

Cashen on Free Agents and Building the Mets

By FRANK CASHEN

DAVE WINFIELD . . . Don Sutton . . . Rusty Staub. Their very names conjure up visions of grandeur, of victory, of packed stadiums on sun-swept afternoons.

These were three of the 10 players of assorted skills and varying talents who were drafted by the New York Mets Thursday morning in major league baseball's fifth annual re-entry draft.

Is the draft a curse or a cure? We will not really know for a few more years — perhaps as many as five more — and it should be a study that is made only in retrospect. But the conditions demand that the Mets play this game, regardless of the outcome.

What are the Mets doing in this raffle of human skills, which, if the club is at all successful in signing the players drafted, will cost us millions of dollars? What indeed?

If there was a beginning for me, it came in late February 1980, when on a cloud-clogged winter afternoon, I left Commissioner Bowie Kuhn's office, where I had been employed, and darted across 52d Street to be officially announced as the new executive vice president and general manager of the Mets.

The Inevitable Question

At the news conference, the questions came quickly, piling one on top of another, and I soon realized that there were a mass and maze of unanswerable queries about the National League franchise in New York.

Would the Mets be active in the re-entry draft in 1981? That was one of the first puzzles posed by reporters. That question would be re-phrased many times during the course of that afternoon, and it would persist through the hope of spring, the faith of summer and the penance of fall.

The question was always before me: Would the Mets be active in the re-entry draft?

The re-entry draft, I was to say then and repeat it so often during the summer, was one of several ways open to a general manager to rebuild a ball club. The improvement of your young players is one, replacement from a budding farm system still another. Judicious trading would help and, of course, there was that comparatively new spectacle — the re-entry draft.

No one of these can be ignored, I said, quickly pointing out that when you have finished last three years in a row, you cannot ignore any of the avenues open to improve the team.

Long Journey Back

It is just six blocks from the "21" Club to the Plaza Hotel, but it took me nine months to make the journey that culminated in Thursday morning's selection of negotiating rights to a handful of players that could be instrumental in turning the franchise around. The final answer will only be known after I have exhausted all of my negotiating skills, pledged the present and future resources of my club, signed players, nursed them through spring training and brought them back to Shea Stadium for the summer journey that is best described as the agonizing ecstasy of a pennant race.

It was anticlimactic to answer the call of my successor in the commissioner's office, Bill Murray, stand before the microphone and explain to the surprise of no one in the crowded ball room that the New York Mets wish to select the negotiation rights to Dave Winfield of the San Diego Padres. The words somehow came slowly, in almost measured cadence, in a manner that someone later was to say left little doubt that the Mets intended to pursue seriously the big and gifted man who had heretofore primarily exhibited his talents on the West Coast.

The game plan was good. First Winfield was drafted. Then Don Sutton, the long-time Dodger ace. Grab the class first. Then like an intense and involved bridge game, it was trump and counter-trump as the order of selection was dictated by the other clubs in the game. Draft some pitching, some left-handed pinch-hitters. The session moved swiftly.

Would Winfield be surprised to learn that the Mets had drafted him No. 1? Hardly. Twice I

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had calls to his agent after he had declared free agency. First, carefully observing the ground rules of the game, I told him that we would be interested in speaking with Winfield to see if we had a mutuality of interest. He and Winfield would be interested in doing that, he said, and they would be in New York the following week and would like to visit with us.

A second call to a New York hotel room brought a guarded but not unpleasant response that set up a luncheon on Friday, or Nov. 7. It was an eventful day. The early working hours were spent in the Doubleday executive offices, explaining to four members of the board of directors exactly what we were allowed to discuss. The satisfaction of playing in New York? Yes, we could talk about that. The plans we had for our franchise were permissible conversations, as was how we would use a player on our team should he have interest in helping perform the magic that would transform the Mets.

Rules of the Game

No mention could be made of terms, financial or otherwise, they were warned. We can, in short, visit but not get intimate.

Nelson Doubleday, John O'Donnell and Walter Freese joined in the walk from Park Avenue and 46th Street to the suite above the Doubleday Book Store on Fifth Avenue, where the meeting was to take place. John Sargent was to follow shortly, and the player and agent were already in place when the parade of prospective, perspicuous employees entered.

We were glad to meet him. He was glad to be there. We had looked forward to having him. He had looked forward to being there. So it began, this ritualistic dance that so loosely resembled old-fashioned courting.

