

# Darryl Strawberry wanted to quit baseball at 19. Two Mets teammates wouldn't let him.

By TIM BRITTON | The Athletic

To this day, 43 years later, Darryl Strawberry still has a nickname for his 1981 season with the Class A Lynchburg Mets.

"I call it," Strawberry said by phone last week, "the suck season." The suck season was, at the time, the most challenging of Strawberry's life. It was the season he first confronted failure on the baseball diamond. It was the season he first heard racist slurs from the stands. It was the season he came oh-so-close to quitting baseball and hanging up his jersey for good.

And so when Strawberry's No. 18 is retired June 1 at Citi Field, it's only fitting that among his honored guests will be the two people who pushed him through the suck season: manager Gene Dusan and teammate Lloyd McClendon.

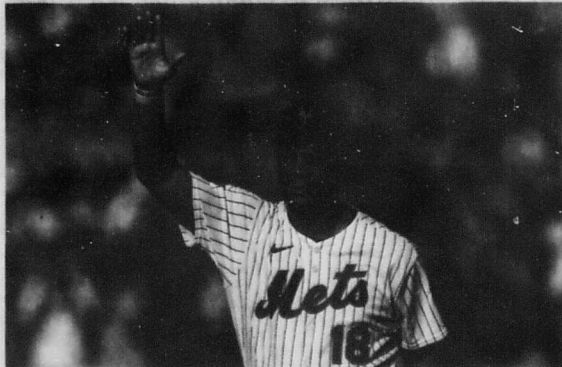
"Everybody looks at the success, but I look at the people who had a great impact on me," Strawberry said. "There's no way that I would be standing on the field having my number retired had it not been for people like them getting me through the most challenging, difficult times at a young age."

The first month of Strawberry's first full season in his hometown of New York City had not gone well. Failing in the field was the first time in hard enough for any player. Strawberry had several extra spotlights on him.

The prior summer, he had been the No. 1 pick out of Crenshaw High School in Los Angeles, where his coach had called him "the black Ted Williams" in Sports Illustrated. His signing bonus, while not a record, more than doubled that of the previous No. 1 pick.

And he was a black man playing in a southern city in Virginia. So when he struggled on the field, he heard it from the Carolina League crowds. Home games, road games, any games — Strawberry heard the worst of it.

"They were calling me all kind of names and saying negative things," Strawberry said. "You're talking about the deep south. I was like, This is crazy. I grew up in



Former New York Mets star Darryl Strawberry waves as he is introduced during an Old-Timers' Day ceremony before a game between the Mets and Colorado Rockies on Aug. 27, 2022, in New York.

Southern California and we never had to experience that growing up."

"Listen, it was 1981. Society as a whole didn't quite embrace us — black folks," McClendon said. "They used to pass the hat for anybody who hit a home run. We hit home runs and we got nothing."

By early May, Strawberry wanted to take his hat into the stands, he said. Instead, he took his hat home. "I just checked out," he said. "I did go AWOL."

"He left for a couple days," Dusan said. "It was concerning that he left. I felt like he'd be back. I knew he'd be back."

Rather than chase Strawberry, Dusan gave him space. He didn't even tell the higher-ups in the Mets front office.

"If I did that today, they'd fire me," he chuckled. "Things were different in the early '80s."

Two days later, Strawberry returned to the park, thanks largely

to his relationships with Dusan and McClendon. Strawberry and McClendon had bonded the year before in rookie ball in Kingsport, Tenn., when they roomed together and had each other's backs during their first summer in the South.

"I guess we had to protect each other," McClendon said.

And McClendon hadn't been there at the start of the '81 season in Lynchburg because of a broken hand he suffered in spring training. But when Strawberry left the team, that rehab period became a lot shorter for McClendon.

"When I saw him at the park, then I was happy," Strawberry said. "To see a face and someone of color just like me."

Dusan made sure the two roomed together again, even though McClendon had gotten married.

"You have to take care of him," McClendon remembered Dusan saying, "because he's not going to

make it if you don't."

"I don't know if I was old enough to be a mentor at the time," said McClendon, who was 22 that season, "but I was certainly a friend and a voice he could talk to. Whatever little wisdom that I had I tried to pass along."

