

CHAPTER 1:

AN INTERVIEW WITH TOMMY LASORDA



Tommy Lasorda and me

WHEN ONE “DOES” LUNCH WITH TOMMY LASORDA, IT’S A TREMENDOUS exhibition of human consumption—multiple courses and huge portions. Tommy and I finish one such enormous lunch and head to the lobby of the Marriott Hotel in Anaheim, California, site of the 1999 Major League Baseball Winter Meetings. Everyone who’s either in baseball or trying to get into baseball comes, pilgrimage style, to these annual gatherings.

The hotel lobby at every MLB Winter Meetings brims with staff members from all 30 clubs— front office executives, field

managers, scouts, coaches, trainers, and clubhouse personnel—plus player representation (agents), and national and local media. Job-seekers occupy any remaining open floor space. It teems with energy. Every club sends staff members to sniff out possible trades or free-agent acquisitions. A quick glance over the crowd yields clues to the business at hand. At all Winter Meetings, one typically sees MLB club officials huddled together in groups of five or six discussing the rapidly changing rumors of the hour. Large groups of baseball friends engage in light-hearted banter with more serious discussions confined to a smaller group. If two staff members from one team are meeting with one or two from an opposing team, it's typically a "trade discussion." When a club official meets with an agent one on one, it's usually a "free-agent/player negotiation." These serious meetings take place on the periphery of the room—off to the side away from the earshot of others. If any of these negotiations gain traction in the lobby, they are continued upstairs in a club suite with the executives. Yes, with the rumor mill churning, multiple MLB trades and free-agent acquisitions have their genesis in the hotel lobby at the Winter Meetings. It is almost impossible to keep secrets in Major League Baseball, and information, including rumors, is shared vigorously in the lobby. Valuable information obtained in the lobby is taken to club executives who combine it with data analysis and scouting reports. These then influence the style or the posture a club assumes in trade or free-agent negotiations.

Tommy and I traverse through the crowded mass of baseball humanity filling the hotel lobby. We slowly make our way to the elevator, headed for the fourth-floor suite occupied by the Los Angeles Dodgers' staff during the four days of the Winter Meetings. *MLB clubs turn fancy suites into*

headquarters for staff meetings, interviews, trade discussions, player contract negotiations with agents, and more.

But before we reach the elevator, Peter Gammons, the era's best-known baseball writer, stalls our progress. He asks Tommy his opinion about the skyrocketing free-agent player salaries. Tommy (*acting uncharacteristically un-opinionated*) ignores the question and describes in great detail our most recent lunch. (*Did I mention the lunch was enormous?*) Because I had just watched Tommy eat all five courses of his lunch while keeping pace forkful-by-forkful, I skip listening to the bloating details so as not to relive the experience.

Diversions

Looking for a diversion, I scan the hotel lobby for someone to talk "baseball business" with. I casually join a group of officials from various teams discussing the most recent events and rumors in MLB. Some rumors seem farfetched, but "you never know," which is why I tuck them away in my mind as "possibilities." Discreetly, I get the attention of a member of another club's front office and engage him one-on-one about a potential trade for a player the Dodgers want to acquire.

The discussion doesn't last long—a disappointing dead end. His organization has no interest in trading the player we like (*trades for good players are not easy to consummate*). So I look for other groups that might consider the trades we have in mind, but it's a tough day on the trade market. Moving on, I bump into a couple of player agents who are eager to remind me of how *great* their players are (*as if they would ever let you forget*). We set up meetings for later that evening upstairs in the suite, as we have serious interest in their free-agent players (*until later when the agents tell us how much money they want*).

Suddenly, I hear a roar of laughter. Across the expansive room I see Tommy in the middle of a crowd of 20 people or so, performing as if on stage. He's recounting his greatest baseball stories (*there's no funnier man*

in our sport). I can hear his distinctive voice from across the lobby and see more people moving toward the assembled crowd. He has his audience laughing hysterically. It was obvious how much everyone was enjoying Tommy's stories. *It would have been more productive for us to go up to the suite, but admittedly, I have little chance to steal Tommy from his admirers.* I know they are having a great time, and nobody enjoys telling funny baseball stories more than Tommy Lasorda. I keep walking.

