Ten days with my favorite Mets

The season was over and the Mets were World Champions. There was no better way to vacation in the Caribbean than by spending...

By Lynn Jones
Special Correspondent

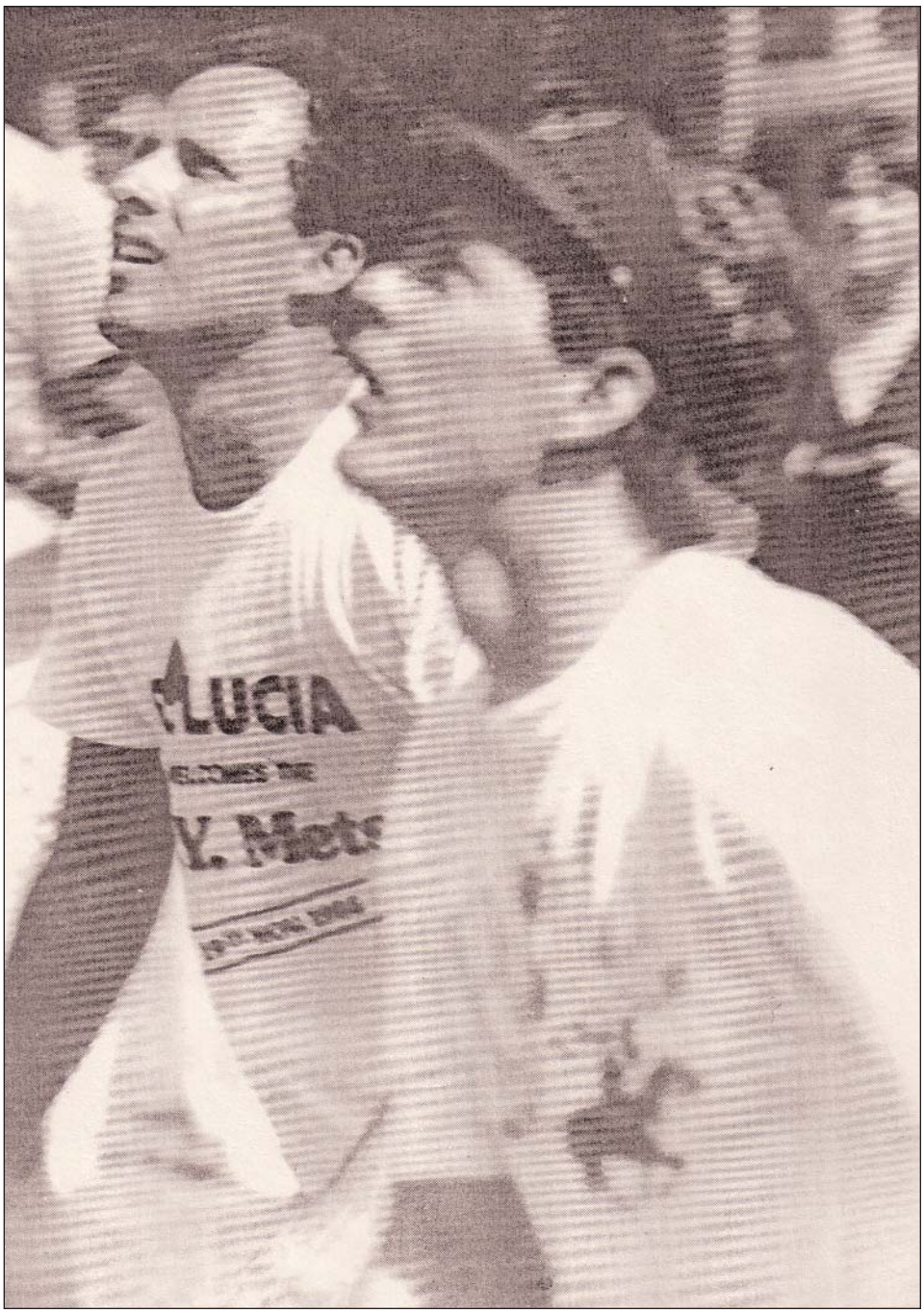
I was walking down the hall on five deck with my girlfriend Chris DeCesare when she turned and looked at me. It wasn't an ordinary look. Her eyes were trying to tell me something. I knew instinctively I was in the presence of an idol.

I turned slightly to my right and there he was. All I had to do was reach out and touch him, but I could only stare in shock. It's not every day you come face to face with someone you worship. Lenny Dykstra felt the crowd's stares and, grabbing his wife Terry's hand, guided her down the hall.

Eight days and seven nights on the Cunard Countess cruise ship with members of the New York Mets. Ever since our plane touched down on the San Juan runway where the cruise would originate, Mets fans from ages 7 to 70 were straining their heads out windows to catch a glimpse of their heroes. Are they here yet? When can we see them? The questions would go unanswered until that evening, and the news would not be good.

Wally Backman, Rick Aguliera and Kevin Mitchell all cancelled at the last minute. There would only be two players — Lenny Dykstra and Bob Ojeda, along with two coaches, Bill Robinson and Mel Stottlemeyer, former Met world champion Tommie Agee and radio announcer Gary Thorne. Their absence was a disappointment but there was no turning back now.

We toured seven islands, sailing at night and docking in the morning, spending one day each in Tortola, St. Maarten, Guadaloupe, St. Lucia, St. Thomas, Antigua and Puerto Rico. There wasn't



Mets Bobby Ojeda, background, and Lenny Dykstra focus on the action during a volleyball game after the Cunard Countess docked at one of several ports in the Caribbean.

much contact with the Mets during the day. Everyone went their own way to shop, sightsee or relax in the sun. At night, back on the ship, we would pass them in the halls, the restaurant, pool, bars, nightclub and casino.

