

Know Thyself . . . Not!

March 20, 1992—No spring training is complete without a visit to the New York Mets, heirs to the New York Yankees as baseball's most self-deluded franchise.

Everybody's talking about the Mets. Why? Because they're talking about themselves, of course. As usual.

This franchise has been to one World Series in eighteen years, but it thinks it's the center of the baseball universe. When the Mets are great ('86), they think they're the best ever. When they're good, they think they're great. When they're mediocre, they think they're very good but got stiffed. And when they're bad, as they were last season, finishing fifth, they think if they spend \$30 million or \$40 million, they'll be great again before the ink dries.

The Mets' reward for self-inflation is that they seldom learn the proper lessons from their annual disappointments and so almost never approach the next season with fitting expectations. For instance, at this very moment, the Mets think—and will actually tell you—that they should win the National League East despite their 77-84 record in '91, which was 20½ games out of first place.

Dream on. Once more, come October, the Mets—owners, fans, and press—will scratch their heads and find some Davey Johnson or Darryl Strawberry or Frank Cashen to pick as this year's scapegoat.

Let's make this so simple that even the Mets can get a reality check.

Two winters ago, the Mets lost free agent Strawberry. Last winter, they replaced him (for \$29 million) with Bobby Bonilla, a fine All-Star

who is getting chubbier every year. This is not progress. This is a net minus.

The Mets now have Bret Saberhagen (in trade), but they lost Frank Viola (to free agency). Talk about tit for tat. Both were once excellent. Both are on the slide. Both have arm trouble. But Viola's more durable. No progress here.

The Mets got Eddie Murray with his sour puss; but they had to trade Kevin McReynolds. Murray's a Hall of Famer. But so what? He's old. He's a statue at first base. And his stats are little better than those of McReynolds, who was a decent outfielder. A wash.

The Mets got ancient Willie Randolph and Bill Pecota to play second base. But they lost Gregg Jefferies. Why is this an improvement? Jefferies may still turn out to be a Royals star. "Mets fans are going to like Bill Pecota," said new manager Jeff Torborg this week.

Yeah? Why? He's thirty-two. He's never done anything anywhere. He's a .235 hitter. If the frequently disabled Randolph, soon to be thirty-eight, gets hurt, Mets fans may do a Pecota on Al Harazin's head.

Above all, the Mets fail to realize their greatest failings.

They have an absolutely horrible defense at almost every position. So what do they do? They move their worst defensive player, Howard Johnson (39 errors) to a really important position—centerfield. They move a first baseman to third base (Dave Magadan); he should be a nightmare. They get Murray, who hasn't hustled since 1979, to avoid smashes at first base. And they turn the catching job over to a rookie. At shortstop? The immortal stopgap Kevin Elster.

Torborg, asked about this, said—honest to God—"We're focusing on defense. We think it can be a plus."

You have to feel for Torborg, one of the game's nice, smart people. There aren't many honest questions you can ask him that won't cause him anguish.

How's HoJo look in center?

There's this wonderful pause while he reworks the company line: "He's looked better since Vada [Pinson, a coach] gave him a tip a couple of days ago."

What was the tip? Buy a motorcycle and wear a crash helmet?

Let's take pity and not ask him about Strawberry's autobiography just yet, okay?

Unfortunately, the Mets' biggest long-term problem may be the health of their two best pitchers, the young yet ancient duo of Dwight

Gooden, twenty-seven, and Saberhagen, twenty-eight. Both are in acute danger of the Fernando Valenzuela Meltdown Syndrome.

Studies of some twentieth-century pitchers have shown that those who are acutely overworked before they are twenty-five usually burn out by thirty. Gooden and Saberhagen, big-league starters at nineteen and workhorses by twenty-one, are the leading candidates of their generation for this sad end. Both already have had career-threatening arm problems.

The Mets can look at anything or anybody and, so long as it's in a Mets uniform, imagine greatness. Even Sid Fernandez. He'll be thirty this year and has probably already eaten away a fine career. Finally, last winter, after his extra weight forced him to have knee surgery ("Oh, no, he's going to land on us again!"), Fernandez lost about 35 of the 50 pounds he needed to drop. His conclusion after an off-season of diet study: "If you eat fats, you get fat."

Naturally, the Mets are counting on El Sid, who won one game last season. Right now, Fernandez has an itty-bitty injury and can't pitch, but the Mets aren't worried. At least he's not eating.

One new Met may get what he deserves. Pouty Eddie Murray has had his hand held by Earl Weaver and his feet kissed by Tommy Lasorda for most of the first fifteen pampered years of his career. Now he's going to meet reality: a two-year sentence in New York City.

Eddie's hands are tender and he hates to hit in cold weather. Shea is a wind tunnel. If Murray is hitting .160 on May 1, the tabloids will eviscerate him on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, the home fans will boo him on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, and on Sunday everybody will bring old vegetables to the park. By June, first base may look like a Caesar salad.

Mets fans always expect a lot. And the Mets always oblige by telling them what they want to hear: We're great.

When they aren't quite that good, no problem. Just find somebody to blame.