Shifting away from the Tommy show, I see a group of six young men overdressed in their business suits. *These guys look like kids.* I usually know the faces of everyone attending the Winter Meetings, but they are strangers to me. Their youthfulness affirms their lack of MLB experience, and their un-pressed shirts expose their need of employment. They're carrying satchels that contain an extraordinary number of loose white sheets of paper—résumés most likely. In direct contrast to the boisterous, fun-loving Tommy, the young men stand stiffly minding their own business. *Definitely job-seekers.*

As I walk in their direction, I notice their eyes tracking my progress. *No doubt they believe I am someone who can help them get a job in MLB.* Presumptively, I ask if any of them has lucked out getting an interview with a team. Without hesitation, all except one respond that they have interviewed. *I deduced their situation correctly.* So I directly ask that one, "You haven't interviewed yet?"

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Jon."

"Well, Jon, you have one now. I'm Bill Geivett with the LA Dodgers. Let's go; Mr. Lasorda and I are going to interview you."

The Celebrity

Immediately, I turn my back to Jon and head in the direction of Tommy's sideshow. With Jon, I act as if it's normal procedure to include

Tommy in interviews, but it isn't. My intention is to add Tommy to the process this one time to make it memorable for Jon—and, deviously, to raise the young man's anxiety level by having Tommy present. I wear a sly grin as I walk across the room to retrieve Tommy, the celebrity. There is nobody in that lobby this day more popular or famous than Tommy.

Another roar of laughter explodes from the crowd as I walk closer. I can see the glee in the faces of those listening to Tommy. *I feel bad for these 50 people now surrounding him for I'm about to end their wonderful time with a baseball legend.*

I make eye contact with Tommy and motion to the elevators, letting him know "it's time" to go upstairs. In response, Tommy excuses himself and meets us outside of the ring of disappointed onlookers, who enthusiastically thank him as we walk away. I inform Tommy we have an important interview to conduct upstairs, then I introduce Jon to Tommy.

At the Winter Meetings, I'd interview a few job-seekers every year, whether our club had openings or not. Knowing some may not get even one interview with an MLB front office executive during the entire four days of meetings, I make sure someone who hasn't interviewed gets the chance. It gives the applicant valuable experience and shows our club the talent available to hire when a position opens up. These job-seekers spend their own money to travel to the Winter Meetings in hopes of employment; it was the least I could do.

Jon understandably seems nervous but under control. *I have seen much worse.* He repeatedly addresses us respectfully as Mr. Lasorda and Mr. Geivett. While in the elevator, Jon informs us he's scheduled to meet with Allard Baird, general manager of the Kansas City Royals, later that day. *(I guess that's why he didn't respond to my question in the lobby.)* I feel happy that Jon has an interview he's excited about. At the same time, I'm confident this interview with Tommy is more than he could have ever expected.

Jerry's Meeting

As we enter the Dodgers' suite, we realize we are interrupting a Player Development staff meeting led by our farm director, Jerry Weinstein. I ask Jerry if Jon might sit in and listen to their discussion and, when finished, would the team interview Jon for a Player Development office job? Jerry says "yes" but looks at me as if I am crazy. *Everyone in the room (except for Jon) knows we don't have a job opening.*

I sense Jerry is a bit perturbed by my spontaneity and lack of communication, but he acquiesces, and Jon sits down to join the meeting. Tommy and I grab a few snacks (*that's a joke*) and go into the next room to wait for Jon to complete his interview.

Tommy and I discuss how surprised and thrilled Jon must be to have this experience. We congratulate each other for the benevolent gesture bestowed on this young man as if we're the saints of professional baseball.

Then we hear a knock at the door.

Our delusional moment of self-congratulation abruptly halts as I open the door to see Jon standing there. To our surprise, Jon's interview with the Player Development team must have been the shortest in recorded baseball history, for his knock came only four minutes after we'd left him. *Jerry was never one to waste time.*

Candidate Interview

I tell Jon, "Come in. Tommy and I will interview you now."

