

# New York Mets fire Randolph

Tuesday, 17 June 2008

ANAHEIM, Calif. (AP) -- After weeks of speculation that his job was in jeopardy, Willie Randolph finally got fired by the New York Mets while most fans were sleeping.

Willie Randolph became the first major league manager to be fired this season.AP

Randolph was let go in the middle of the night Tuesday, 2 1/2 months into a disappointing season that has followed the team's colossal collapse last September.

Bench coach Jerry Manuel takes over on an interim basis for Randolph, who led the Mets to within one win of the 2006 World Series. They got off to a strong start again last year but plummeted down the stretch and have been unable to rebound.

A preseason favorite to win the NL pennant, the \$138 million Mets (34-35) had won two in a row when Randolph was dismissed early Tuesday morning -- making him the first big league manager to get fired this season.

Pitching coach Rick Peterson and first base coach Tom Nieto also were cut loose in an enormous overhaul that was revealed in a fact-of-the-matter news release at a stunning time -- about 12:15 a.m. PDT, nearly two hours after New York's 9-6 victory over the Los Angeles Angels.

Ken Oberkfell, the club's manager at Triple-A New Orleans, and Dan Warthen, pitching coach for the Zephyrs, will join the major league staff along with Luis Aguayo, a Mets field coordinator.

A message left for general manager Omar Minaya was not immediately returned. The Mets said Minaya and Manuel would be available to reporters at Angel Stadium at 2 p.m. PDT on Tuesday.

Reached by phone nearly three hours after Monday's game, Mets utility man Marlon Anderson said he didn't know that Randolph had been fired and he didn't want to comment until he heard the news from a member of the team.

"Not tonight," Anderson said.

It was a frustrating end for the 53-year-old Randolph, who was set to be an NL coach at the All-Star game at Yankee Stadium next month.

Signed through the 2009 season, Randolph won't be able to move with the Mets into new Citi Field next year, either. He was slated to earn \$2 million this season and is owed \$2.25 million in 2009.

Now, the 54-year-old Manuel takes over a squad that still has playoff aspirations. He's had success before, too.

Quiet and confident, Manuel managed the Chicago White Sox from 1998-2003, winning AL Manager of the Year in 2000 after guiding his club to the league's best record (95-67).

He steps in for Randolph, known for his exceptionally steady play as a six-time All-Star second baseman and even-keel demeanor as a coach with the Yankees.

Yet Randolph's time in charge of the Mets was marked by highs and lows from the get-go.

Hired by Minaya to replace Art Howe for the 2005 season, Randolph lost his first five games as a major league manager, then won the next six.

He nearly guided the Mets into the 2006 World Series, losing Game 7 of the NLCS to St. Louis on Yadier Molina's tiebreaking home run in the ninth inning.

The Mets and their fans were convinced 2007 would be their year. Poised for a big run, what followed was one of the biggest collapses in baseball history: Leading the NL East by seven games on Sept. 12, they lost 12 of their last 17 and missed the playoffs as Philadelphia rallied to win the division title.

Several times, Randolph tried to separate last season's failure and this season's struggle.

"I really felt we put last year behind us," he said last month. "Any pressure we feel is because of staying in the mix and not reverting back to last year. I don't sense that at all. No one ever talks about it, no one ever brings it up, so if we are looking a little like we were last year, there's no correlation."

Many Mets watchers, however, felt there was a carry-over effect. Injuries to Pedro Martinez, Moises Alou and Ryan Church, another down year by Carlos Delgado and a sudden slump by closer Billy Wagner didn't help.

With each stretch of inconsistent play, chants of "Fire Willie!" grew louder at Shea Stadium and on New York's sports talk radio station.

Despite a \$138 million payroll, the highest in the National League, and the offseason addition of ace pitcher Johan Santana, the Mets never found their groove. Even when things briefly went their way, Randolph caused trouble.

Coming off an uplifting, two-game sweep at Yankee Stadium in mid-May, the first black manager in New York baseball history created a stir by suggesting in a newspaper interview that he was portrayed on Mets broadcasts differently than a white manager might be.

Randolph brought up the race issue as he detailed the way he's been shown by SNY, the team's TV network.

"Is it racial?" Randolph was quoted. "Huh? It smells a little bit. ... I don't know how to put my finger on it, but I think there's something there."

A couple of days later, Randolph apologized to Mets ownership, SNY and his players "for the unnecessary distraction" he'd created.

Late last month, Randolph got a temporary reprieve when he met with ownership.

"Willie's job was never in danger going into this meeting," Minaya said after the session. "Willie has my support. He has the support of our ownership. ... There is no limbo period. Willie is the manager."

But no promises for the future were made.

Raised in Brooklyn, Randolph enjoyed many of his favorite and finest moments in the Bronx.

He played for the Yankees from 1976-88 and was a member of two World Series championship teams.

Surrounded by stars Reggie Jackson and Thurman Munson, characters Sparky Lyle and Mickey Rivers and volatile George Steinbrenner and Billy Martin, Randolph merely went about his business. He made for a good fit in pinstripes, and later became a Yankees co-captain.

Randolph batted .276 lifetime -- he got 2,210 hits in 2,202 games -- and never made an error in his 47 postseason appearances.

After finishing his playing career with the Mets in 1992, Randolph served as an assistant GM with the Yankees in 1993. The next year, he moved back onto the field and became their third-base coach, a post he held for 10 seasons.

He was part of the Yankees team that won four World Series titles, and was manager Joe Torre's bench coach in 2004. Before landing the Mets job, Randolph said he interviewed unsuccessfully for 11 or 12 managerial openings.

Randolph had Torre's full backing for the move over to Queens and they remained friends, filming a series of popular local TV commercials together.

Randolph was hired in November 2004 and, boosted by the addition of Carlos Beltran and Martinez, the Mets showed immediate improvement. They went 83-79 in his first year, stopping a slide of three straight dismal seasons.

The Mets did far better the next year, tying the crosstown Yankees for baseball's best regular-season record (97-65) and winning the NL East for the first time since 1988.

Making their first playoff appearance in six years, the Mets swept the Dodgers in the first round despite an injury-depleted pitching staff and went into the NLCS against the Cardinals with high expectations -- those ended in Game 7.