And Dusan's tough-love approach as a manager was what Strawberry needed at that point. The day Strawberry returned to the club, Dusan didn't exactly rejoice.

"I'm glad you're back. I'm glad you're healthy," he told the player. "We've got to go to work."

From that day forward, Dusan remembered, Strawberry became the best player he ever coached.

"He was there every day for extra hitting," Dusan said. "Once he applied himself, he was the man."

There was a reason Strawberry was always there for extra hitting.

"Let me put it this way. In a very good way, Gene was a pain in the ass to Darryl and I," McClendon said.

"When we were on the road, he would wake us up at 8 every morning and we had to go to the ballpark. I guess he saw something special in both of us. He saw it in Darryl, for sure."

"Gene Dusan was like a father figure to me that I didn't have. He embraced me, fought through some adversity early," Strawberry said. "I became a part of his family. It was just very personal to me."

How much a part of the family? Strawberry helped babysit Dusan's children.

"Gene kept me going, kept me focused on not looking up there and interacting with the people up there (in the stands), Strawberry said. "That really helped me because I really didn't want to play anymore, for a minute there."

"He taught us so much about not just baseball but life in general and how you go about your business," said McClendon, who went on to manage more than 1,000 major-league games. "You stand up and live by your word and learn to be a man of honor. It was pretty cool."

For Strawberry, the suck season remains an important part of his story. That first experience of adversity helped him through the many later challenging periods he endured, both self-inflicted and not. It was a learning moment, he said, one that came up whenever his children wanted to give something up at a difficult time.

In '82, playing for Dusan in Double-A Jackson, Miss., Strawberry broke through with 34 homers, 45 stolen bases and an OPS over 1.000. Two years after the suck season, Strawberry was the National League's Rookie of the Year.

"I made the right decision to fight through the adversity and start believing," Strawberry said. "I'm forever thankful for that and for real people. These are real people. These are not people that sugarcoat everything about you. But the people that showed me how to overcome."

"It's hard to believe," Dusan said about watching the teenager he managed have his number retired. "I appreciate how he feels about me. I'm proud of him."

## Unlock the Power of Gold:

Secure Your Retirement with Genesis Gold Group

Faith-Based, America-First Gold

In the ever-changing landscape of investments, one asset has stood the test of time as a beacon of stability and value: gold. More and more investors are turning to the security and potential of a Gold IRA through trusted institutions like Genesis Gold Group.

### The Timeless Value of Gold

For millennia, gold has been revered as a store of wealth and a hedge against inflation. Unlike fiat currencies, which can fluctuate wildly due to economic and political factors, gold maintains its intrinsic value over time.

### Protecting Your Retirement

In today's volatile financial climate, safeguarding your retirement savings is paramount. Traditional retirement accounts, subject to the whims of the stock market, can be precarious. But with a Gold IRA offered by Genesis Gold Group, you can fortify your retirement nest egg with the enduring strength of gold.

### The Expertise of Genesis Gold Group

When it comes to securing your financial future, trust and expertise are paramount. Genesis Gold Group boasts a team of seasoned professionals dedicated to guiding you through every step of the process. Their personalized approach ensures that your retirement strategy aligns with your goals and risk tolerance.

Call Now to Receive Your FREE Definitive Gold Guide, Exclusively from Genesis Gold Group  
**877-205-4956**

genesisgoldgroup.com



### Diversify and Prosper

Diversification is the cornerstone of sound investing. By adding a Gold IRA to your portfolio, you mitigate risk and enhance potential returns. Whether you're a seasoned investor or just beginning to plan for retirement, Genesis Gold Group offers the tools and resources you need to thrive in any market environment.

### Your Path to Financial Security

Don't leave your retirement to chance. Take control of your financial future today with a Gold IRA from Genesis Gold Group. With their expertise and your determination, the possibilities are limitless.



**Genesis Gold Group**

## Did you know the U.S. is considering a digital dollar system?

Downside of a Digital Dollar

## The FREE report

reviews possible risks for IRA/401(k) savers: privacy, government control, cybersecurity.

Get informed and be prepared. Order the report TODAY!

**385-462-4880**