My approach to interviewing a candidate is to get him or her to talk as much as possible. I give applicants a chance to discuss what's important to them and what they feel passionate about. They are usually nervous and on edge, a perfect emotional state for the interviewer to gain insight into their abilities. Asking general questions allows candidates to speak of what they know best. When an interviewer asks too many questions or talks too

much, it decreases the chances of truly learning about the candidate. Applicants—be prepared to talk!

I proceed with basic questions about Jon's family and upbringing, then I allow him to explain how he thinks he could assist the LA Dodgers organization. From his answers, I can tell Jon is close to his family and loves his parents deeply. He talks about his baseball background and how he has studied the game. He speaks of his passion for the profession and how seriously he desires to have a career in Major League Baseball. Judging from his impressive answers, Jon conveys that he would be a tireless worker. Clearly, he is an intelligent young man who is eager to begin a career in Major League Baseball—a prospect for the future and a person to keep in mind.

Still, we aren't hiring. Cruel? Maybe, but as I said, this mock interview helps Jon gain valuable experience.

I glance over at Tommy during my questioning to assess whether he's engaged, but I can't tell. He sits silently. Maybe the big lunch has rendered him groggy? I know it has made me groggy. Or maybe he's tired after his comedy routine in the lobby. Either would have been understandable. *Normally, Tommy would have participated in any conversation or meeting to a great extent. After all, he'd been excited about celebrating our delusional benevolence.*

As I finish, I ask Tommy if he has any questions to ask Jon. "No, I don't have any questions. But, I have something to say."

I'm suddenly excited (and relieved) when Tommy announces he has something to say to Jon. Tommy will probably give Jon sage advice he would hear nowhere else. He will tell him something so significant, it will influence his entire career—a poignant positive uplifting message to inspire Jon to great heights.

"Go ahead, Tommy," I say.

In a soft tone, Tommy says he has been watching Jon the entire interview and has listened to all of his responses. He believes Jon has answered all of the questions satisfactorily. Tommy then speaks about his years in baseball, saying he has met hundreds of scouts and front office staff members who have influenced him. Tommy fondly mentions some of their names—emphasizing Branch Rickey and Al Campanis—two of the greats who shaped his knowledge and success. He praises their great work ethic and passion for baseball.

Tommy talks about starting out as an area scout, not making much money to bring home to his wife Jo and their children. He didn't know if the Dodgers would ever recognize his true potential as a professional baseball man. Slumped in his chair, he then quietly states he has only a few things to say to Jon.

Tommy's Tirade

In an abrupt motion, he straightens up, points his crooked finger squarely at Jon, and screams, "YOU'RE NOT TOUGH ENOUGH!"

Still screaming, he adds,

"YOU CAN'T HANDLE THE LONG HOURS."

"YOU CAN'T LIVE WITH LOW PAY."

"YOU CAN'T TAKE THE DOWN TIMES."

"YOU'RE JUST NOT TOUGH ENOUGH!"

Whoa! What the hell is Tommy doing? I'm shocked and alarmed by Tommy's loud, disdainful shouting. I feel terrible for Jon. Why is Tommy attacking this respectable young man with the aggressive fervor he normally reserves for umpires? This former Major League manager, baseball icon, legend of the game, and Hall of Famer has just crushed Jon's dreams. . . .

But I'm incorrect.

Jon fires back, “YOU’RE WRONG, TOMMY!”

I guess that, since Tommy screamed at him, Jon feels there’s no longer a need to use “Mr. Lasorda” when addressing Tommy.

“I AM TOUGH ENOUGH, AND I WILL BE IN BASEBALL!”

Jon shouts.

Tommy slowly sits back into his chair and smiles. He has used inappropriate screaming and an extreme level of emotion to evaluate Jon’s true conviction about a career in MLB. Brilliant! Jon has shown his toughness and confidence by defying Tommy. He has won us over. Jon will not be denied his place in Major League Baseball.

