

SANTANARIFIC

Johan Conjures Images of Seaver and Doc

by Greg Spira

On Tuesday, January 29, 2008, the New York Mets and Minnesota Twins tentatively agreed to a trade that would bring Johan Santana to the Mets in exchange for four prospects, if the Mets were able to sign the pitcher to a long-term deal within 72 hours. The fact that the Twins were trading the two-time Cy Young Award winner came as no surprise to anyone; after failing to sign Santana beyond 2008, Minnesota had spent most of the offseason trying to get all they could for him. To their dismay, the Twins found out that their favored suitors, the Yankees and Red Sox—teams they had hoped would compete for the privilege of acquiring Santana—were unwilling to give up the cream of their farm systems for the top pitcher in baseball. The more time passed without one of these AL East rivals dealing for Santana, the more likely it was that the Twins would turn their focus back to their third option: the Mets.

Unlike the Yankees and Red Sox, the Mets did not have a single elite prospect who could serve as the foundation of a deal, and General Manager Omar Minaya was seemingly steadfast in refusing to even give up Fernando Martinez, the organization's top hitting prospect. But Minaya was willing to provide the Twins with three of his top pitching prospects along with Carlos Gomez, who could be plugged into center field in Minnesota following the free agent departure of All-Star Torii Hunter. With spring training just over two weeks away, the Twins decided to accept this package, and the deal—Santana for Gomez, Kevin Mulvey, Phillip Humber, and Deolis Guerra—was made.

After taking the Mets past the signing window—the Mets got a brief extension to finish the details—Santana signed a six-year, \$137.5 million contract extension. The deal, which runs through 2013, and has a club option for 2014, makes him the highest-paid pitcher in baseball history. Typically, a

new record-setting player contract creates a huge uproar. In this case, however, the reaction was relatively muted, because paying the best pitcher in baseball the highest salary is not particularly controversial.

Santana's statistical accomplishments over his last four seasons with the Twins spoke volumes. He led the AL in ERA in 2004 and 2006 and was the runner-up (to Kevin Millwood) in 2005. He allowed the fewest baserunners per nine innings among AL starters in all four seasons. He led the league in strikeouts in 2004, 2005, and 2006 while placing second to former Mets prospect Scott Kazmir in 2007. Santana finished first in innings in 2006 after being second the two seasons before that.

Among the 99 pitchers who threw at least 500 innings between 2004 and 2007, Santana pitched the most innings (912.1), was credited with the most wins (70) and the highest winning percentage (.686), posted the lowest ERA (2.89), and held opponents the lowest batting average (.211) and on-base percentage (.258), while finishing second in opponents'

slugging average (.356) to Jake Peavy. In other words, the Mets, in acquiring Santana, were getting a Hall of Fame quality ace in the middle of one of the most dominating pitching runs in baseball history.

The Mets have traded for big stars before—George Foster, Keith Hernandez, Gary Carter, and Frank Viola, among others—but Santana is better and younger than any previous blockbuster Mets acquisition. And the Mets desperately needed Santana, more than even Minaya seemed to realize. The Mets starters had pitched very well during the early part of 2007, but by the end of that season the rotation had greatly deteriorated, and the club coughed up a huge division lead in the process. Before the Santana trade, the Mets expected their 2008 rotation to be anchored by Oliver Perez, John Maine, Orlando Hernandez, and Pedro Martinez. (Mike Pelfrey was a contender for the last spot in the rotation, but he was hardly a sure thing.) Given the health issues of Hernandez and Martinez, as well as the maddening inconsistency of Perez, the Mets simply did not have a rotation that



Despite leading the National League in innings and ERA, Johan Santana still needed help in his first year as a Met. He was often left wanting—Santana left seven games with the lead, only to have the bullpen blow it.

could guarantee them being contenders, much less favorites, in 2008.

If the Mets had not acquired Santana, they likely would have been no better than a .500 team. And that projection doesn't take into account the extra strain that not having the league leader in innings pitched would have placed on—and this is far too kind an assessment—a beleaguered bullpen.

What the Mets got from Santana in 2008 wasn't the southpaw's best, but in the annals of great Mets seasons by a starter, it still qualified for the top five among a grouping of Tom Seaver's finest years and one astounding season from Dwight Gooden. In his first year as a Met, Santana found a perch among the top pitchers for a franchise that has been blessed with aces and a fantastic pitcher's park.

