

Chase Utley, Ruben Tejada, and the Long History of the Mets Avenging Injustices

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Nearly 48 hours later, Mets fans are still reeling. Dodgers second baseman Chase Utley's filthy, far-to-the-right-of-the-bag slide into Mets shortstop Ruben Tejada during Saturday night's playoff game ended Tejada's postseason and could end his career, while the umpires' boobish mishandling of the ruling on the field cost the Mets the game.

So when the best-of-five series resumes in Flushing with Game 3 on Monday night, Mets fans will demand two things: redemption in the form of victory, and justice for Tejada in the form of a fastball right at Utley's backside (Utley himself has been suspended for two games but, with his appeal pending, is expected to play tonight).

In sports mythology, these two things are linked. Every good sports fable foretells that the Mets will rally to avenge Utley's hit on Tejada, unite behind whichever pitcher plunks Utley (or some other unfortunate Dodger), and then destroy the Dodgers on sheer adrenaline.

And that is precisely what would happen in a just world. But as Mets fans know quite well, the world is extremely unjust -- and justice has been elusive almost every time a Met has sought it.

Take, for example, an incident during the Mets inaugural season in 1962, when Giants great Willie Mays spiked Mets shortstop Elio Chacon while sliding into second base. Chacon sought immediate justice by throwing a punch at Mays, and Mays punched back in the ensuing scuffle. In the end, Mays -- the aggressor -- got the final laugh: His storied career lasted 11 more years, while Chacon was believed to be blackballed by baseball, and never played again after that season.

It wouldn't be the last time that a Mets infielder sought justice. In 1977, Mets second baseman Felix Millan took exception when Pirates catcher Ed Ott slid hard into him, and in the ensuing fight Ott body slammed Millan and ended his career.

Nine years later, during a May 1986 game, Dodgers pitcher Tom Niedenfuer plunked Mets third baseman Ray Knight on the elbow after allowing a grand slam to outfielder George Foster, and when Knight charged the mound, Niedenfuer tackled Knight in a bench-clearing melee. Two months later, Knight sought justice from another aggressor: After Reds outfielder Eric Davis slid hard into third base, Knight -- a former amateur boxer -- sucker-punched him in the face.

Perhaps more infamously, on May 11, 1996, the Mets held "John Franco Day" to celebrate the Mets closer's 300th save. During the first inning, Cubs pitcher Kevin Foster threw an inside fastball at slugging Mets catcher Todd Hundley's head, and Mets pitcher Pete Harnisch promptly retaliated by plunking Foster the following inning. A few innings later, both benches cleared when Harnisch, then batting, started fighting with Cubs catcher Scott Servais. When the dust settled, nine players were ejected -- including Franco, the day's honoree.

The most renowned incident, of course, involved the Mets' multi-season quest for justice against Yankees pitcher Roger Clemens. The conflict began when Clemens beamed Mets catcher Mike Piazza in the head during a regular-season July 2000 game, which forced Piazza to miss the All Star Game. Mets fans' demands for justice grew louder during the World Series three months later, when Clemens threw a bat splinter in Piazza's direction after Piazza broke his bat while fouling off a pitch. Ultimately, the umpires declined to eject Clemens, Piazza struck out, and the Mets lost the game.

When the Mets finally got their shot at retribution two years later -- with Clemens batting at Shea Stadium -- Mets pitcher Shawn Estes threw a half-hearted fastball behind Clemens that missed by a few feet. Estes redeemed himself in that game by hitting a three-run homer off of Clemens, but Mets fans never forgot his weak would-be-beanball, and he was cast off into oblivion (in other words, traded to Cincinnati) later that season.

To be sure, the Mets have occasionally secured justice. During a 1989 game, Mets infielder Gregg Jefferies charged Phillies reliever Roger McDowell, Jefferies' former teammate, after McDowell insulted him, punching McDowell five times before the fight was broken up. Much more notably, during the 1973 playoffs, Mets shortstop Bud Harrelson fought Reds left-fielder Pete Rose after Rose slid hard into him. The brawl energized the Amazins, propelling a Mets team that just barely made the postseason past the so-called Big Red Machine and into the World Series.

Will Utley's vicious slide into Tejada prove to be a similar turning point, with justice paving the way to victory? Or will the incident, and Tejada's absence, leave the team deflated? That question now rests on the surgically repaired arm of Mets pitcher Matt Harvey, who will start Game 3. Hopefully his agent won't object if he's asked to throw one extra, and extra hard, fastball that badly misses the strike zone.

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