

ESPN doc on 1986 Mets, 'Once Upon a Time in Queens,' for more than just fans says director

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Matthew Roberson

On Tuesday, Sept. 14 at 8 p.m. eastern time, one of baseball's most cinematic teams will see their story told on screen.

The four-part ESPN 30 for 30 documentary "Once Upon a Time in Queens" directed by Nick Davis, tells the story of the World Series champion 1986 Mets. With such massive personalities, the surrounding events of New York City in the '80s and the intricate history of the Mets all intertwined here, the director believed this is a film that transcends sports.

"This isn't just for Mets fans," Davis, a Manhattan native, explicated. "This isn't just for baseball fans. It's for anyone who's interested in character and story. As it was happening, Mets fans knew, 'This is really big. Nothing like this has ever happened before.' In '83 it was like the Beatles in Hamburg. Then you get deeper into it, it's like, 'Okay! Sgt. Pepper! Here we go.'"

The story needed to be told in four separate segments because of how much of the '86 team was affected by things that came before and after Mookie Wilson's grounder scooted between Bill Buckner's legs. From Nelson Doubleday Jr. buying the Mets in 1980 — and hiring Frank Cashen as his general manager — to Cashen drafting Darryl Strawberry and Dwight Gooden, trading for Keith Hernandez and Gary Carter, and picking Davey Johnson as the man to manage this simmering cauldron, several things had to fall into place for the '86 team to grab the league by its throat.

"It's like a heist movie," Davis saw. "You need a cat burglar, Keith Hernandez. You need a getaway driver, Darryl Strawberry. You need a safe cracker, Dwight Gooden. All these pieces came together and it was incredible to witness. Gary Carter was the final piece of the puzzle, and by '86, they were ready to dominate."



The Mets after celebrating their World Series championship in 1986. (John Roca/New York Daily News)

Dominate they did. The Mets went 108-54, outscoring their opponents by 205 runs during the regular season. But their on-field exploits are far from the most interesting thing about the '86 Mets. This was a team, as the film explains with testimonials from all the main players, that loved to party. Whether it was swanky Midtown night clubs, the team plane after a big win, or even sometimes the team clubhouse during a big win, drugs and alcohol were as commonplace as peanuts and Cracker Jack.

“They’d get 10 bottles of Dom Perignon, and they’d have a doubleheader the next day,” Davis said. “That kind of thing happens today and there’s suspensions, probably. They were doing this nightly. You look back and think, ‘I can’t believe that’s the way people behaved.’”

That behavior was largely enabled by Johnson, a player’s manager when that term meant turning a blind eye to debauchery, sometimes even when the players were in full uniform.

“I don’t blame Davey and I’m not judging him,” said Davis, who included extensive clips of Johnson throughout the documentary. “The way he managed was to give these guys a lot of leeway. He trusted them to behave like men and show up to do their job. He comes on at one point in the film and says, ‘Look, it didn’t matter to me what they did between innings.’ You’re sort of like, ‘What? It didn’t matter to you what they did between innings?!’”

By the time they reached the playoffs, winning a World Series felt like a foregone conclusion. The National League West winners from Houston and American League titans from Boston gave the Mets hell, though. Davis said the one person he wished he could have interviewed for the film but couldn’t was Astros pitcher Mike Scott, thrower of notoriously scuffed baseballs in the NLCS who almost ruined the whole story before it could receive its proper ending.

The fourth and final installment, set to air on Wednesday night, opens with self-submitted videos of fans explaining where they were when the Mets got off the mat to beat Boston in Game 6. As a college student getting his feet wet in the arts, Davis has a unique tale of watching his boyhood team’s most iconic game.

“I was in a play,” Davis recalled. “I was playing a TV anchorman in a production of ‘The Skin of Our Teeth.’ I brought my roommate’s Sony Watchman onstage with me. I didn’t have a lot of lines. I just sat in the corner the whole time with the Watchman set up. I hid it so nobody could see it and I still looked like an anchorman. When the show ended I turned the volume up and realized it was the tenth inning and the Mets were down 5-4. I got to watch Mookie’s at-bat and sort of freaked out.”

The film does a marvelous job of demonstrating that unrelenting weirdness, the stranger-than-fiction moments and personalities that comprised the Big Apple’s most unapologetic team.

“They knew as they were doing it that their swagger — and that the rest of the league hated them — was part of it too,” Davis noticed.

Come for the expected hilarious anecdotes from Sid Fernandez, Kevin Mitchell, Wally Backman and the crew, stay for the more tender moments like Hernandez explaining the tenuous relationship he had with his father, complete with home videos from Little League.

“Once Upon a Time in Queens” captures the true essence of the ‘86 Mets, a team that knew they were more talented than any team in their way, and having exponentially more fun than them too.

The version of the film with explicit language airs on ESPN at 8 p.m. on both Tuesday and Wednesday, with the edited version on ESPN2.