For the third time in his career, Santana captured his league's ERA title. He threw a career-high 234.1 innings in 2008, including 17 in a four-day span during the final week of the season. Santana provided the Mets both extreme quantity and extreme quality.

Only once before has a Mets hurler led the league in both ERA and innings in the same season. Tom Seaver never did it. Neither did Jerry Koosman. Nor did Jon Matlack. Dwight Gooden accomplished the feat in 1985 with his 276.2 innings pitched and 1.53 ERA. Gooden's 1985 is generally considered the greatest single-season performance by a Mets starter, not to mention one of the best by any pitcher in baseball history. There's no argument about that here. Gooden was simply otherworldly in '85.

Gooden's 1985 may be on top of the list, but Tom Seaver, "The Franchise," has far more seasons on that list than any other Met. The chart of the 50 greatest Mets pitching seasons that accompanies this article (on page 26) includes each of the 10 full seasons that Seaver spent with the Mets before he was traded to the Reds in the M. Donald Grant-enforced, Dick Young-fueled, Joe McDonald-executed, "Midnight Massacre" of 1977. (Seaver's single-season return to the Mets, in 1983, though heartening to the downtrodden masses at Shea, misses the list.) Two of Tom Terrific's seasons, 1971 and 1973, rate not far behind Gooden's 1985. In 1971, Seaver threw 286.1 innings and posted a miniscule 1.76 ERA. It is arguably Seaver's best season, though he lost the Cy Young to 24-game winner Fergie Jenkins of the Cubs. In 1973, Seaver pitched 290 innings with a 2.08 ERA and, despite a worrisome shoulder, won the final game of the season to complete the team's dizzying rise from doormat to division champ in the final month. Seaver won the ERA and strikeout titles in both '71 and '73, finishing third in innings both times.

Santana's 2008 can reasonably be placed fourth, right



Johan Santana lived up to his reputation as a second-half pitcher. He was 8-0 with a 2.17 ERA and three complete games after the All-Star break, including one on short rest during the final weekend.

behind Gooden's magical season and Seaver's two best, while ranking just ahead of Seaver's first Cy Young season of 1969. In an era where most starters struggle to pitch 200 innings in a season, Santana's workload is just as impressive as those put forth by Seaver in his era. And aside from the seasons already mentioned, no Met has ever prevented more runs compared to a replacement-level pitcher in a single season. In short, Santana was Seaver-good and Gooden-esque in 2008.

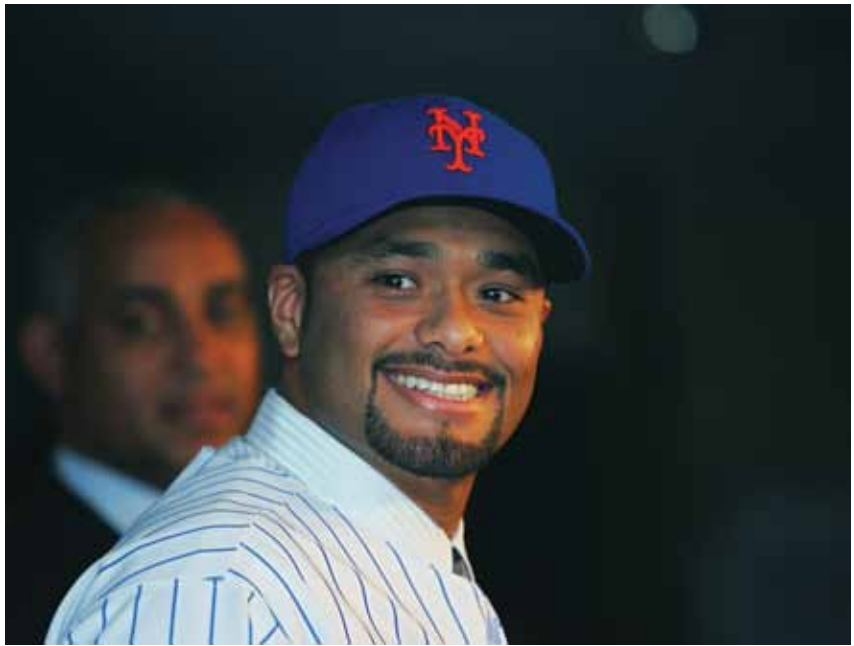
Most of the other names on the list should be recognizable to Mets fans, though some will ring a bell more than others. The Seaver-Koosman-Matlack trio dominates the list with 18 appearances. (Seaver alone surpasses the cumulative total of his talented teammates, with Koosman appearing five times and Matlack four.) The mid-to-late-1980s staff, including Gooden, Ron Darling, Bob Ojeda, Sid Fernandez, and David Cone, occupies 11 spots on the chart. There are several Mets starters from the pre-Santana decade. Al Leiter, pops up on the list four times, but there's also Rick Reed, Tom Glavine, Mike Hampton, Pedro Martinez, Kevin Appier, Glendon Rusch, and even Steve Trachsel. They appear 13

