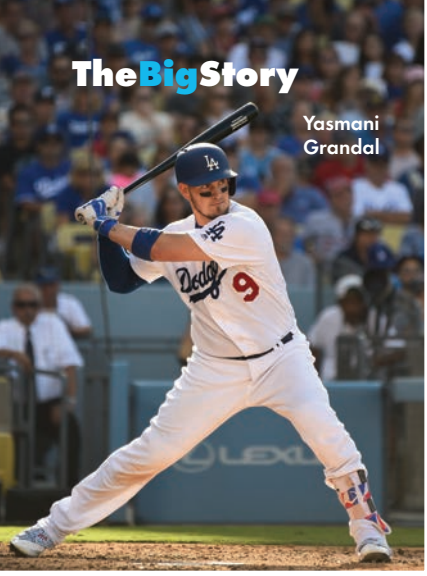


TheBigStory

Yasmani Grandal



Howie Kendrick



Adrián González



Chase Utley



Corey Seager



Kenley Jansen



Joc Pederson



Justin Turner



Joe Blanton

Seemingly lost without Clayton Kershaw, the 2016 Dodgers found themselves

BY JON WEISMAN

Maybe in that last week of June, when the Dodgers' world turned upside down, maybe you were ready to surrender.

Maybe you felt the 2016 season slipping away on June 26, a gloomy, humid Sunday in Pittsburgh, when not even Clayton Kershaw — in the most unreal season of an otherworldly career — could stop the Dodgers from falling eight games behind the San Francisco Giants in the National League West.

Maybe your spirits sunk further the next day, when Pittsburgh raised a big bad '4' up the scoreboard mast in the first inning against the Dodgers, who were suddenly staring a four-game sweep by the Pirates in the eye-patched face.

Maybe the day after that, when news broke that Kershaw would be leaving the Dodgers to have team doctors examine his lower back, was the straw that broke yours.

Before that week began, the Dodgers were 14-1 in games Kershaw started, and 27-34 in games that he didn't. The idea of a Kershaw-less team of Dodgers rallying to save the season was a hard, hard sell.



Kenta Maeda

MAN DOWN, RISE UP



Clayton
Kershaw

But quietly, calmly, the Dodgers themselves were already buying in.

They came back from that 4-0 deficit on June 27 to defeat Pittsburgh, avast the sweep and shave the first game off the Giants' divisional lead. Then, when they landed on the next stop of their road trip in Milwaukee with the knowledge that they would be moving forward without their leader — for how long, they had no idea — they truly began the process of turning their season around.

"I think that when we were in Milwaukee, and we knew it was going to be a little bit of an extended time without Clayton, you could just hear the chatter and see the demeanor, that no one was feeling sorry for themselves," Dodger manager Dave Roberts said. "Even the first day after, there weren't guys hanging their heads.

"And we went out and won a ballgame."

That 6-5 victory over the Brewers drew the Dodgers another game closer to San Francisco. In two days, 25 percent of their deficit was gone. And no, it wouldn't go quite so smoothly after that. On June 29, the Dodgers suffered through a 7-0 loss, and then placed Kershaw on the disabled list with a herniated disk June 30.

It's not as if Kershaw's injury was an isolated case, to say the least. In the first three quarters of the season, the Dodgers placed 26 players on the disabled list, a National League record.

But from the day after Kershaw last pitched in Pittsburgh, the Dodgers would win 23 of their next 36 games, catching the Giants atop the NL West on August 9 and setting the stage for a down-to-the-wire finish.

Go back in time to tell any Dodger fan in that last week of June that the Dodgers would be in first place by August, and they might scream. They might dance. They might jump for joy.

Or maybe they'd just shake their heads and ask, "How?"

'JUST US' LEAGUE

Several members of the Dodgers had been through this sort of thing before. The 2013 and 2014 teams each erased deficits of 9½ games or more in the NL West to win the division.

But those teams had Kershaw leading the way. So did the 2015 Dodgers, who took over first place in mid-April and never let go.

Aside from Kershaw — who went on the disabled list with a 1.79 ERA and only nine walks in 16 starts this year, averaging more than seven innings per outing — nearly every Dodger underperformed for stretches in the first three months of the 2016 season. "The Boys of Bummer," you might say.

But before people realized it, the winds were already shifting in the Dodgers' favor.

The Big Story



Corey Seager

The bullpen sent perhaps the most surprising cool breeze. The black sheep of recent Dodger teams, Dodger relievers struggled again as the 2016 season began. But rather than buckling under an increased workload — Kershaw was the only Dodger pitcher averaging more than 5 2/3 innings per start — the bullpen thrived.

In July, the first full month without the team's ace, Dodger relievers threw 106 1/3

innings in 24 games — an average of about 4 1/3 per game — with a 1.03 WHIP, 2.96 ERA and 9.7 strikeouts per nine innings.

