

# TRUE BLUE



## Tommy Lasorda discusses life, love and baseball



By Lynn Armitage

There's an old saying, "When you try to embrace all of mankind, you sometimes forget your wife."

Nothing could be further from the truth for Tommy Lasorda, baseball's favorite blue blood who managed the Los Angeles Dodgers for 20 career-defining years and is now the organization's senior vice president at a youthful age 75. What was supposed to be an interview with one of the game's most lovable legends began as an unexpected tribute to Jo Lasorda, Tommy's wife of 53 years, to whom he credits all his success.

Isn't that just like a manager?

The Lasordas, whose home base has been Fullerton since 1967, have rallied through all of life's seasons together — the wins and losses — sometimes side by side and too often separated by time zones.

Through the years, they've celebrated their two children as well as two world championships; painfully endured Tommy's heart problems and the tragic death of their son; and rejoice daily in the life of their 7-year-old granddaughter, Emily. But amazingly, after more than five decades of pure joy and profound heartbreak, they're still in the game together.

What impressed me most about Tommy weren't the priceless anecdotes, his illustrious career, or his Hall of Fame status. Instead, I was in awe of a man who is in awe of a woman. Life's most basic game plan. He spoke of loyalty, dedication, respect and devotion. And he wasn't talking about baseball, either.

Not by coincidence, these same qualities upon which Tommy built his winning marriage also were instilled in his players. He led them to four National League pennants, eight division titles and two World Series wins, beginning in 1977.

We could learn a lot from Tommy. About life AND baseball, which he would argue are one and the same. Seeing the Lasordas together, a solid gold, enduring franchise, gives me hope as a recently divorced woman. As Tommy and Jo walked away from a Fullerton coffeehouse, still holding hands after 53 years of true-blue wedded bliss, it made me believe in the power of love again.

**Q:** Sometimes I think the secret to a happy marriage is to spend as much time apart as possible. Is that why you've been married so long?

**JO:** (Laughs) I hope not!

**TOMMY:** It's unfortunate we had to be away from each other so much. But if you're a ballplayer, you're away from home half the season.

**Q:** Were all those road trips hard on your family?

**TOMMY:** It was tougher on Jo than me because I loved what I was doing. When you're away playing, if you don't have an outstanding wife, someone like Jo, then you've got problems. If I could have seen God one week before I got married, and had

written down on a piece of paper what kind of wife I wanted, he couldn't have given me a better one than who he gave me. She is the unsung hero of our family. She's got the greatest temperament, greatest disposition, greatest personality of anybody I've ever met in my life.

**Q:** So how do you like your new job?

**TOMMY:** It's not as good as what I had before, but it's interesting. I do a lot of different things as senior vice president. I help all the departments and work with our minor-league players. I inspire, motivate and evaluate them. I really love doing that.

**Q:** Do you see more talent now than 20 years ago?

**TOMMY:** No, much less. I don't know why, maybe they're going into other sports. In the '70s, I saw a lot of talent, particularly in our organization. When I took over as manager of the Dodgers, 17 of the 25 players had played for me in the minors. That's a rarity now because of free agency. We had an infield that played together for 8 1/2 years. You'll never see that again.

**Q:** Do you miss being a manager?

**TOMMY:** Oh, yes! I did it for 20 years in the majors, eight years in the minors and six years in winter baseball. I miss the players, the

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competition, the thrill of winning, which was big with me. I loved to taste the fruits of victory. And the camaraderie I had with people was great. It was a privilege and an honor to be manager of the Dodgers, the greatest organization in baseball.

## Q: Why did you retire?

**TOMMY:** Everything has to end, just like our life eventually. I loved every minute of it. If I didn't have that heart problem, I'd probably still be managing. People thought I had a heart attack because of the stress. But it wasn't the stress that put me in that hospital, it was the freeways (laughs)!

## Q: Has your life turned out as you had hoped?

**TOMMY:** Oh, it's beyond my expectations. I never dreamed I would be manager of the Dodgers or in the Hall of Fame. I also never thought I would be a vice president for the Dodgers or win a gold medal in the Olympics.

## Q: What will be your next big accomplishment?

**TOMMY:** When I made the Hall of Fame, I reached the top of the mountain in my profession. Then I climbed another mountain I never expected when I coached our Olympic baseball team and we won the gold medal for the first time ever. Then I was asked to be a consultant in Japan for the Osaka Buffaloes, a team that hadn't won in years, and I helped them win their first pennant in 10 years. So I climbed that mountain, too, unexpectedly. There are other mountains to climb. Where they are, I don't know, but I know I'm going to climb them.

