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When the Phillies lost for 3 weeks

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By Rich Westcott

Phillies fans of a certain age may remember this date's dubious distinction: It's the 50th anniversary of the end of a 23-game losing streak.

That's right: The Phillies once lost 23 games in a row. Although that mark has occasionally been threatened by other teams - including the Baltimore Orioles, who lost 21 straight in 1988 - it still represents a modern major-league record.

Today, of course, the Phillies have the best record in baseball. And the current cast of wildly popular all-stars could be on their way to becoming the best team in franchise history. This is certainly the greatest era in the franchise's 129 years.

So it's hard today to imagine the team achieving anything so inglorious as the longest losing streak in post-1900 baseball.

But it did. Starting on July 29, 1961, when the San Francisco Giants defeated them, 4-3, the Phillies lost every game they played for three weeks.

Six of the losses were at Connie Mack Stadium, while 17 were on the road. Eleven were by two runs or fewer; the biggest were to the Pittsburgh Pirates, 10-2 and 13-4. They played 11 innings against the Milwaukee Braves before losing, 7-6.

Chris Short and Jim Owens were the losing pitchers four times each. Art Mahaffey, John Buzhardt, Frank Sullivan, and Don Ferrarese lost three apiece. Even the legendary Robin Roberts, then in his final year with the Phillies, lost one.

"It was awful," Mahaffey recalled recently. "We were all just crushed. Can you imagine losing 23 games in a row? That's just unbelievable. We played hard every time out, but we just couldn't win."

Gene Mauch was then in his second year as the Phillies' manager, on his way to becoming the winningest (and losingest) manager in Phils history (for now). The Little General had some good position players, including Johnny Callison, Tony Taylor, Tony Gonzalez, Don Demeter, and Ruben Amaro Sr. But the squad also included long-forgotten names - such as Pancho Herrera, Choo-Choo Coleman, and the Bahamas native Tony Curry - who ranged from mediocre to downright bad.

The streak finally ended on Aug. 20, in the second game of a doubleheader in Milwaukee. Buzhardt, who won only six games all season - including the last victory before the streak began - ended it with a 7-4 win over the Braves at County Stadium. He also snapped a 10-game Braves winning streak.

The Phillies flew home from Milwaukee that night. Thousands of fans flocked to the airport, either to boost the team's confidence or convey uncomplimentary sentiments. As the plane taxied to the terminal, Sullivan peered out a window, saw the huge crowd, and offered some advice to his teammates: "Leave the plane in single file so they can't get us all with one burst."

Amazingly, the Phillies followed up the losing streak with four wins in a row. In one, a 6-0 victory over the Chicago Cubs just two days after the streak ended, Mahaffey hurled a one-hit shutout.

The team won 17 of its last 37, but it finished the season with an unsightly record of 47-107 - 46 games out of first place. The Phils haven't lost 100 or more games in a season since.

"We were so bad," Taylor recalled. "It seemed like in every game, we were just waiting to lose."

From start to finish, it was not a season to be remembered.

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