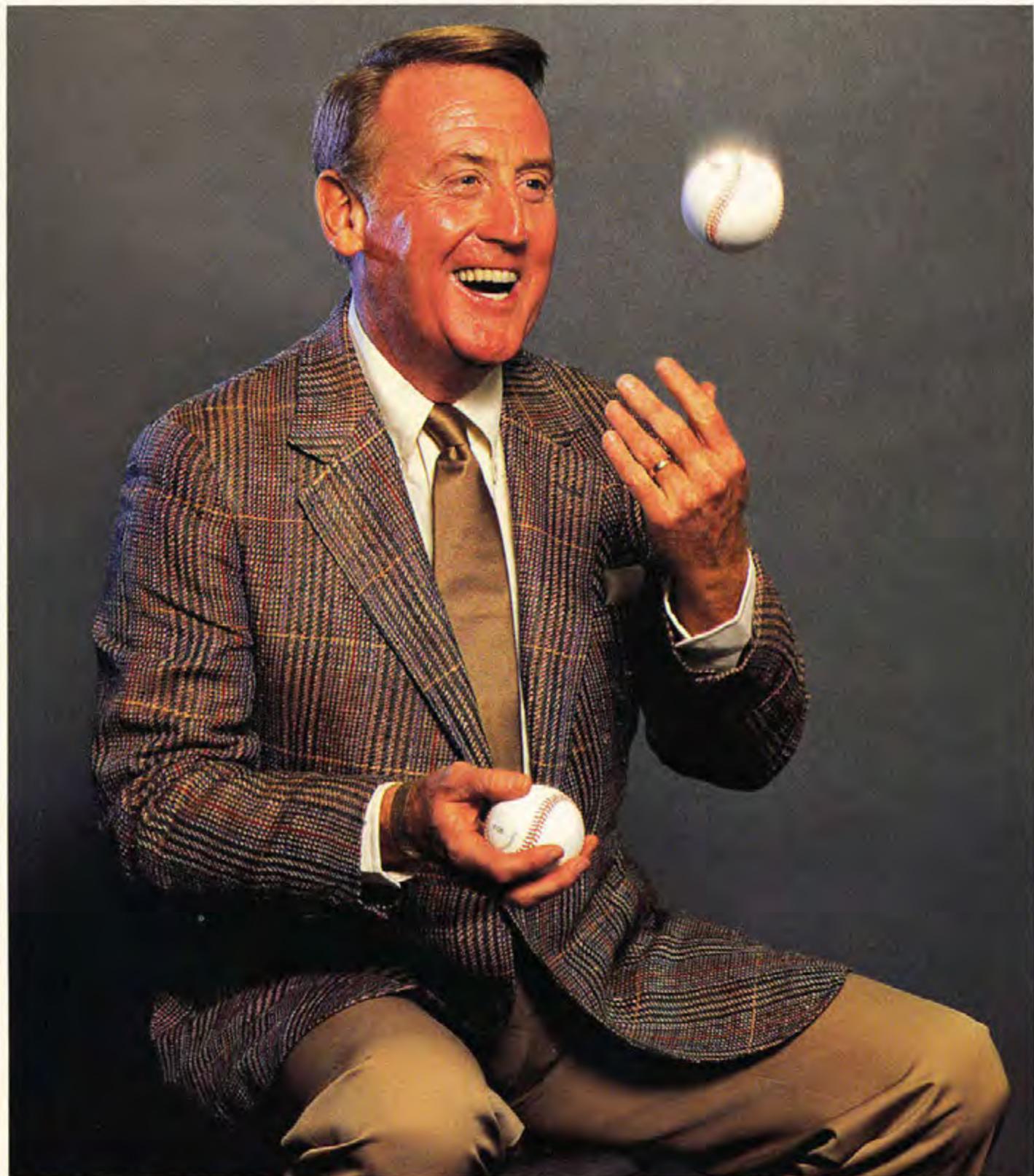


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*Vin Extraordinaire: Scully's World Series Primer*

# How to Watch a Baseball Game

Vin Scully's Primer for Neophytes and Connoisseurs

BY HENRY WEINSTEIN



**H**e's been called "The Bard of the Base Paths." "The Velvet Voice of the Dodgers." "The Babe Ruth of Sportscasting."

He is Vincent Edward Scully, who for 35 years has been captivating millions of baseball fans around the country—be they rookies, seasoned observers or outright addicts—with his descriptions of the national pastime.