times on the list, though only Pedro's 2005 and Leiter's 1998 make the top 15. Mike Pelfrey sneaks on the list with his breakout 2008. One can only hope his name forces its way onto the list a few more times in the future.

Mets who excelled during the team's down periods are a reminder of how even great seasons can be muddled by time and circumstance. Craig Swan, who pitched for the Mets during the dark Linda de Roulet days of the late 1970s, has two seasons on the list, including one in which he led the league in ERA. He's only one of four Mets to win the ERA title—along with Seaver, Gooden, and Santana—and Swannie was the only one to do it for a last-place team. Swan was an excellent pitcher when the Mets were bad, but repeated injuries derailed a very promising career by the time the team got good again in the mid-1980s. Bret Saberhagen is remembered in New York for churlishly spraying reporters with bleach, but that can't whitewash his remarkable 1994 season, in which he was credited with 14 wins and a mere 13 walks in 177.1 innings. That season is doomed to obscurity by being shortened by the strike.

Before his Mets career is over, Johan Santana will undoubtedly force a few names out of this top 50. (Look out, Trachsel!) Santana demonstrated in 2008 that he is still very much in his prime. The secret to Santana's success is his change-up, which is widely considered the best in the major leagues. He throws the pitch exactly like he throws his fastball, with the same grip and release point, so hitters—at least right-handed hitters—cannot tell the difference between the two pitches when they come out of his hand. A Santana four-seam fastball barrels in at 90 to 94 mph. His change-up, however, comes to the batter at a speed that is about 15 mph slower than the fastball, but with a bigger dip. Santana throws a change-up more often than any other pitcher in the game—with the possible exception of ex-Met Tom Glavine—but hitters can't help but chase it even when it falls out of the strike zone. Santana will throw a change-up almost half the time after he gets a hitter to a two-strike count.

Santana's change-up isn't as effective against left-handed hitters, so he uses his slider more often on them. At its best, the slider falls completely off the table and left-handers are unable to hit it. But Santana doesn't throw his slider as consistently as he does his change-up, and so it is more hittable. Relatively.



Almost from the moment Omar Minaya brought him to New York, Johan Santana has appeared content in his new home.

As good as Santana's 2008 was, his command of the strike zone, especially in the first half, was significantly worse than it had been at any point during his seasons as a starter in Minnesota. As a result, his pitch counts generally ran higher than expected, which led to more bullpen use in his starts than any sane man would recommend. The seven blown saves in Santana's starts might have cost him the Cy Young Award, though Tim Lincecum had five leads blown for him by the porous San Francisco bullpen and also had to count on a Punch-and-Judy offense to help garner his 18 wins, and, ultimately, the award.

Down the stretch, Santana fully regained his command, and pitched his finest game of the season—and one of the best outings in team history—in a masterpiece against Florida. He allowed just two singles, a double, and three walks in a 117-pitch complete game on short rest that kept the Mets alive for one more day. Santana has traditionally been a stronger pitcher in the second half, yet never before has his command been so much weaker in the first half. Johan had a great first season and he'd be worth every penny of his contract if he just repeats his 2008 season, but based on his career performance, it's reasonable to expect even more out of Santana in 2009. **MSP**

Greg Spira is a writer, editor, and researcher of sports books and other titles. The managing editor of the *2008 ESPN Baseball Encyclopedia*, Greg was born and bred a Mets fan during his childhood in Whitestone, New York; he then attended Harvard College in order to root for the Red Sox against the Yankees. These days he is ensconced in Philadelphia, where he still maintains an annual tradition of burning M. Donald Grant in effigy every June 15.