The workload was potentially overwhelming, but the Dodgers would find safety in numbers, using 13 different relievers after the All-Star break, with usually eight (and occasionally nine) on the active roster at a given time.

In the meantime, one by one, Dodger position players who had started the season slowly on offense began to hit ... and hit ... and hit. The team's OPS (on-base percentage plus slugging percentage) rose for five consecutive months, from as low as .686 in April to .829 in August (through August 22).

"People have used the word 'resiliency' a lot," Roberts said. "I think that it applies to our group. Our guys started off slow but stuck together. Now you're seeing consistent at-bats throughout the lineup."

The power surged, sudden and strong. Justin Turner hit 20 home runs in 71 team games from June 1 through August 22. Yasmani Grandal hit 17 in the same period. Adrián González and Joc Pederson each hit 10.

Above all, there was Corey Seager, transcendent in ways no one anticipated — which is saying something, since the 22-year-old was the consensus No. 1 prospect in baseball and a Rookie of the Year candidate when the season began.

BLUE OPS

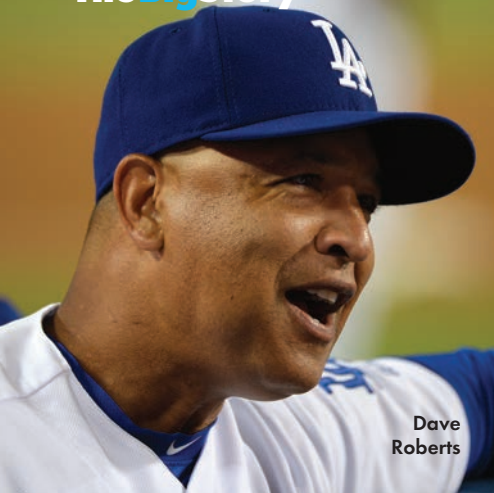
Dodgers' month-by-month on-base percentage plus slugging percentage

Player	April	May	June	July	August*
Adrián González	.800	.790	.614	.864	1.134
Yasmani Grandal	.903	.464	.639	1.130	1.094
Howie Kendrick	.333	.723	.672	.962	.883
Joc Pederson	.858	.761	.804	.906	.919
Corey Seager	.707	.892	1.085	.891	1.013
Justin Turner	.654	.699	.922	.979	.995
Chase Utley	.815	.778	.571	.711	.799
Team	.686	.690	.710	.800	.829

* through August 22



JILL WEISLEDER



With a .375 on-base percentage and .540 slugging percentage by the final week of August, Seager had basically locked up the NL Rookie of the Year Award — a unanimous vote seemed more likely than not.

Seager also had tied an 86-year-old Dodger record for homers by a shortstop with 22, and placed himself among the top candidates for NL Most Valuable Player. According to Fangraphs, only the Cubs' Kris Bryant had higher wins above replacement than Seager as the season passed the final quarter pole.

If the Giants hadn't hit a major skid after the All-Star Break, winning only 11 of their first 34 games (the worst record in the Majors during that time), the Dodgers would still have been clawing their way toward the top. Should San Francisco rebound, the Dodgers might have to scratch and scrape again.

One thing was clear, however. The Dodgers were not a one-man show, and they certainly weren't a no-man-show.

L.A. CONFIDENCE, Y'ALL

We're left with one unsolved mystery, one chicken-and-egg question surrounding the 2016 Dodgers.

Were they destined to improve as the

season progressed, even without Kershaw's injury?

Or did it take his absence to bring out their presence?

There's no way for Roberts to answer, though he gamely tried.

"I would hope that it was going to come out all along," he said. "But I do know that when your best player goes down, there was a concerted effort for us to do a little bit more each individually. So it's hard to say, but the way we have responded with Clayton being down is a testament to our guys."

There wasn't any grandiose clubhouse summit, no "Win one for the Kershopper" speech from Roberts. The Dodgers' comeback was the product of seeds that were planted in the morning glow of Spring Training that (whether or not that last week of June was the fuel) flowered at the right moment.

"I think it's just something at that point in time, where we were at in the season, I felt that we were trending in the right direction as a team," Roberts said.

"We have a lot of conversations, mostly individually but (also with) certain groups or as a team, about what it takes to win and be better every day, and I thought that the guys were understanding what me and the coaches were trying to kind of talk about on a daily basis. And so I just trusted that and felt that I didn't need to call a team meeting to state the obvious."

If the Dodgers prevail for a playoff spot, they will play in their fourth consecutive postseason and their 10th since they hoisted the 1988 World Series trophy. Even with a healthy Kershaw, they would be underdogs to the team that won its last World Series six decades before that trophy was first designed: the Chicago Cubs.

But maybe, just maybe, the Dodgers have shown that it's OK to believe. It's good to believe. Because with this team, you never know.