Since he started as an assistant to Red Barber, one of baseball's legendary broadcasters, at Brooklyn's Ebbets Field in 1950, Scully has announced thousands of games, including 13 no-hitters, two perfect games, a dozen World Series and the breaking of Babe Ruth's career home run record by Henry Aaron.

Vin Scully became the chief broadcaster for the Dodgers in the mid-'50s when Barber left the team after a contract dispute. But he really hit his stride after the team moved to Los Angeles in 1958.

Soon, his highly descriptive, fact-packed radio accounts of Dodger games not only won wide praise but also were deemed responsible for the creation of a new subspecies of humanity—the transistorized fan. Such people are so into baseball that they hold small radios to their ears and listen to a Dodger game wherever they are, be it a bus stop, a Bar Mitzvah or even the ballpark itself.

In 1976, Scully was voted "the most memorable Dodger personality of the century" in a poll of Southern

California fans. Then in 1982, he became one of six broadcasters enshrined in the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, N.Y. His fame has grown considerably since then, in part because he now handles baseball's "Game of the Week" for NBC as well as Dodger games. He's a surprisingly well-known public figure. In hotel lobbies, in airport waiting rooms, boarding the Dodger bus on the way to a game, getting out of the bus on arrival at the ballpark or jumping into a cab when leaving the stadium, Scully is besieged by well-wishers, beseeched by autograph seekers.

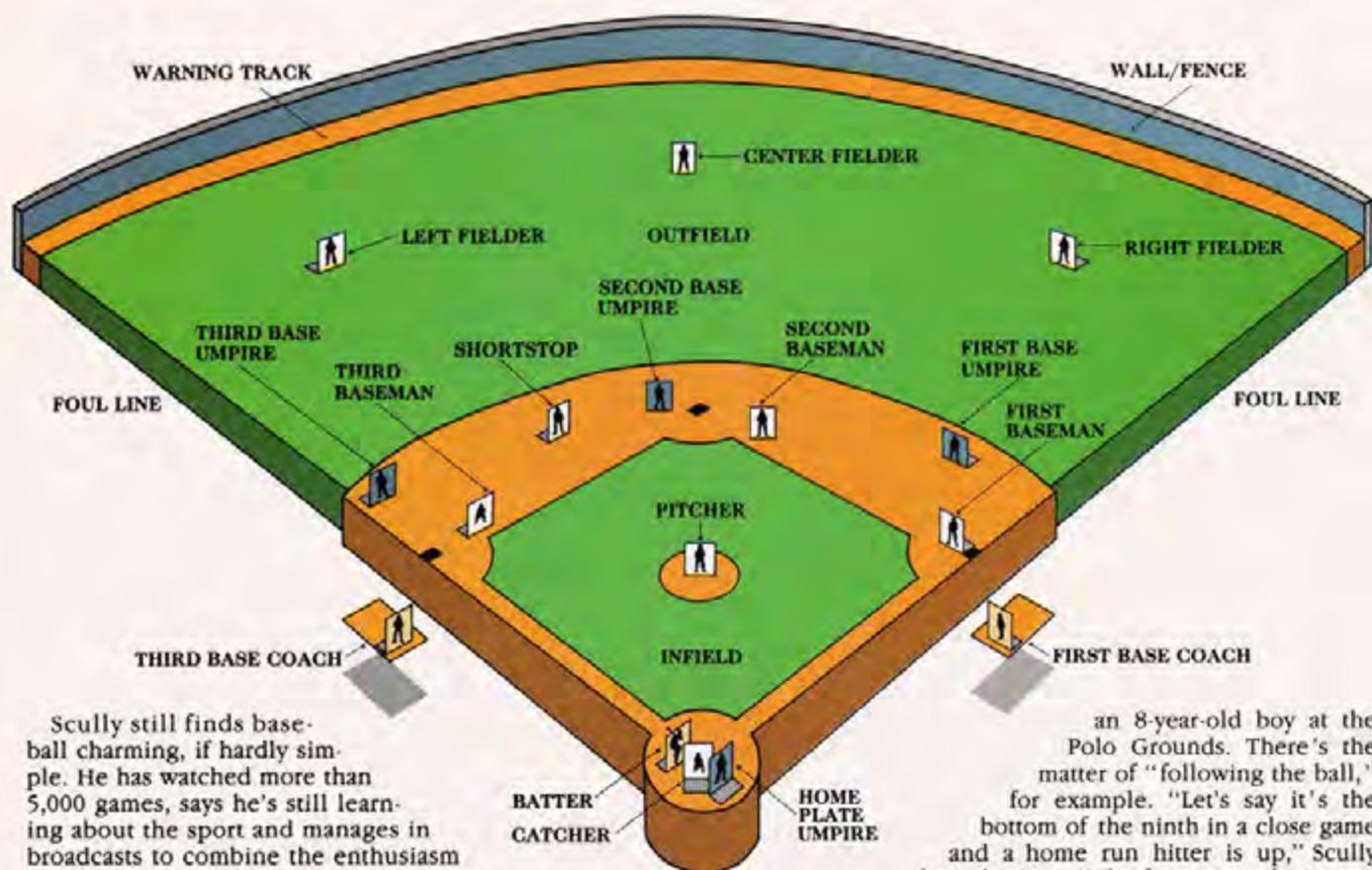
Fifty years ago, Scully was the autograph hound. That's when his romance with baseball began. At the time, he was an 8-year-old boy rooting for the Dodgers' archrivals, the New York Giants, the team nearest his family's apartment. Scully collected returnable soda pop bottles to raise the 55 cents he needed for admission to the bleachers of the Giants' home field, the cavernous Polo Grounds, a stadium that is no longer.