The Greatest Seasons by Mets Pitchers

Pitching has long been the name of the game for the Mets. Over the past 41 years—ignoring the pre-Seaver years (for good reason)—the Mets have had many remarkable seasons from starting pitchers. Using a list of criteria that takes into account changing expectations for pitchers, what follows is a ranking of the top 50. Going on raw numbers, seasons that occurred in the dominant pitching era of the 1960s and



1970s would occupy all but the top spot on the list, so we included Opponent OPS+ (On-Base Plus Slugging Allowed that is adjusted for home park and normalized to league average) and ERA+ (adjusted by dividing the league average ERA by the individual ERA and then factoring in home park). Both Opponent OPS+ and ERA+ have a baseline of 100, so the higher the better in terms of performance.

Pitcher	Year	Age	G	GS	CG	W	L	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	ERA	HR	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS+	ERA+
1 Dwight Gooden*	1985	20	35	35	16	24	4	276.2	198	51	47	69	268	1.53	13	.201	.254	.270	148	228
2 Tom Seaver	1971	26	36	35	21	20	10	286.1	210	61	56	61	289	1.76	18	.206	.252	.297	139	193
3 Tom Seaver*	1973	28	36	36	18	19	10	290	219	74	67	64	251	2.08	23	.206	.252	.313	138	175
4 Johan Santana	2008	29	34	34	3	16	7	234.1	206	74	66	63	206	2.53	23	.232	.286	.362	125	163
5 Tom Seaver*	1969	24	36	35	18	25	7	273.1	202	75	67	82	208	2.21	24	.207	.272	.331	128	165
6 Jerry Koosman	1969	26	32	32	16	17	9	241	187	66	61	68	180	2.28	14	.216	.275	.308	133	160
7 Tom Seaver*	1975	30	36	36	15	22	9	280.1	217	81	74	88	243	2.38	11	.214	.279	.292	133	145
8 Pedro Martinez	2005	33	31	31	4	15	8	217	159	69	68	47	208	2.82	19	.204	.252	.334	143	145
9 Dwight Gooden	1984	19	31	31	7	17	9	218	161	72	63	73	276	2.60	7	.202	.269	.275	141	137
10 Frank Viola	1990	30	35	35	7	20	12	249.2	227	83	74	60	182	2.67	15	.242	.288	.333	125	141
11 Jon Matlack	1974	24	34	34	14	13	15	265.1	221	82	71	76	195	2.41	8	.226	.283	.289	134	149
12 Tom Seaver	1970	25	37	36	19	18	12	290.2	230	103	91	83	283	2.82	21	.214	.272	.328	134	142
13 Al Leiter	1998	32	28	28	4	17	6	193	151	55	53	71	174	2.47	8	.216	.298	.306	135	170
14 Tom Seaver	1976	31	35	34	13	14	11	271	211	83	78	77	235	2.59	14	.213	.272	.303	127	127
15 Jerry Koosman	1973	30	35	35	12	14	15	263	234	93	83	76	156	2.84	18	.242	.299	.348	115	128
16 Jerry Koosman	1976	33	34	32	17	21	10	247.1	205	81	74	66	200	2.69	19	.226	.278	.327	119	122
17 Tom Seaver	1968	23	36	35	14	16	12	277.2	224	73	68	48	205	2.20	15	.222	.261	.320	120	137
18 Jon Matlack	1972	22	34	32	8	15	10	244	215	79	63	71	169	2.32	14	.234	.289	.333	115	144
19 Jerry Koosman	1968	25	35	34	17	19	12	263.2	221	72	61	69	178	2.08	16	.228	.283	.327	110	145
20 Mike Hampton	2000	27	33	33	3	15	10	217.2	194	89	76	99	151	3.14	10	.241	.328	.325	127	142
