2, but Scioscia's home run off Gooden, an 18-game winner, tied the score. The Dodgers then scored a run in the 12th to win 5–4. Instead of being down three games to one, the Dodgers had tied the Series at two games apiece. Three days later in Los Angeles, Orel Hershiser blanked the Mets 6–0. The Dodgers went to the World Series. The Mets went home.

- The Mets had failed to make the postseason for 10 straight years. They would lose more games than they won for six consecutive seasons, from 1991 to 1996, but the losing ended with the Bobby Valentine era, which began during the 1996 season. In 1999, they won the National League wild-card and beat the Arizona Diamondbacks in four games to advance to the National League Championship Series against the Atlanta Braves.

The Braves won the first three games of the best-of-seven series, but the Mets showed their grit by coming back to win the next two games. In Game 4, they were trailing 2–1 in the bottom of the eighth when John Olerud singled in two runs and the Mets held on for a 3–2 victory. Game 5 was a 15-inning classic with the Mets again battling from behind with two in the bottom of the 15th on Robin Ventura's "grand slam single."

Introduction

The Braves scored five runs in the first inning of Game 6 and led 5–0 after five. Again the Mets rallied and took the game into extra innings, tied 8–8. The Mets scored a run in the top of the 10th and the Braves tied it in the bottom of that inning. But in the bottom of the 11th the Braves scored on a bases-loaded walk to Andruw Jones, batting against Kenny Rogers, and again the Mets went home without a pennant.

- The Mets were back in the playoffs the following year, winning the wild-card and advancing to the NLCS for the second straight year. This time they beat the St. Louis Cardinals in five games and made it to the World Series for the first time in 14 years. But in that Series the Mets ran into the dynasty that was the Joe Torre–led Yankees and were defeated in five games. The joy of reaching the World Series was definitely diminished by losing to their hated rivals from the Bronx.

We learned in 2000 that the intercity rivalry stimulates the fiscal health of both parties, when the Yankees and Mets combined to draw close to 6 million fans. (Eight years later, in the final season of Shea Stadium and old Yankee Stadium, they would combine to draw more than 8 million fans.)

There was a time (before I was born and until I was four years old) when there were three teams in New York City: the Yankees in the Bronx, the Giants in Manhattan, and the Dodgers in Brooklyn. New York was said to be a National League town, if only by virtue of the two-to-one odds. It was with that belief that the Mets were created, and soon after they arrived they'd grabbed hold of the city and validated the adage of NL supremacy in New York. Once Shea Stadium was erected in 1964, the Mets outdrew the Yankees for 12 consecutive years, from 1964 to 1975, doubling the Yankees' attendance in each of four straight years, from 1969 to 1972.

In the mid-'80s, the Mets enjoyed a resurgence and again surpassed the Yankees in attendance, this time for nine straight seasons, from 1984 to 1992. Then, in 1987, the Mets became the first New York team ever to draw more than 3 million customers with 3,034,129 (the Yankees drew 2,427,672).

PUT IT IN THE BOOK!

Understand as well that attendance figures in those days were computed differently by the two leagues. American League attendance reflected the number of tickets sold, while in the National League only the turnstile count, or “fannies in the seats,” counted as paid attendance. Therefore, there were seasons in the mid- and late 1980s, with contending teams on both sides of the rivalry, when the Mets sold roughly half a million more tickets than the Yankees!

History teaches us that success in baseball is cyclical; that neither the good years nor the bad are constant. Believe me, the good ones are a lot more fun, but having the chance to broadcast all of them for the New York Mets has been an honor, a privilege, and a thrill.

If all goes well, the biggest thrill is still to come.

PROLOGUE: No-No

The Mets outfielders are standing their ground. Nobody walking around, taking any extra steps between pitches. Santana's 3-1 pitch. Swing and a topper up the third-base line foul. It's 3 and 2.

And now Santana, perhaps a strike away. Johan sweeps a little dirt away from the left of the pitching rubber. Steps behind the rubber. Tugs once at the bill of his cap. Takes a deep breath and steps to the third-base side of the rubber.

Santana into the windup...the payoff pitch on the way...swung on and missed...strike three!

He's done it!

Johan Santana has pitched a no-hitter!

In the eight thousand and twentieth game in the history of the New York Mets, they finally have a no-hitter. And who better to do it than Johan Santana...and what a remarkable story.

His teammates are mobbing him at the mound. The players in the bullpen are trotting in.

It is a surreal feeling here at Citi Field. The first no-hitter in the history of the New York Mets has been pitched by as worthy a candidate as anyone, Johan Santana.

Put it in the books! In the history books!