But in the mid-1930s, sitting 483 feet from home plate, in seats no batted ball had ever reached, Scully, "worshipping from afar," noticed something curious. "I would see the batter hit the ball. I would see the ball in the air. I would see the ball leave the infield. . . . Then it's on the way to the outfield, then I hear the crack of the bat."

After that happened several times, Scully grew more puzzled and turned to a man in the bleachers and asked him to explain. "He gave me a lesson in elementary physics, that light travels at a speed considerably faster than sound. It's nothing, but to me it was a big thrill. I was charmed."

*Henry Weinstein, a staff writer who specializes in labor relations, has been listening to Scully since 1958.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARLENE WALLACE



## The Diamond

Scully still finds baseball charming, if hardly simple. He has watched more than 5,000 games, says he's still learning about the sport and manages in broadcasts to combine the enthusiasm of a boy with the wisdom of his years. Scully said he still gets goose bumps watching a great pitching duel, a dazzling double play, a home run at a climactic moment. Now he sits much closer to the action, and he agreed on the eve of the World Series to share some of his insights into how to watch a baseball game. His suggestions ranged from the specific to the cosmic.

### The Essential Nature of the Experience

"You can't compare sports," Scully begins. "You can't compare baseball, for instance, with basketball or football. Basically, basketball is like playing 21: two cards. Hit me, Bingo. You made it or you didn't. Constant action. Action. Action. Turnover. A lot of people like 21. Other people like gin rummy; it takes some more thinking. Then there's that group that loves chess."

With baseball, Scully says, it could simply be a group of fans going to the park to relax and have a good time "and then somebody hits one over the fence and it's 21. If you're a gin rummy player, baseball might be gin rummy. But if you're really into it and you're looking to see 'Are they holding the runner on?; this might be a hit-and-run play,' then suddenly it's chess. It's like beauty: It's in the eye of the beholder."

Scully's philosophy is that baseball should be savored before being dissected—and there's a hint of regret that he can no longer watch the game as he did when he was

an 8-year-old boy at the Polo Grounds. There's the matter of "following the ball," for example. "Let's say it's the bottom of the ninth in a close game and a home run hitter is up," Scully hypothesizes. "The fan wants a home run badly. The fellow hits a fly ball, just an ordinary fly ball, and as soon as he hits that fly ball the crowd goes bananas because they think that they're going to see what they want and it's just a fly ball. If I broadcast that way, I'd drive people crazy.

A broadcaster can only afford to follow the ball when it's on the ground or when it's a low line drive. Whenever a fly ball is hit, the first person I have to look at is the outfielder. He tells me whether it's just an ordinary fly ball or whether it's a fly ball that just has a chance. And sometimes he tells me immediately it's a home run."

