

*Everyone knows the famous phrase 'Nice Guys Finish Last'. Chapter Five recounts how that began, and shows it didn't quite work out as its creator expected...*

In July 1946 Leo Durocher, the combative Brooklyn Dodgers baseball manager, is sitting with a group of newspapermen in the Dodgers' old brick-walled Ebbets Field. They're watching the opposing team, the New York Giants, jog up from their dugout to take their turn at batting practice.

Durocher likes to talk. He gestures at the Giants players. 'All nice guys. They lose a ball game, they go home, they have a nice dinner.' The reporter beside him – Frank Graham, of the *Journal-American* – lets Durocher continue. 'All nice guys. They'll finish last.' Graham is good at shorthand, and knows he's on to a winner. Above his article in the next day's paper the *Journal-American's* headline writers boil down Durocher's words, and the famous saying 'Nice Guys Finish Last' is born.

Publicity agents tried to present Durocher as a lovable curmudgeon, but the reality was different. Earlier in his career, outraged by a fan who he felt had insulted him one day, Durocher got an off-duty policeman to hustle the poor man out of sight of anyone else. After the policeman winded the fan with a lead-filled club, Durocher started punching the man in the face, so hard and so repeatedly – breaking his jaw then keeping on hitting – that the policeman ended up scrambling to pull Durocher off: 'What are you doing, Leo?' he said according to his testimony later in court, 'What are you doing? Let him go.'

The spillovers from his temperament spread beyond his day job. Durocher found it hard to keep friends, for he kept stealing from them at cards, just as he also found it hard to keep girlfriends and wives. (One did turn the tables on him though, neglecting to inform him when they got married that she was, in fact, currently also married to someone else.)

The single indisputably good thing he did in his life – screaming in his typically charming manner at his Brooklyn players who petitioned against the black athlete Jackie Robinson joining the team that they could go fuck themselves, as well as their petition – was marred by his complete inability to keep from needling and goading Robinson, once hired, to the degree that soon Robinson hated him as much as everyone else did.

His approach came to a head in Chicago in 1969, the summer that was supposed to complete his career. His team took a great lead in their division, far ahead of the second-place New York Mets, but Durocher pushed his players for week after week without the rest they begged for in the hot, humid Midwestern summer, so much that they turned against him. He ragged his third baseman Ron Santo as a cowardly wop, weak from diabetes, until, Santo remembered later, 'I grabbed Leo and had him around the neck. I could have killed him.' Durocher also

encouraged fans to throw batteries and metal spikes at opposing teams so frequently that they played harder than ever against him.

Finally, Durocher berated and humiliated umpires to such an extent – in this era before video review of calls was allowed – that ‘whether or not Leo ever united the Cubs against the umpires,’ one sportswriter wrote, ‘he certainly united the umpires against the Cubs’. As an earlier general manager Durocher had worked under put it, Leo ‘possessed the fertile ability to turn a bad situation into something infinitely worse’. His Cubs fell into a record-setting losing streak.

And the New York Mets won the pennant.

To Durocher this was incomprehensible: the way democracies being stronger than dictatorships is incomprehensible to strongmen around the globe. The phrase ‘Nice guys finish last’ had stuck with him ever since Frank Graham’s old headline, and he’d liked it. ‘I don’t think,’ he said, ‘it would have been picked up if it hadn’t struck a chord. Because as a general proposition, it’s true.’ Durocher had known the Mets manager Gil Hodges years before: Hodges had played on one of his teams. Everyone knew him as one of the most decent men in baseball. Yet here he was the one finishing first!

What Durocher missed was the space available between being too aggressive, and being too soft. Clearly you need to defend yourself. Be ‘merely’ nice and everyone will walk over you. But going as far in the other direction as Durocher – being so disproportionate – is also a mistake. It’s a cliché to talk about sowing the seeds of your own destruction, but that summer in Chicago this is what Durocher had done.

A single episode from the summer of Mets manager Gil Hodges’s great competition with Durocher shows how a fairer leader can get the balance right. It came near the end of a long double-header, where two games are played in succession, and Hodges’s star player, Cleon Jones, had started to give up.