—My call on WFAN radio of the first no-hitter in Mets history.

It makes no sense that a franchise which has featured Tom Seaver, Nolan Ryan, Dwight Gooden, and David Cone, pitchers that have combined to throw 10 no-hitters for other teams, could go more than 8,000 regular season games since its inception without a no-hitter of its own. But so it was as game time approached at Citi Field on the night of Friday, June 1, 2012.

Game No. 8,020 in Mets' history brought the defending world champion St. Louis Cardinals to town. Before the game, all the commotion was about the return of former Met Carlos Beltran, back in Flushing for the first time since being traded to the Giants the previous July. All anyone seemed focused on leading up to the first inning was what kind of crowd reaction Beltran would get. Johan Santana, the Mets starting pitcher, was almost an afterthought.

In his pregame press conference, Mets' manager Terry Collins insisted that Santana, back after missing a full season recovering from shoulder surgery, would throw no more than 110–115 pitches. When Matt Adams led off the Cardinals' fifth inning with a base on balls, I said on the air that although the Cardinals still did not have a hit, don't expect tonight to be "the night." Santana had already walked four and it appeared he might reach 110 pitches by the seventh inning. But after walking Adams, Santana retired the next nine hitters and started the eighth inning with an 8–0 lead, just six outs away from Mets history. The fact that in the sixth inning there was a blown call by third-base umpire Adrian Johnson on Beltran's line drive down the third-base line didn't matter. Replays would show that Beltran's drive actually kicked up chalk from the foul line beyond third base and should have been ruled a fair ball; but it wasn't, and the no-hitter, if not Terry Collins' stomach, was intact.

Collins agonized visibly over his decision, but against his better judgment and his own pregame directive to keep Santana's pitch count under control, he allowed Johan to continue his bid for a no-hitter despite a high pitch count. Santana walked his fifth batter with two out in the eighth, but at this point Terry was uncomfortably committed to

Prologue: No-No



Johan Santana waves to the Citi Field crowd after finishing the first no-bitter in Mets history on June 1, 2012. (AP Images)

his pitcher's pursuit of history. Collins wasn't the only one compromising his principles. I had always been blunt on the air by using the words "no-hitter" in describing what a pitcher was pursuing. Most broadcasters subscribe to baseball superstition by talking around a no-hitter in progress, but I figured I didn't control what happened on the field so I decided to simply report the facts and let the game take care of itself.

I don't know why I decided to make this night different, but I did. I found *myself* compromising *my* principles by saying such things as, "It's 8-0 New York and the Mets have all the hits and all the runs." I left no doubt what Santana was attempting to accomplish, but I never uttered the phrase "no-hitter," and I admit doing so caused me to feel slightly squirrely. By the ninth inning, all I felt was intense, nervous anxiety.

I had never broadcast a no-hitter, never had so much as seen one in person. But as the final inning began I had a feeling that no matter how badly I wanted it, no matter how badly the fans and anyone connected to the Mets wanted it, there was some external force at work which decreed that no New York Met would pitch a no-hitter. Not now. Not ever.

Tom Seaver had taken three no-hitters into the ninth inning as a Met only to allow hits to such luminaries as Jimmy Qualls, Leron Lee, and Joe Wallis. Kit Pellow and Paul Hoover also had broken up Mets' no-hit bids in the eighth inning. Don't bother looking for plaques of those five spoilers in Cooperstown. You won't find them.

By the ninth inning, I had a knot in my stomach, the same sort of knot I had experienced calling those dramatic Rangers games during their run to the 1994 Stanley Cup. I was trapped at the corner of Professional and Emotional, a dangerous intersection. When Matt Holliday, leading off the ninth, got out in front of a changeup and looped a pop-fly to shallow center, my voice reflected uncertainty that the ball would drop for a hit. It didn't. It hung up long enough for Andres Torres to make the catch. One out! The next batter, Allen Craig, then hit one a little harder to left field, but Kirk Nieuwenhuis made a running catch. Two outs!

Prologue: No-No

The next hitter was David Freese, the 2011 World Series MVP. Santana fell behind in the count 3–0 and was now at 131 pitches, more than he had ever thrown in a single game in his career. A walk to Freese would bring to the plate Yadier Molina of all people, whose home run in Game 7 of the 2006 National League Championship Series had broken the spirit of the Mets. Imagine Santana’s no-hit bid coming down to an at-bat by one of the Mets all-time heartbreakers.

Santana found the strike zone with his next two pitches to Freese, filling the count at 3–2. He was one strike away from history. He went into his windup and fired. Freese took a mighty swing at a vintage Santana changeup...and missed. I was in a state of broadcasting shock, a feeling I had never before experienced. The Citi Field crowd of 27,069 must have felt the same way. Johan Santana and the Mets had finally achieved a no-hitter.