Look but don't touch. Express interest but don't mention money. Somehow, in the proceedings that followed, it was difficult to know who would buy and who would sell. A stranger to the mix would be puzzled but no less so than the participants.

A ballplayer once described it best: Visiting with ownership prior to the draft is like spending an evening with a beautiful and willing woman and never mentioning love.

The Sutton Approach

There was an exquisite lunch and much talk of Dave's philanthropic activities, particularly the Winfield Pavilion and the Optimal Health Programs that he stages for children. Perhaps it was best that there could be no talk of dollars. The true measure of the man was probably indelibly inscribed in memory by those conversations. Dave Winfield is his own man, I thought, and it was difficult to imagine that with his pride, with all that he has endured in spite of the brightness and completeness of his talent, that he could ever agree, regardless of the gold, to be just another extension of any owner's ego.

With Don Sutton it was different. Don Sutton was in town and his agent was on the phone, saying Sutton would like to talk with us. That was how simply it happened.

Of course, was the reply.

Would early this afternoon be acceptable?

Yes, at 1.

Perfect. One o'clock it is.

Jeans and boots, curly hair and a weathered face. Thirty-five years old and counting. One million? Two million? What would it take? Those are the unasked questions.

The asked question is why Don Sutton? When I looked at that face I wondered if he could be the bellweather of my staff for the next two years. He is of unquestionable quality. If Craig Swan's shoulder doesn't respond, Sutton could represent something we don't actually have. And could he start the World Series for me two years from now?

There were also distractions. A lot of agents reciting an endless litany of deeds accomplished by a seemingly exhaustible list of athletes. Were these the same players that I had seen for the last six years? They can help you, they can make you a winner, cried the hucksters. Lord, deliver me from mediocrity, I silently pray.

Down to the Hard Work

Inexorably, the days drifted away. A folder bulged with the notices of the players who have

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Associated Press

The New York Times

"There was . . . much talk of Dave's philanthropic activities"

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Associated Press

"He is of unquestionable quality"

"For a team without character in its left-handed pinch-hitting, he is rated the best of the lot."

selected the re-entry draft. It gives some hope, but the real hour of truth is approaching. Tuesday, Nov. 11 is the day to complete our draft list. It is a day that begins at Shea Stadium at 7:30 A.M. and that is to continue unrelentingly until 10:30 P.M. Visiting hours are over.

Through that day the separate pieces move in an unswerving manner. Chris Kager works on each player's career record, brought up to date with 1980 statistics; the irrepressible Arthur Richman puts together the salary information. What did the player earn this year? What are his financial hopes for the future? Richman, perhaps the best gatherer of information in the profession, knows of last offers, asking prices, settling prices, off-field habits. He leaves the table to make phone calls; he has sources available to no one else.

Manager Joe Torre comes from New Jersey for the 5 o'clock final meeting. Quiet, silent, he knows ball players. He listens, he talks, he is an invaluable team player at a time like this.

President Fred Wilpon, who had been in Europe when the early contact was made with Winfield, sits in. Energetic, dedicated, he is ever ready to help. He contributes, he keeps the discussions on track.

Al Harazin, who recently joined the Mets from the Baltimore Orioles, is bright, and he knows the American League; when he talks, you listen.

What the Mets Need

The Mets' needs are first examined. Power, more pitching, an improved bench. It all sounds so easy. The exercise begins. Each player's record is considered in detail. Richman quotes the player's supposed asking price. He is placed in a category. Harazin keeps the notes. Slowly but steadily the complete list is attacked, consumed, digested and then segregated.

Rusty Staub, the redoubtable redhead from New Orleans by way of Houston, Montreal, New York, Detroit and Texas, draws a lot of com-

ment. For a team without character in its left-handed pinch-hitting, he is rated the best of the lot and moved from Column 2 to Column 1.

Class tells quickly and the list takes shape. It is time to go home.

Wednesday, Lou Gorman, the newly arrived vice president of baseball operations, examines the results. There is some juggling; not at the top but in the middle. The list remains at 10, but one thing is absolutely clear: the Mets, in their pursuit of excellence, will go for quality first and let the numbers follow thereafter. And once drafted we will make every effort to sign the player.

Thursday, the staff gathers early at Shea and goes to Manhattan via subway. Ironic, I think to myself, that we rush eagerly to risk millions . . . on the subway. Friendly, sunny skies greet us as we hurry across Fifth Avenue to the hotel.

Don't start without us, I think, as I look at my watch, don't start without us. The Mets are coming. The Mets are coming.