Jones was playing defence in left field, far from his teammates, and it was hot, and he was tired, and the Mets were down by nine runs already, in this second game of the night, so when yet another fast-hit ball came near him he didn’t sprint forward to nab it (which would have made it possible to stop the batter before he got too far around the bases), but instead, letting everyone know how he felt, just trotted lackadaisically towards the ball. He was a star, and his team was probably going to lose anyway, so why should he bother?

Hodges knew why he should bother. The team looked up to Jones. If one of their best players started taking it easy, who would be next?

It was usual in Hodges’s time that, when a manager wanted to pull an out elder from the game, he signalled to the player, or had one of his coaches do that. Hodges didn’t do this; nor did he yell. is wasn’t out of weakness. Durocher had

spent his life around grown men who wore children's woollen outfits and played a game with a ball and stick, running around bases to score a run. Hodges was a coal miner's son who'd been a Marine in the World War II battle for Okinawa and won a bronze star for heroism in combat. He was making a choice.

In the Pacific, appropriate defence was violent, and deadly. On a baseball field, however, aiming it differently was right.

What Hodges did was call out to the umpire to pause the game, then stand up from his seat in the dugout, and – the entire stadium puzzled – start walking across the infield. Only his wife, watching from home, realized what was going to happen. 'Oh my God,' she remembered thinking, 'he's not going to...'

Hodges passed the pitcher's mound, slowly, and then passed the shortstop's position, still slowly, and kept on walking – strolling actually, just as lackadaisically, it might seem, as Jones himself had strolled towards the fast-hit line drive – until finally, quite at ease, not breathless at all, he reached his player. It had rained earlier, and the turf here in the deep outfield was soaking. Jones remembered: 'I looked down and he looked down and both our feet were in water up to our ankles.'

Hodges was relaxed; perhaps the two men would chat for a while, but well, everyone was waiting, that wouldn't be fair, so he turned back, on the wet turf, gesturing for Jones to walk beside him, and the two men – everyone in the stands, and also the players from both teams, and the umpires, still staring – squelching slightly with each step walked together all the way back to the dugout where players who weren't in the game waited. Hodges was just as casual as before.

By the time they'd reached the dugout – and under Hodges's instruction one of the coaches had sent out a replacement player far below Jones's calibre – he had made his point. 'If you're hurt, tell me,' Hodges would say. Otherwise he expected commitment. Jones had the highest batting average in the league, but Hodges was letting everyone know, as one player remembered, 'that you play this game one hundred per cent all the time or you're not playing'.

Keeping a firm defence and sustaining order are central, but the art came in the way that everything Hodges had 'injected' was fair. 'Cleon [Jones] didn't resent this thing,' another player recalled of the forced walk back from the outfield. In fact, almost immediately after, 'Cleon comes to me and says I want to get back in the game.' What Cleon Jones realized was that what had happened was no more than he deserved. He had no need to feel resentful.

The next day, with no hard feelings, Hodges let Jones play again. Jones was transformed, as was the team. It was exactly the balance that we've repeatedly seen. Hodges had been fair to his own goal, of firmly shaping a team that was going to win, yet remaining considerate enough to preserve Jones's dignity. Soon

the Mets tore past Durocher's Cubs, won their division pennant, and made it all the way to the World Series.

There they faced the heavily favoured Baltimore team. In the fifth game, Jones batting, the Baltimore pitcher threw the ball too close. Jones said it hit him, the umpire said it didn't – and Hodges immediately, absolutely, backed his player: not giving in till the umpire relented. at put Jones on base. When a home run after him gave the Mets two runs, they turned the game around, and soon won the World Series – with a spectacular running catch by the now far-from-lackadaisical Jones securing the final out.

*The chapter goes on to look at parallels on the Game of Thrones set, where I've spent time with many of the principals. But I'm especially drawn to the baseball part of this chapter, for when Durocher was in that battle with Hodges's New York team, I was twelve and spending a lot of time at Chicago's Wrigley Field after the games. (My friends and I could get free tickets for the next day if we stayed late to help clean the stands.) Sometimes we'd stop to watch Durocher do interviews at that late hour: as he stood awkwardly in the natural grass; the so-recently-full stadium stretching empty beyond. He wouldn't always be irritated when he began, but somehow, some way, he almost always would be near bursting by the end.*



*Leo Durocher, relaxing with a friend*



*Gil Hodges, relaxing on his own*