Our first real contact came Saturday night at the get-acquainted cocktail party. Staff photographers walked around taking pictures of people squeezing their way toward their favorite players for autographs. My first attempt was with Bob Ojeda. One minute I was on my tiptoes trying to see over the crowd; the next minute I was standing beside him, arm in arm, saying cheese for Mr. Photographer. Afterward I thought, this is great! And rushed off to find the rest of the team.

Not being a gambler, I hadn't yet seen the casino, but a hot tip brought us there Sunday night. The mood was tense. Out in the hall the sound of clinking coins meant slot machines at work. Inside crowds of people surrounded the blackjack tables. Hot bright lights hung over the green felt table and a neverending stream of smoke rose up to meet them.

I stood behind Bill Robinson, Lenny Dykstra and Bob Ojeda for almost an hour. Finally, when I could pull myself away, we headed for the disco and my thoughts turned to other things. But soon my thoughts would return to the Mets.

As I glanced around the room I saw Tommie and Maxine Agee, Bill and Mary Robinson, and Bob and Tami Ojeda sitting at a quiet corner table. Seconds later Lenny and Terry Dykstra cut across the floor toward their friends, hand in hand. They didn't stop to sit down as Lenny pulled her out onto the dance floor. The song was "Truly," by Lionel Richie, and as we listened he stared into her eyes, twirling her around and, kissing her on the lips as if to say, I am *truly* in love with you, girl. They seemed so young and so in love.

Tuesday morning brought us into Guadaloupe. As we were finishing breakfast on deck, an attractive blonde woman in her forties came walking by, searching for an empty table. A man on crutches followed behind. His face looked vaguely familiar, but I wasn't sure. "Excuse me," I asked, "but are you Mel Stottlemeyer?"

He replied that he was and while his wife Sally headed for the breakfast line, Mel explained how he had fallen Monday playing basketball on deck. Torn ligaments in his left leg would keep him on crutches for the entire cruise, and then some.

That night there was a photo session with all the team members. The fans lined up out the door and down two flights of stairs. One by one we were ushered in to stand in the middle of Ojeda and Dykstra, with Agee, Thorne and the coaches on either side.

This was it. My last chance to say something, anything, to my hero, Lenny. I turned and looked at him. He was so pale compared to the others.

"You need some sun," I said. "You can't go home without a tan!"

"Not me," he replied. "I don't like the sun." With a smile and a wink I was gone.

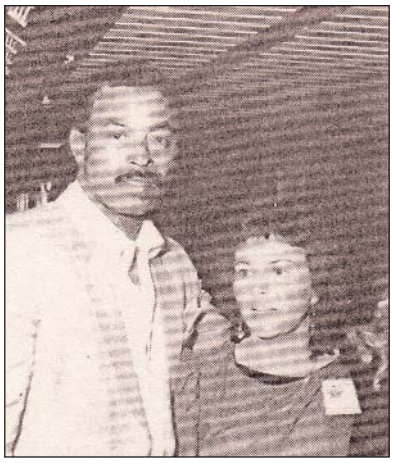
Wednesday was the big day. A party at Cunard's La Toc Hotel in St. Lucia. Volleyball with the Mets, swimming, sunning, barbequeing and a little limbo (except for Mel, of course). The wives weren't as shy as their husbands, and didn't seem to mind the questions, photos, and endless requests for autographs. In fact, I think they were eating it up.

On Thursday, Chris and I tore ourselves away from the Mets to go on a three-hour Jolly Roger party cruise around Antigua. Rum punch, dancing and more limbo. As the boat docked off shore for a sun and swim break, Met fans showed their bravery by walking the 30-foot high gangplank or swinging from a rope over 13 feet of water.

That night, back on ship, it was time for the masquerade contest and talent show. Chris and I took first place in the contest dressed as red and yellow crayons. (Yes, crayons. Crayola to be exact.)

After a quick change of clothing we headed back for the talent show. Little did we know there was so much talent on board the Cunard Countess. One of the last contestants was a woman named Maxine, introduced only as a teacher from New York. It seemed appropriate when she started singing, "I believe the children are our future. Teach them well and let them lead the way." Her strong voice brought roaring cheers and a standing ovation from the crowd, the best we'd seen or heard all night. What they didn't tell us was that her last name was Agee.

Friday brought St. Thomas and heavy rain. The lobby of the ship, or 4 square, as they called it, was alive with hustle and bustle as Mets staff members rushed



Mets first base and hitting coach Bill Robinson poses with the author in the casino aboard the Cunard Countess.

around selling last minute mementos. T-shirts, beach towels, sun visors and video tapes on hitting and pitching. Limited supply! they cried three days in a row. Special cruise discounts! Twenty dollars for a beach towel that said 1986 Champions. You'd have to be nuts to buy one. Okay, so I'm nuts. At least the T-shirt was a good deal.

We awoke on Saturday morning to 80 degrees, bright sunshine, and the sound of tired vacationers pushing and shoving to get onto the pier and retrieve their luggage.

Hugs, kisses and long goodbyes abounded, last minute picture taking and trying to flag down a porter. Where did all this luggage come from? I arrived with three bags and left with five. As I headed down the stairs toward customs, I looked for one classic sendoff. My attention was drawn to three teenagers yelling at me, "Where are the Mets? Where are the Mets?"

Could it really be over? Was I really leaving? I walked up to Bob, Tommie, Bill and Mel and shook their hands. "Thanks for coming. We really had a great time," I said.

What I wanted to ask was, "What time is dinner at your house? Rumors had already begun to spread about next year's cruise — trans-Panama on the Queen Elizabeth II. Would I go again? I'm ready now. Sign me up.

Lynn Jones is an account executive for Southern Connecticut Newspapers' national advertising department and a long-time Met fan.

This article was reset for my portfolio. No content was changed.