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Leo Durocher Says: "I'm Glad to Be Back in Baseball"

Six years ago, he thought the game
couldn't offer him any more;
now he knows differently,
and even a secondary job brings
back that famous old fire

By JOSEPH N. BELL



In his new role as Dodger coach, Leo Durocher points out bunting flaws to rookie outfielder Ron Fairly.

EVER SINCE Leo Durocher left baseball in 1955, sports writers have had to strain for the colorful copy his antics once provided by the team. This spring, the easy smiles are back on the sports scribes' faces. Leo is back in baseball making the big banner headlines.

He stopped presses all over the country early this year when he accepted the lowly (for him) job as a coach with his old Dodgers, then of Brooklyn, now of Los Angeles. Said Durocher: "I had been out of work for 15 months and I needed a job. Besides, I was just about ready to give my right arm to get back into baseball."

The furor had hardly died down when a New York newspaper screamed in front-page headlines that Leo was suddenly leaving the Dodgers before he had baited his first umpire during the official season to take on the manager's job for the New York "Metropolitans," the new National League club beginning operation in 1962.

Durocher and George Weiss, president of the Mets, issued vehement denials of the story, as did the Dodger brass. The reporter who broke the exclusive, while not revealing who leaked the news to him, assured us his story "was no pipe dream," no matter how heated the denials. Even as this story was being written, there was the possibility the volatile Durocher will be scouring the country for Met ballplayers rather than traffic-copping base runners in Los Angeles. If not now, it seems a reasonable guess that Leo will sign as manager of the Mets before next spring.

No matter where he is for the balance of the '61 season, Leo is back with a bang and glad of it. The controversy proves it.

A few years ago, Durocher was saying he would never again put on a baseball uniform for a salary, no matter how large. He insisted that only part ownership in a club could bring him back.

"During my six years out of baseball, I found that money isn't everything. To me, being back is everything."

Baseball was everything to Leo until 1955. By then, however, he'd done just about everything an ambitious man could do in the game—except own a club. He'd starred on the

field, managed pennant winners in Brooklyn and New York, and finally copped a World Series for the Giants.

Still ambitious and always cocky, he looked for new fields to conquer and ended up with the National Broadcasting Company. He tried acting and was an admitted failure. He did better at sportcasts but wasn't happy.

Durocher and NBC parted company at the end of the baseball season in 1959, and he has been literally out of work ever since. For 15 months, everything was going out, and nothing was coming in.

"But I found out then what loyal friends I had," says Leo. "Dozens of them called to offer help and to make sure I was all right. I knew then that baseball was my life, and I wanted to get back to it."

"But the statements I'd made a few years earlier that I wasn't interested in returning to baseball on any sort of salary basis hurt me—even though I told anyone who would listen that it was no longer true. The Dodgers were the only club that believed me enough to make a concrete proposal, and I'll always be grateful to Walter O'Malley, Buzzie Bavasi, and Walt Alston because of it."

"I didn't have to negotiate with them. I didn't even discuss terms with Bavasi. I just told him: 'Forget about a contract. Your word is good enough for me.' And that's the way it was."

WHICH LEADS US to what sports writers have euphemistically labeled an "uncomfortable situation"—that is, Durocher's working under Walter Alston, who right now is the senior major-league manager.

"Nobody had to tell me that my being around could make a delicate situation for Alston," he says. But Durocher contends that those who are predicting this "situation" will finally blow up just don't understand—or won't concede—three points:

1. Leo is capable of stout personal loyalty. "When I work for a manager," he says, "he's the greatest manager in baseball. I'm happy and gratified to be working with Walter as a coach, and I'm delighted to be with the Dodgers."

2. Durocher likes it in California. Los Angeles is his home, and most of his friends are there. Working for the Dodgers makes it possible for Durocher to live on the Coast.

3. Durocher has shown, at least in spring training, that he's able to subordinate himself to Alston, as a coach must. He hasn't popped off. He has made statements only in general press conferences. He hasn't second-guessed. He has contributed his advice and considerable baseball knowledge, not through the newspapers but in the privacy of clubhouse staff meetings.

All this makes it seem like a good bet that Leo will finish the season with the Dodgers, but by the same token, Leo has always been hard to handicap.

HE INSISTS that no writer is going to get a single unguarded word from him by jockeying him to one side and whispering, "What do you really think, Leo?" His determination on this point is judicious. During the press conference at which Durocher's appointment was announced, Buzzie Bavasi, in reply to a question from a reporter, looked straight at Leo and said: "The first time I read in the papers where you have second-guessed Walt, that's it."

This arouses no rancor in Durocher. He knows that's the way it has to be. He wouldn't tolerate second-guessing from a coach when he was managing, and he doesn't expect Alston to. Durocher knows the rules, and thus far he gives every indication that he intends to abide by them. However, that doesn't mean he's wearing a halo on the playing field. Nor does the Dodger management want him to.

Alston says of Durocher: "We've got Leo on our side again, and I'm glad to have him with us. He'll direct traffic at third base, and he'll help us in a lot of other ways, particularly in instructing all our kids in the fundamentals of baseball. I plan to let him do his usual amount of talking. It may be that's what this ball club needs. We can use a man with enthusiasm and spirit. I don't resent it; I'm glad to have it on my staff."

Avoiding the limelight has proved impossible for the fiery Leo even though he insists he wants to take a back seat.

When questioned about leaving the Dodgers to manage the Mets, he said: "I wish they'd just leave me alone for a while. I'm happy where I am. I know how good baseball has been to me, and I'm so glad to be back that I'll do almost anything to make sure that this time I stay."

He sounds as if he means every word of it, whether in New York or Los Angeles.

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