## Q: What would you like to see him do next, Jo?

**JO:** Whatever he wants to do. If it keeps him happy, then that's the best thing for me, too.

**TOMMY:** That's the greatest thing a husband can hear. When we lived in Pennsylvania and (then-General Manager) Al Campanis wanted me to move to California to scout, I asked Jo what she thought and she gave me the greatest answer: "Whatever you want to do that makes you happy, will make us happy." The rest is history. After scouting for the Dodgers out here, I had four years in the rookie league, four years in Triple A, four years as third base coach and then I became manager for 20 years. So this move out here turned out to be the greatest thing that ever happened to us.

## Q: What if Jo had said "no"?

**JO:** Yeah. Let's answer that question!

**TOMMY:** If Jo had said no, I wouldn't have gone against her wishes. I would have told Al I couldn't go because my marriage meant more to me than anything.

## Q: Managers are like father figures. Is that how you felt with your players?

**TOMMY:** Without a doubt, I was a father to them. I watched over them, and wanted them to be outstanding on and off the field. I especially wanted them to be proud of their family, represent our ballclub at all times, help make it better and be a good role model for kids. You spend more time with them than your own family, so there's gotta be a family attitude in the club.

## Q: How did you discipline players and still get their respect?

**TOMMY:** I reprimanded them, fined them, talked to them. But I never took a player out of the lineup as punishment. When a manager does that to spite a player, he's really spiting himself because his responsibility is to put the best players on that field. In the 20 years I managed the Dodgers, I never had a curfew. I told players if you want to be treated like a man, act like a man. You want to be treated with respect, then give respect. If I find out you're not doing that, then you're not going to be on this team. I trusted and encouraged them. They were like my sons. I loved and respected them, and appreciated what they did for me.

## Q: Many parents dream their sons will become professional players. What would you say to kids who don't make the cut?

**TOMMY:** Just because you didn't make it here doesn't mean you can't be a success somewhere else. I got to the majors but never became the pitcher I hoped to. But I asked myself, "Would you rather be a 20-game winner and not have a good family or not be a successful pitcher and have an outstanding family?" I'll take the outstanding family, so I was a success in that. Then I tried managing, and reached the top there. So what I didn't achieve in one area, I did in another.

## Q: You live in Orange County, home of the World Champion Angels, yet you've devoted your life to the Dodgers. Do you feel divided loyalties?

**TOMMY:** No, I've always pulled for the Angels because of Gene Autry. When Mike Scioscia became manager, then I really wanted them to win. And with Mickey Hatcher, Ron Roenicke and Alfredo Griffin as coaches, that made it even more desirable because they all played for me. Dusty Baker, who managed the other end of the series, played for me, too. When I see guys who played for me managing in the majors, it makes me proud. I feel there's a little part of me with them wherever they go. At one time, there were seven guys who played with me managing in the majors.

## Q: Do they keep in touch?

**TOMMY:** A lot of us talk to each other. Johnny Oates, who's really sick right now, I call Johnny, he

calls me. Joe Ferguson and Bobby Valentine, Davy Lopes, Ron Cey, Steve Garvey, Mike Scioscia, we see each other a lot. That feeling is still there.

## Q: When I told my 5-year-old I was interviewing Tommy Lasorda, she said, "Who?" Kindergartners aside, does it bother you to be recognized everywhere you go?

**TOMMY:** What amazes and overwhelms me is that people haven't forgotten me. Not only in this country, but in Italy, Japan, the Dominican Republic. I'm amazed at the reaction and treatment I get. I love meeting people and trying to motivate them.

## Q: You do a lot of motivational speaking. Any success stories?

**TOMMY:** I was speaking at the Air Force Academy and a young lieutenant told me he got hit in the head with a line drive that knocked him unconscious and his doctor said he could never be a pilot. I said, "The only person who should tell you that you can't fly is God, and don't ever forget that!" After my speech, he told me he decided to try flying after all because of something I said in my speech: When I went away to play baseball at the tender age of 17, my father said to me, "Because God delays does not mean that God denies." Two years later, the lieutenant sent me a picture of him standing next to his jet. At the bottom of the letter, it said, "Because God delayed, God didn't deny." He went on to become a hero in Desert Storm after rescuing Officer O'Grady, who got shot down. And he later became the youngest major in the U.S. Air Force.

## Q: Speaking of incredible stories...what are the Dodgers chances of winning the pennant this year?

**TOMMY:** Pretty good. We have a lot of talent on the team, and an outstanding manager and general manager. It's a matter of pulling it all together.

## Q: How do you like being 75?

**TOMMY:** I tell everyone I'm really 65. I've gained three hours on every trip I've taken over the years from the East to the West. I've totaled them up and it's 10 years, so I'm really 65 instead of 75.

## Q: Any last words, Tommy?

**TOMMY:** There are four things I never regretted one day in my life: The love I have for God; the love I have for my family; living in the greatest country in the world; and the 54 years I've been with the Dodgers. So you're talking to the happiest, most appreciative man in this whole world. ■

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