

Youngman column: Dodgers' Lasorda indefatigable at age 80

The veteran baseball man is continually on the move



RANDY YOUNGMAN
Register columnist

LONG BEACH -- Tommy Lasorda was running late for a cable-TV appearance Tuesday morning, so he did what he had to do to make up time.

When a state trooper pulled up alongside his car, he knew he was speeding. So he did what came naturally. He smiled and waved to the officer and continued on his way. He did not ease off the accelerator. The TV cameras were waiting. "I was going 70, maybe 75," Lasorda said a couple of hours later, over lunch at a famous Long Beach restaurant. Shortly thereafter, the red lights came on, so Lasorda pulled off to the side of the 405 freeway. Suffice to say, the officer was not amused when he approached the driver's side window and immediately recognized the Hall of Fame manager, now the special advisor to Dodgers owners Frank and Jamie McCourt. "Tommy!" the officer said, frowning. "I'm late for a TV show in Long Beach," Lasorda said. Soon, he was on his way.

It's still great to be Tommy Lasorda, even at 80. And Lasorda, who has lived in the same house on the same street in Fullerton for nearly a half-century, is as busy as ever. He has been making holiday appearances on behalf of the Dodgers, passing out Thanksgiving turkeys to needy families, serving as sports grand marshal of the recent Laguna Niguel holiday parade, speaking to hundreds of local elementary school kids during the Dodgers' annual holiday party at Dodger Stadium, dressing up as Santa for the kids in the pediatric hematology/oncology ward at Mattel Children's Hospital in L.A.. The list goes on and on.

In between, he has been traveling and going to book signings for his recently released second autobiography, written with Bill Plaschke: "I Live For This!: Baseball's Last True Believer." "I've signed thousands of books," Lasorda said.

I haven't read the book yet, but I'm not sure I have to after listening to him re-tell several of the stories from it Tuesday, in between his bites of meatballs and sausage and angel hair pasta. (Apparently, Dodger hair pasta wasn't available.)

Oh, and Lasorda wondered if he forgot to mention his new Lasorda line of wines? [Check it out at www.lasordawine.com](http://www.lasordawine.com), he says.

"Did you know our Chianti Classico was rated No. 1 two months ago at the international wine-tasting festival?" he said proudly. And our Chardonnay Di Sicilia was rated No. 3?"

I did check out the Web site and — what do you know? — Lasorda is offering a free copy of his book to anyone who buys six bottles of Lasorda wine. Now that's cross-promoting!

Some things about Lasorda never change, such as his story-telling and his appetite for Italian cuisine. When the waitress dared to interrupt him and ask if he was ready to order, Lasorda said wisecracking, "We didn't come here to paint!"

And when she brought a cup of soup, he bellowed, "Is this a child's portion?" Soon came the big bowl.

It was difficult to squeeze in my questions between his stories, but I succeeded a few times.

Is he happy the Dodgers finally found an Italian manager to replace him in the dugout? Happy? He says he's ecstatic, because now the Dodgers have an Italian advisor to the owners, an Italian general manager (Ned Colletti) and an Italian manager (Joe Torre).

"Bob Costas had a great line about that," he said, laughing. "Now the five (Mafia) families are all happy."

Lasorda enthusiastically endorsed the hiring of Torre, another future Hall of Fame manager — after ordering another basket of fried calamari for the table.

"I'll tell you why it's a great move," he said. "The guy comes in with great credentials. He's got great leadership qualities; the players are going to listen to him, and he's going to control the clubhouse. He's going to make sure things do not happen before they do. And he's just a wonderful person. The players are going to like him, and I think he's just what we need right now."

"And when you manage 16 years for George Steinbrenner, that's quite an accomplishment."

Which reminded Lasorda of another story.

"I went down to Tampa to speak a few years ago, and Steinbrenner introduced me," he said. "He said, 'It's unbelievable that Tommy Lasorda is one of two to manage the same team for 43 years (the other was Walter Alston). Two managers in 43 years! I had 43 managers in two years!'"

Lasorda revealed another factoid from his book.

"Did you know in the 20 years I managed the Dodgers, there were 212 managers fired in baseball?" he said. "Well, that might include Billy Martin a few times."

Surprisingly, I also asked a question that Lasorda wouldn't answer: What was his reaction to last week's Mitchell Report and the 86 names implicated in the use of performance-enhancing drugs?

"I can't comment on that right now," he said.

That meant there only was time left for dessert. He had several scoops of spumoni. Then it was back to the dreaded 405 freeway.

Oh, did I forget to mention that Lasorda was in the diamond lane, alone in his car, when he was pulled over?

Forgot to ask him if he got a ticket.