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Dodger Tremors Shift L.A.'s Baseball Balance

As the storied franchise rattles through firings, the center of fan gravity slips toward the Angels.

By Bill Shaikin

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The Dodgers once stood for success, for stability, for Sandy Koufax. Their very name evoked loyalty and pride from fans, respect and admiration from competitors.

The Angels were a joke locally, a blip nationally. They wore wings on their caps, and periwinkle pinstripes. They lurched from Plan A to Plan Z and back again in a futile attempt to win one for the Cowboy, but Gene Autry died at 91 without seeing his beloved team reach the World Series.

Autry's old team is the one that stands tall today, with the Dodgers providing fodder for Jay Leno. In the latest episode of turmoil for the team that was once a model sports franchise, Dodger owner Frank McCourt fired General Manager Paul DePodesta on Saturday.

The dismissal — 3 1/2 weeks after McCourt publicly sided with DePodesta in a power struggle that resulted in the departure of Manager Jim Tracy — highlighted the dramatic reversal in the identities of the Los Angeles area's two major league teams.

"For many years, everybody wanted to pattern themselves after the Dodgers," said their Hall of Fame manager, Tom Lasorda. "You haven't heard that for a while. We're trying to get that reputation back."

Lasorda managed the Dodgers from 1976 to '96, working for two general managers while winning two World Series championships and four National League pennants. Since then, they have employed four managers and five general managers and won no pennants.

During Lasorda's tenure, the Angels employed nine managers and six general managers, winning no American League pennants. Since they hired General Manager Bill Stoneman and Manager Mike Scioscia in 1999, the Angels have won the World Series championship, attracting record crowds and star players to Anaheim.

The directions of the two teams have so diverged that Scioscia, who played on the Dodgers' last World Series championship team in 1988 and long aspired to manage the club, now has no interest in what was once his dream job.

As a minor league instructor with the Dodgers, Scioscia worked with Paul Konerko, who blossomed into the cleanup hitter for the World Series champion Chicago White Sox. As manager of the Angels, Scioscia will recruit

him to Anaheim as a free agent.

"Stability takes awhile. It's not an overnight fix," said Sparky Anderson, the Thousand Oaks resident who managed the Cincinnati Reds and Detroit Tigers in his Hall of Fame career. "The Angels have two great people there, Stoneman and Scioscia, and they have an owner that is out of this world."

Angel owner Arte Moreno bought his team in 2003, with McCourt among the losing bidders. Moreno is not universally loved — the city of Anaheim sued after he slapped a Los Angeles label on his team; he fired one top executive after awarding him a three-year contract extension; and he eliminated some fringe benefits for season-ticket holders — but he fields a winner, pays top dollar for top players and markets the team aggressively.

The Angels outsold the Dodgers in season tickets and exceeded them in television ratings this year, evidence enough to persuade Fox Sports Net to offer the Angels a cable contract on par with the Dodgers'.

"I'm not so sure the Dodgers are L.A.'s team any more. The team doesn't seem to have a particular direction," said former Angel President Richard Brown, citing this winter's renovations at Dodger Stadium. "The team doesn't seem to be fan-oriented — \$20 million for taking seats out and putting seats in rather than putting it into the team?"

The skepticism that greeted McCourt upon his arrival last year has not abated, despite an army of publicists he has retained for that very purpose. He financed most of his \$430-million purchase, generating concern among fans who wondered whether money that could be spent on players would instead be spent on loan payments.

He pledged to maintain a \$100-million payroll and add local investors as minority owners. But the payroll dropped below \$90 million this season — including \$20 million in payments to players not on the roster — and he kept ownership all in the family.

His wife, Jamie, is the team president. His oldest son, Drew, 24, is the director of marketing.

When McCourt bought the team, he promptly fired the general manager he inherited, Dan Evans. After 20 months, he fired DePodesta.

"If, with every hurdle that comes, McCourt is going to fire somebody, that increases the chances he'll turn the team into the Royals, a team that is constantly starting over and repairing mistakes," said Jon Weisman, proprietor of the independent website <http://www.dodgerthoughts.com> .

The Kansas City Royals, another once-proud franchise, lost 106 games last season. They have not appeared in the playoffs since winning the World Series in 1985.

The sheer size of the Los Angeles market makes it improbable that the Dodgers could ever shrink to the national irrelevancy of the Royals. But as the Angels aspire to regional dominance and national prominence, the Dodgers can no longer take either for granted.

"They can fall from the top of people's minds," said Tom Boyd, professor of marketing at Cal State Fullerton. "There's a more interesting story somewhere else. There has to be some diminishment of their cachet as one of the premier teams in baseball."

Boyd, a lifelong Detroit Tiger fan, moved to Long Beach four years ago. He checked out the Dodgers, then adopted the Angels as his new team.

"Which team is likely to provide me with payback for my loyalty? Right now, it's the Angels," he said. "They're

more likely to provide me with a winning team and interesting, compelling players."

At Dodger Stadium, the turmoil in the general manager's chair echoes the turbulence in the rest of the front office. In less than two full years as owner, McCourt has fired 11 top executives.

"We're trying to create greatness here," McCourt said. "We look forward to the stability we're going to bring. You can't build anything without a strong foundation. And until you get the strong foundation in place, you're not going to have the stability this franchise needs and deserves."

McCourt fired the senior marketing executive he inherited, hired a replacement, then fired him in April. He has yet to fill the vacancy, with the winter drive to sell tickets and sponsorships upon him and no manager or general manager in place.

"Usually, a franchise that didn't make the playoffs is selling hope right now," said David Carter of the Sports Business Group in Redondo Beach. "What the Dodgers are selling is, 'Trust us, we'll be in a position to sell hope soon.' That makes the off-season that much more difficult."

The Dodgers lost 91 games this year, a total exceeded in team history once since World War I. DePodesta dumped popular players, then he dumped Tracy, then McCourt dumped DePodesta. In the meantime, the Dodgers would kindly like fans to pay thousands of dollars to renew season tickets.

"We have the greatest fans in baseball," McCourt said. "They deserve a winner. I would tell them that's why we're making this change."

"The fans are going to be very, very pleased. They deserve a winner, and they're going to get one."

They've gotten used to getting one, after all. The Dodgers moved to Los Angeles in 1958 and won the World Series the next year, setting a standard for excellence and presenting such homegrown stars as Koufax, Don Drysdale, Steve Garvey and Fernando Valenzuela. At the same time, the Angels kicked Hall of Famer Nolan Ryan out of town and regularly imported washed-up sluggers who had made their names elsewhere.

If the Dodgers win again, all might well be forgiven. Brown, who presided over six seasons of Angel futility, recognizes that the Dodgers retain a passionate following.

The Dodgers led the National League in attendance this season. The Angels sold 3 million tickets in each of the past three seasons, but they had never done so before. The Dodgers do so routinely.

"Winning cures everything," Brown said, "including the common cold."

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