I’m comfortable in the thought that my call of that final pitch, that moment in Mets history, reflected the enormity of the achievement while still paying attention to detail. It took me almost 60 seconds after the final pitch to say, “Put it in the books! In the history books!”

I’m proud of that because there was so much else to describe that seemed of greater importance at that moment than being able to squeeze in a signature call immediately upon history having been made. I was a little hysterical at times, but it is one of my favorite calls.

Later, Gary Cohen came from the TV side to the radio booth and joined me for a special postgame show. Two New York kids who grew up with the Mets, suffering their failures and exulting in their successes, reminiscing and glowing over the ultimate success, attaining the seemingly unattainable, a no-hitter. It was a momentous night in Mets history and one of the most memorable nights of my career.

After the postgame show, I went to the Mets clubhouse hoping to offer Santana private congratulations. Thankfully, he was still there 90 minutes after the game had ended. I gave him a congratulatory hug and told him I had never cried on the air, but this night I came close to breaking up a bit.

PUT IT IN THE BOOK!

“Did you cry?” he asked with a smile.

When I said I didn’t, he seemed so disappointed I wished that I’d told him a little white lie. Then I did something I had never done before in almost four decades of sports broadcasting. I asked Johan to sign the scorecard of the game I had just broadcast.

That’s how much that game and that night meant to Johan Santana, to the entire Mets organization, to their fans and, I confess, to me.

Chapter 1

I CONFESS

In the interest of full disclosure, I have a confession to make: my father was a Yankees fan (so was I, but only when I was a little guy and only before there was a team called the New York Mets).

The first baseball game I can remember is the seventh game of the 1960 World Series between the Yankees and the Pittsburgh Pirates. When I was little, my dad would grill me on the Yankees' lineup, so I knew their names, their numbers, and their positions. For instance, I knew the name Yogi Berra. I knew he was No. 8 and that he was a catcher. The vague recollection I have of Game 7 of the '60 World Series is of Bill Mazeroski hitting the game-winning home run over the head of the Yankees' left fielder, Berra. My six-year-old mind could not grasp the concept of someone taking off all of that catcher's equipment and running all the way out to left field and still almost catching Mazeroski's home run. (It's a minor miracle I actually became a big-league broadcaster.)

Because of my dad and his love of the Yankees, I became immersed in baseball in 1961, a magical season in which Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle chased Babe Ruth's supposedly unbreakable single-season home run record of 60 and doing it before my father's and my eyes, practically in our backyard, in fact.

At the time we lived in the Bronx, only a few blocks from Yankee Stadium. I was born in Brooklyn (can't everybody trace at least part of

his roots to Brooklyn?) but when I was five we moved to the Bronx, where I attended P.S. 77 for first and second grades. I mention that only because P.S. 77 was across the street from James Monroe High School, where both Hall of Famer Hank Greenberg and the Mets' Ed Kranepool went to high school. Literally, when I was sitting in my classroom in P.S. 77, Kranepool was hitting home runs for James Monroe toward my classroom. That shows how far back my New York Mets roots go.

Not surprising, kids being notorious front-runners, my first baseball hero was Maris (the Mets, Tom Seaver, Bud Harrelson, Darryl Strawberry, Keith Hernandez, Mookie Wilson, Gary Carter, and David Wright were not yet even on my radar). I have vivid recollections of the final week of that season with Maris closing in on the record. I'd watch the games on television, but I was in second grade and if there was a night game and there was school the next day, I had to go to bed. I couldn't stay up until 10:00 or 10:30 PM to watch the game. My dad and I would catch the start of a game together in my bedroom. He'd keep the TV on, but he'd turn the sound down and he'd allow me to stay up a little later. When he thought it was too late for me to stay awake any longer, he'd make me turn around and go to sleep while he watched the rest of the game. It wasn't an easy chore for him to get me to sleep because I kept cheating and stealing peeks at the television.

On September 20, a Wednesday night, the Yankees were playing the Orioles in Baltimore. I watched the beginning of the game and then I dropped off to sleep. I was asleep when Maris hit his 59th home run, and my dad was so excited he literally shook me awake to show me Maris running around the bases. That's how passionate he was about baseball and the Yankees.

The following year the Mets were born and I dropped my allegiance to the Yankees and became a Mets fan for the same reason so many kids of my age did at the time: the Mets were not our father's team, they were ours. It was a chance to get in on the action from day one. I was narcissistic enough to believe that because I had become such a huge