

eadline:	Leyland brings another winner to Pittsburgh
Byline:	
Date:	7/1/2006
Web Categories:	

By JOHN DUDLEY

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PITTSBURGH - During batting practice Friday at PNC Park, Jim Tracy and Jim Leyland never got close enough to talk.

That's probably fitting, since Tracy's Pittsburgh Pirates and Leyland's Detroit Tigers haven't been within shouting distance of each other this season.

For Leyland's first game in Pittsburgh in seven years, the Tigers arrived with the best record in baseball for a three-game series against the Pirates, the worst team in the National League in Tracy's first season.

Leyland, who led the Pirates to their last winning season in 1992, said it was good to be back managing in a city where he still lives and owns the hearts of no small number of baseball fans.

"I have a lot of friends here," Leyland said during a wide-ranging interview session in the visiting manager's office at PNC Park a few hours before Friday's series opener.

Occasionally dragging on a cigarette, with a pair of sunglasses perched on the bill of his blue Tigers cap and smoke wafting across his face, Leyland held court with reporters as he did so often in Pittsburgh during the 1990s, when he twice took the Pirates to within a win of playing in the World Series.

Asked how many tickets he left at PNC Park for the weekend series, Leyland squinted and twitched the white puff of a mustache that is the dominant feature on his tanned, creased face.

"A lot," he said, then lapsed into his familiar deadpan. "I'm sure a lot of them will wish me good luck, and then they'll boo me. This is a hell of a town."

Leyland's Tigers went into Friday's game 54-25, a stunning turnaround that comes on the heels of a Pirates-like 12 straight losing seasons.

The Pirates contacted him about their managerial opening last winter, but Leyland was already on his way to taking the Tigers job.

The Pirates hired Tracy instead, and things haven't gone well so far. They snapped a franchise-worst 13-game losing streak by beating the Chicago White Sox on Thursday, and Tracy has appeared to place the blame at the feet of his players.

The Tigers, meanwhile, have stayed remarkably healthy and have one of the best pitching staffs in baseball, the result of a years-long construction project by president Dave Dombrowski, who collaborated with Leyland for a World Series title in Florida in 1997.

But Detroit's players can't say enough about the job Leyland's done.

"I played for Phil Garner, Luis Pujols and Alan Trammell, so I've seen just about the full range of managers, " third baseman Brandon Inge said. "I've never been around anyone better than (Leyland). He's the ideal manager. There's nothing petty with him, ever. He lays everything on the table for you. You know what you're getting with him."

Leyland's now legendary early-season eruption in Oakland, when he tore into the Tigers for playing poorly in the opener of a long road trip, was followed by five straight wins. The Tigers entered Friday's game 38-16 in May and June.

"He's very laid back most of the time, but he's not afraid to get in your face when you need it, " said center fielder Curtis Granderson, who played for the Erie SeaWolves in 2004. "Probably the most amazing thing about him is how well he knows players. I'll be sitting there thinking, 'Someone needs to say something, ' and - bam - he'll call a (team) meeting."

Inge said Leyland seemed to be looking forward to returning to Pittsburgh this week.

Leyland and two members of his Tigers coaching staff - Lloyd McClendon and Gene Lamont, both former Pirates managers - drove to Pittsburgh on Wednesday and played golf Thursday and Friday.

"It was good, " Leyland said of the break. "I don't get too worked up over golf, because it doesn't mean a damn thing if I miss a six-foot putt."

Leyland has worked hard to avoid taking credit away from his players for the Tigers' fast start, but he acknowledged that he's pleased to have regained his fire this season.

When he resigned from his last managerial job with Colorado in 1999, he hinted he was burned out. There was speculation he might be through with managing, and he spent six seasons as a scout, regularly attending games at PNC Park.

Even when Dombrowski convinced him to return this spring, Leyland said he wasn't "100 percent sure" he could rediscover the passion that drove him in Pittsburgh and Florida.

No worries.

After ending Friday's interview session, Leyland bounded into the clubhouse, where he high-fived catcher Pudge Rodriguez and exchanged friendly barbs with several other Tigers.

"I'm a wild man again, " he had said a few minutes earlier. "I'm having fun, and that's exactly what I hoped would happen."

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Published: October 02. 2013 1:01AM

Pirates, PNC captivate as playoff baseball returns to Pittsburgh

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PITTSBURGH -- The rickshaws-for-hire rolled their fares right past Heinz Field on Tuesday night, gently bouncing a little further east, through the jammed parking lots and around the big crowds, to the intersection of General Robinson and Federal streets, to the ballpark that usually stands empty this time of year.

Whether summer's game really has been dead here or just cryogenically frozen, waiting for a soothsayer like Clint Hurdle to sprinkle homespun fairy dust in the home clubhouse and revive a club that once captured this city's imagination, it returned with fervor this week.

A 6-2 win over the Cincinnati Reds in the NL wild-card game reminded us what a great baseball town this can be. And what a team with a "Why not?" approach

can do in the postseason, where the rules bend and pitching, timely hits and emotional swings can level the field between upstarts and favorites.

"We didn't talk about one and done," Hurdle said in the bubbly aftermath of the win. "We talked about one and run."

Since PNC Park opened in 2001, nearly the midpoint of two decades of Pirates futility, many had wondered how one of sports' beautiful venues would dress out for the postseason.

We received a glimpse during the 2006 MLB All-Star Game, when much of the rest of the country got its first look at the breathtaking sight lines and stunning city backdrop.

But Tuesday was different. So different that the only way to describe it was if you could take the best college football crowd you know and squeeze it into a baseball stadium.

That was PNC for its first live look at October, stuffed to the rafters with a record crowd of 40,487, nearly all of them decked in "Black Out" t-shirts that vendors hawked for \$10 apiece on the streets around the North Side before the game.

It was a power surge that marked the game early on, with Marlon Byrd hitting a tracer to left to open the scoring in the second inning off of Reds starter Johnny Cueto.

Then the crowd came with thundering chants of "Cue-to, Cue-to," that rattled the right-hander so much that he dropped the ball while standing on the mound, and it rolled onto the infield as Russell Martin dug in for a 2-1 pitch.

Cueto retrieved it and, perhaps without taking enough time to compose himself, hung a pitch that Martin crushed a little to the right of Byrd's, and suddenly it no longer mattered that the Steelers are 0-4 and hockey's Stanley Cup playoffs are a long, hard winter away.

Two low-profile, big-market acquisitions -- Byrd from the Mets and Martin from the Yankees -- spotted the Bucs a 2-0 lead on a night when the press box was jammed with writers from New York and other bigger towns.

Martin added another solo shot in the seventh and this season's compelling comeback story, left-hander Francisco Liriano did what he's done all summer.

Liriano mystified the Reds for the most part over seven innings as the Pirates built their lead, striking out five, walking one and allowing one run on four hits.

"We're definitely for real," said centerfielder Andrew McCutchen, who batted five times and reached safely four times, each to chants of "M-V-P."

Baseball? Yes, it's back all right. For one night at least, it felt like it never left.

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