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# Dickey Wins 20th Game for the Mets

By ANDREW KEH

He is baseball's most unlikely star — a 37-year-old reclamation project who throws the only knuckleball in the majors, speaks more like a professor than an athlete, wins game after game on a bad team and has increasingly turned his career into an American sports fable.

On Thursday afternoon, [R. A. Dickey](#), author, mountain climber, journeyman turned ace, took his saga one step further when he became the first [Mets](#) pitcher in 22 years to win 20 games in a season. He beat the [Pittsburgh Pirates](#), 6-5, adding some welcome noise and drama to the final home game of a season that long ago got away from the Mets.

In doing so, Dickey became just the sixth pitcher in the franchise's five decades to reach 20 victories and, more significantly, put himself in a strong position to become the first knuckleballer to win a Cy Young Award.

"If there's greatness in pitching, it's winning 20," Mets Manager Terry Collins said after the game. "The road to where he is today, a lot of people dream about it, few achieve it."

That road for Dickey had a bizarre beginning with the revelation before his rookie year in professional baseball that his right arm, his pitching arm, did not have an ulnar collateral ligament, the primary stabilizer of the elbow. Years later, after learning the knuckleball as a last-ditch effort to keep his career alive, he bounced around — from Texas to Seattle to Minnesota — before landing on the Mets in 2010 and suddenly harnessing the pitch in a way he had not before.

He was a revelation off the field, too, with an eclectic interest in books and a vocabulary bursting at the seams, all of it being confidently delivered by a player with a leisurely mane of hair and a graceful Tennessee drawl. Dickey, it quickly became clear, was an original.

And sure enough, when it came time after Thursday's game to talk to reporters, Dickey did it his way, sitting at a table, his hands clasped together, all well-worn clichés banned from the room, as he offered a ruminative appraisal of his latest accomplishment.

"Growing up, you just want to compete, and then once you have the weaponry to compete, you want to be really good, and then when you're really good, you want to be supernaturally good," Dickey said. "For me, there's been this steady metamorphosis from just surviving, to being a craftsman, and then, ultimately, the hope is to be an artist in what you do. This year is kind of representative of that for me."

Dickey was artful for a good part of Thursday's game, withstanding three early runs by the Pirates to strike out 13, which matched his career high and brought his season total to 222, which leads the National League. But Dickey was also tough and persevering, throwing 128 pitches — the most he has logged this season and the second-highest total of his career — as he protected a 6-3 lead until there were four outs to go in the game.

Almost predictably, the lead shrank to 6-5 as Dickey watched nervously from the dugout. But the bullpen finally held on and the Mets, and their fans, actually had something to celebrate.

In fact, Dickey's quest to win 20, and the Cy Young, has allowed the Mets a once-every-fifth-day escape from the dreary spell they often seem to be under. In September, Citi Field has been quiet and close to empty during any number of home games, but not when Dickey pitches. And that he managed to keep pitching well and get all the way to 20 victories with a team that utterly collapsed in the second half of the season was all the more impressive.

"To do it with a club that is this many games under .500, to me, is just remarkable," said Ron Darling, who was a standout pitcher on the Mets' 1986 championship team and is now an analyst on Mets TV broadcasts. "I think the single-mindedness and intelligence of R. A. probably was needed to shut out all the white noise that was going on around him."

There is a precedent for starting pitchers overcoming the disheveled play of their teammates. Bob Gibson went 23-7 with a 1970 St. Louis Cardinals club that went 76-86. Nolan Ryan went 22-16 with a 1974 California Angels team that went 68-94. Most famously, in 1972 Steve Carlton went 27-10 for the last-place Philadelphia Phillies, who won only 59 games, and then went on to win the Cy Young Award that season. Dickey, who should get one final start next week during the team's season-ending road trip, now hopes for the same fate.

"Who doesn't want a Cy Young Award?" Dickey said after Thursday's game. "What kid didn't grow up wanting to be the best? I'm no different. I want to be the best. I've always wanted to be the best."

On Thursday, Dickey and the Mets fell behind early, and had to withstand [a startling catch by Pirates right fielder Travis Snider](#), who reached high over the fence to rob Mike Baxter of a solo home run. But by the fifth inning, the Mets had tied the score at 3-3, and [David Wright](#), one night after setting the mark for the most career hits by a Met, hit a three-run homer to right to give Dickey some breathing room.

And the buzzing, engaged crowd, which filled about half the stadium, then urged Dickey on, roaring when he came out in the bottom of the seventh to hit and again when he was removed in the eighth, when he tipped his cap before entering the dugout.

Afterward, Collins said he had left Dickey in the game in the top of the eighth despite the fact he was tiring and had thrown so many pitches. But he told him he would be removed as soon as a runner got on base, knowing that he would then get a deserved ovation.

“I hope everybody doesn’t take this wrong, but this was about R. A. today,” Collins said. “It was about his connection with the fans, his connection with the city.”

And it all worked out, despite the bullpen scare. The man who climbed Mount Kilimanjaro last winter for charity, who produced a deeply personal and sometimes painful memoir this season that brought him a sense of peace, had prevailed again. The R. A. Dickey saga now has another chapter.