21 Craig Swan	1978	27	29	28	5	9	6	207.1	164	62	56	58	125	2.43	12	.219	.275	.321	125	143
22 David Cone	1988	25	35	28	8	20	3	231.1	178	67	57	80	213	2.22	10	.213	.283	.293	125	146
23 Rick Reed	1997	32	33	31	2	13	9	208.1	186	76	67	31	113	2.89	19	.239	.272	.368	127	141
24 Al Leiter	2000	34	31	31	2	16	8	208	176	84	74	76	200	3.20	19	.228	.304	.357	126	139
25 Bob Ojeda	1986	28	32	30	7	18	5	217.1	185	72	62	52	148	2.57	15	.230	.278	.330	126	139
26 Bret Saberhagen	1994	30	24	24	4	14	4	177.1	169	58	54	13	143	2.74	13	.254	.271	.389	125	152
27 Dwight Gooden	1986	21	33	33	12	17	6	250	197	92	79	80	200	2.84	17	.215	.278	.321	129	126
28 Sid Fernandez	1985	22	26	26	3	9	9	170.1	108	56	53	80	180	2.80	14	.181	.279	.302	131	125
29 Ron Darling	1986	25	34	34	4	15	6	237	203	84	74	81	184	2.81	21	.234	.300	.354	113	127
30 Al Leiter	2004	38	30	30	0	10	8	173.2	138	65	62	97	117	3.21	16	.218	.332	.354	117	133
31 Ron Darling	1985	24	36	35	4	16	6	248	214	93	80	114	167	2.90	21	.235	.321	.360	103	120
32 Sid Fernandez	1989	26	35	32	6	14	5	219.1	157	73	69	75	198	2.83	21	.198	.271	.334	118	115
33 Tom Seaver	1967	22	35	34	18	16	13	251	224	85	77	78	170	2.76	19	.241	.301	.356	104	122
34 Rick Reed	1998	33	31	31	2	16	11	212.1	208	84	82	29	153	3.48	30	.261	.290	.434	106	121
35 Tom Seaver	1974	29	32	32	12	11	11	236	199	89	84	75	201	3.20	19	.230	.293	.341	117	112
36 Sid Fernandez	1992	29	32	32	5	14	11	214.2	162	67	65	67	193	2.73	12	.210	.273	.328	125	127
37 Tom Seaver	1972	27	35	35	13	21	12	262	215	92	85	77	249	2.92	23	.224	.284	.343	115	115
38 Jerry Koosman	1970	27	30	29	5	12	7	212	189	87	74	71	118	3.14	22	.237	.299	.368	116	128
39 Dwight Gooden	1987	22	25	25	7	15	7	179.2	162	68	64	53	148	3.21	11	.244	.299	.344	120	119
40 Tom Glavine	2004	38	33	33	1	11	14	212.1	204	94	85	70	109	3.60	20	.252	.308	.383	118	119
41 Kevin Appier	2001	33	33	33	1	11	10	206.2	181	89	82	64	172	3.57	22	.237	.306	.390	113	117
42 Jon Matlack	1973	23	34	34	14	14	16	242	210	93	86	99	205	3.20	16	.236	.312	.331	115	114
43 Jon Matlack	1976	26	35	35	16	17	10	262	236	94	86	57	153	2.95	18	.242	.284	.342	113	112
44 Craig Swan	1979	28	35	35	10	14	13	251.1	241	102	92	57	145	3.29	20	.255	.296	.391	105	110
45 Tom Glavine	2005	39	33	33	2	13	13	211.1	227	88	83	61	105	3.53	12	.279	.330	.388	107	116
46 Al Leiter	2001	35	29	29	0	11	11	187.1	178	81	69	46	142	3.31	18	.252	.299	.393	115	126
47 Dwight Gooden	1993	28	29	29	7	12	15	208.2	188	89	80	61	149	3.45	16	.242	.302	.357	119	117
48 Mike Pelfrey	2008	24	32	32	2	13	11	200.2	209	86	83	64	110	3.72	12	.276	.340	.393	101	111
49 Glendon Rusch	2000	25	31	30	2	11	11	190.2	196	91	85	44	157	4.01	18	.267	.311	.399	115	111
50 Steve Trachsel	2002	31	30	30	1	11	11	173.2	170	80	65	69	105	3.37	16	.258	.327	.379	108	118

* denotes Cy Young Award winner. League leaders in orange.