

## TELEVISION REVIEW

# ‘Once Upon a Time in Queens’ Review: Meet the Mets

A four-part ‘30 for 30’ presentation on ESPN tells the amazin’ story of the 1986 Mets.



Gary Carter and Wally Backman of the New York Mets celebrate after winning the 1986 Major League Baseball World Series

PHOTO: MLB PHOTOS VIA GETTY IMAGES

*By John Anderson*

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The more storied seasons of Major League Baseball—not plays, not games, but entire seasons—unfold like 19th-century novels, or the more implausible of Hollywood fantasies. The ’78 Yankees. The ’79 Pirates. The 2002 Oakland A’s (who were, in fact, the basis of “Moneyball”) or the ’86 New York Mets—the subject of “Once Upon a Time in Queens,” a foul-mouthed fairy tale about what is probably best remembered as a tale of soaring stars and collapsing Red Sox.

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**Once Upon a Time in Queens**

*Tuesday and Wednesday, 8 p.m., ESPN and ESPN2*

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As director Nick Davis tells it so energetically, and affectionately, there was much more to it, as older fans will constantly be reminded while younger viewers are left agog: A Mets fan parachuted into Shea Stadium at the beginning of Game 6? Of the World Series? How did that even happen? And how was it not the strangest thing that happened in Game 6?

Back in 2008, Kevin Rafferty made a film called “Harvard Beats Yale 29-29,” which despite having a title that gave away the ending was a paragon of nerve-racking nonfiction. “Once Upon a Time in Queens,” a two-night, four-part “30 for 30” documentary presentation from ESPN Films, will navigate viewers just as closely to the edge of their seats. This despite their already knowing the ending and the climax being one of the more notorious World Series games in the history of the sport. One needn’t mention the beloved Bill Buckner because so many other things went wrong for Boston: One might easily imagine the ghost of the Bambino out in the bleachers somewhere, waving a magic bat and re-cursing the then-luckless Sox. The Mets had been anointed the team of destiny, as its players admit to being all too fully aware. And yet: suspense.

Episode 1 begins with Mr. Davis laying out the metaphoric role of the Mets in, and for, New York. Founded in 1962, the property of Joan Whitney Payson, the New York Metropolitan Baseball Club Inc. was intended to mend the souls of National League fans cruelly abandoned by the Giants and Dodgers, who had moved to California in 1957. For some time, they were the worst team in baseball, hence the “miracle” of the 1969 World Series. In the '70s, however, with the city having being told to drop dead by President Gerald R. Ford, the owners of the Mets sent Tom Seaver, one of the best pitchers the team ever had, to the Cincinnati Reds. It was a symptom of a team, and perhaps a city, on the skids.

In 1980 came a change in management and the arrival of a new general manager, Frank Cashen. He started to assemble a team of players whose names still resonate well beyond Flushing: Dwight Gooden, Darryl Strawberry, Keith Hernandez, Mookie Wilson. ( Lenny

Dykstra all alone might be the reason ESPN is airing the series in uncensored and censored versions—on ESPN and ESPN2, respectively—something it also did with “The Last Dance,” its series on the Chicago Bulls.)



Members of the 1986 Mets team

PHOTO: ESPN

Mr. Davis interviews virtually everyone—the ’86 Mets, their then-opponents, and a dugout’s worth of prominent fans ( John McEnroe, Cyndi Lauper, Tama Janowitz, George R.R. Martin). Catcher Gary Carter, who died in 2012, was a huge part of the Mets season and, naturally, the film (though, oddly, very little interview footage with him appears). He was also the squeaky clean, camera-friendly antithesis of his hard-partying teammates. “Gary Carter was probably one of the more beautiful people you’d ever want to meet,” says one unidentified player. Cut to Mr. Hernandez: “Gary was one of the more disliked players in the league.” Nobody holds back about much, though no player wants to address the return flight to New York that followed the Mets’ epic, 16-inning win over the Astros for the National League championship. (“One of the great moments in American aviation,” says author Jeff Pearlman. ) The plane was ruined; various players estimate the damage at between \$5,000 and \$150,000. The airline sent the team a bill; the organization wanted the players to pay. Manager Davey Johnson —one of Mr. Davis’s more entertaining interviewees—ripped up the bill, because, after all, they were going to the World Series.

And besides, he recalls saying, “I know you guys didn’t do it. I know it had to be your wives.”

Much of “Once Upon a Time in Queens,” which airs Tuesday and Wednesday evenings, is exhilarating, fun and triumphal. It’s also quite sad at times: Mr. Strawberry is extraordinarily frank about his difficulties with marriage, drugs and the various distractions available to a young ballplayer whose team was on fire. Similarly Mr. Gooden and Mr. Hernandez, now a Mets announcer and always a wry observer of life and the game. He talks about his troubled relationship with his baseball-obsessed father (which Mr. Davis punctuates with scenes from “Fear Strikes Out,” about the bipolar player Jimmy Piersall, which seems a bit much). George Foster —the first marquee attraction Cashen signed and who later accused the Mets of racism when he was benched in favor of an outfield that included Mr. Strawberry and Kevin Mitchell, who like Mr. Foster were both Black—declined to be interviewed.

Mr. Davis’s handling of an unwieldy season and story is expert; the editing by Colin Cosack, Josh Freed and Jack Mankiewicz is first-rate; and Joel Goodman’s original music percolates, though he does get some help from Mozart. The soaring overture to “The Marriage of Figaro” ends episode 3 as the great sportswriter Roger Angell recalls having been at the opera during the playoffs when he saw a ticketholder rush in at the last possible moment, flash the score with his fingers and give a thumbs up: Mets. It was that kind of year.