After Jon departs the room, we reflect on how much we like this convincing young man—until Tommy brings up our next item of business, DINNER!

By the way, Jon eventually acquired a job with the Kansas City Royals and made a steady rise in the hierarchy of MLB as an accomplished, seasoned front office executive.

Are You Tough Enough?

Professional baseball is a tough gig. From the outside, it looks like great fun filled with good times and glamour, travel, and excitement. From afar, one typically sees only the celebrations and the winning team players spraying champagne on each other. On the inside, though, a career in Major League Baseball is filled with defeats and a never-ending supply of “punches in the stomach.” No television crew is filming other teams’ employees who didn’t qualify for the post-season. Instead, the “losers” are answering tough questions posed by their club owners. They’re taking a beating in the media and alerting their families about the real threat of the possibility of selling their homes if the team has another losing season.

Statistically, the majority of MLB clubs fall into the “loser” category.

Ask yourself: *Can you withstand the job's negative aspects? Only the toughest can take it and persevere. Can you?*

Can You Handle the Long Hours?

When you take employment in most other industries, appropriate questions to ask are “What are my hours?” and “How many days a week will I be required to work?” Major League Baseball has only one answer to those questions:

“AS MANY AS IT TAKES TO GET THE JOB DONE!”

Therefore, you had better be passionate about a career in this game because you won't punch a time clock. If working all day, every day, all year is not desirable, then pick another career. Those who have worked in MLB can tell you about all the family gatherings, funerals, Little League games, birthday parties, dance recitals, band performances, school plays, and graduations they have missed because of their work in professional baseball.

If you dedicate yourself to a baseball career, let me caution you: *You are not choosing a job in baseball; you're choosing a LIFE!*

Can You Start with Low Pay?

Entry-level jobs with high salaries don't exist in Major League Baseball. Expect long hours for low pay. An organization will hire you in your first position because club officials see you as a “prospect”—someone with the potential to grow into higher positions in the distant future. They're investing in your “future ability.” The club is paying for your education in the game of professional baseball. Your first job should be taken for *the experience*, not for the rate of pay. Let me give you a heads-up: *Don't compare starting salaries with your buddies who work in other industries; it will be painful. Instead, think of your first job as a scholarship.*

Can You Survive the Down Times?

Pittsburgh Pirates Manager Clint Hurdle has this great saying: “Baseball is filled with humble people—AND THOSE WHO ARE ABOUT TO BE!”

You learn to survive the down times by exercising your humility very quickly. No matter what position you hold, it seems the entire world knows all of your unfortunate mistakes. Detractors are everywhere: media, fans, neighbors, and sometimes even members of your own organization. You take potshots (some fair, some not) on a regular basis, making it mandatory to have thick skin.

Do this: *Learn to “shower off” the criticism and prepare to take a lot of showers. Be humble.*

Do You Have a Realistic Perspective?

Thinking back to Tommy’s tirade with Jon, here’s his message: *Believe in yourself and your ability to withstand the pressures, long hours, travel, and defeats. It’s the only way you can sustain a long career in MLB.*

Just as you must be tough to the core, you must also be realistic. Know that the good times don’t last long, but the bad times seem to last forever. If you can take crushing blows, defeats, and disappointments and still keep showering them off, only then are you destined for a successful career in baseball.

Most of all, have a *realistic perspective*. I won’t ever sugarcoat this career choice by saying it’s a bunch of fun. My 28 years in the game have taught me that the most successful MLB staff members are truly passionate about the game. No matter how much criticism is thrown their way, those who succeed don’t feel they’re working a job. They absolutely love the game!

One of Tommy's favorite pieces of advice is: *Choose something you love, and you will never work a day in your life.* It doesn't appear to be complicated. Sage advice from a wise man.

That said, Tommy Lasorda emphasizes the need for toughness. Clint Hurdle advises humility. These great baseball men speak from the experiences of their long careers. Yes, baseball brings a lot of good, mixed with a lot of bad. Only the most talented, resilient, persistent, fortunate, humble, and tough will enjoy a long career in professional baseball.

Will you be one of them?