So does he advise a fan to avoid following a fly ball? Absolutely not. "It would be impossible. The fan is seeing things with his heart, and why not? That's fine. That's what the roar of the crowd is all about anyway. But my responsibility is to see things with my eyes."

Still, most of the ways that Scully watches a ballgame are also accessible to the fan.

### Preliminary Observations

The first thing Scully does when entering a ballpark is precisely what the players do: He looks at the outfield flags to see how much wind there is and which way it's blowing. Wind is rarely the factor in a game at Dodger Stadium or Anaheim Stadium that it can be in a number of other parks, but the breeze can be an early indication of whether it's going to be a / *Continued on Page 54*

# Scully's Primer

*Continued from Page 19* / good day for hitters (wind blowing out) or a good day for pitchers (wind blowing in). He also considers atmospheric conditions.

"If it's a very hot afternoon, a ball will have a tendency to travel a long distance, compared to a cool evening. In the old days they used to talk about the home team, if they were playing a home run-hitting team they would put the baseballs in the icebox to keep them cold so then they wouldn't travel as far during the game." He has had no indication that this is still happening, but it's an example of some of the hidden strategy at play in baseball.

## Opening Moves

As the game begins, Scully examines the field alignment. "Let's say you have no idea who's playing. Let's say the leadoff man (first hitter) is a left-handed batter. The first thing I do with a left-handed batter is see where the third baseman is. Is the third baseman even with the (third base) bag, or is he way in on the grass? . . . If the third baseman is playing in on the grass, the word in the league is that this fellow likes to bunt. So right away you've learned something: You've learned that this team thinks this fellow might bunt anytime and they've set up for him."

The same type of diagnosis applies to right-handed batters. In one late-August game in New York, the Dodgers stacked their entire infield toward the left side of the field when Met catcher Gary Carter, a right-handed pull hitter (one who frequently hits the ball to the left side of the field) came to bat. Third baseman Enos Cabell was almost in foul territory; shortstop Mariano Duncan was playing deep "in the hole" toward third base, and second baseman Steve Sax was stationed behind the second base bag. The Dodgers conceded virtually the entire right side of the infield to Carter. And their outfielders were in a similar configuration. "If you knew nothing about what kind of hitter Carter was, even if you just landed from Mars and had never seen a baseball game before, you'd have a real good idea what the Dodgers were expecting."

Watching the fielders move around provides more clues, Scully says. "The fielders will tell you basi-

cally what kind of hitter the hitter is and how they plan to pitch him. If you know you've got a very powerful hitter, and yet you see they're shading him the other way (away from his power), that tells you they're going to try to keep the ball away from him; they're not going to let him try to pull the ball."

## At the Plate

The initial confrontations between a pitcher and one of the power hitters—generally the third, fourth, fifth and sixth hitters on a team—may give an indication of how good the pitcher is. There's a natural tendency to try to keep the ball away from a hitter, particularly a power hitter, so that it's more difficult for the batter to get a fat piece of the ball with his bat.

"Let's say you have a power hitter up there. You're going to find out what kind of pitcher you have out there. You have to come inside. I don't care if he's the greatest home run hitter—Babe Ruth, Henry Aaron—sooner or later you've got to come inside, because if you keep pitching away, they'll kill you the other way," because the batter will adjust his stance to compensate for the type of pitches he's being thrown.

"If a guy can come inside to a real power hitter and throw strikes, that tells you he's got a pretty good fastball plus the guts, the confidence to challenge a hitter," Scully says. "In other words, don't give in to him; don't be afraid that if I don't throw hard enough he'll hit it on top of the roof. You can't play in the big leagues that way."

Perhaps just as important is knowing in advance what style of pitcher is working in a particular game. With a sinkerball pitcher such as Orel Hershiser of the Dodgers, whose goal is to keep the ball low, "if he's really sharp, you will see a lot of ground balls. If you see a lot of fly balls, you know there's something wrong with the pitcher."

With a classic fastball pitcher, such as the Mets' Dwight Gooden, it's not surprising to see hitters simply swinging and missing or perhaps hitting foul balls straight back or away from their strength. "But if they're swinging and pulling it foul, I'm starting to think that either his location is not right or his velocity is not what it normally is."

One key with all pitchers, though, Scully says, is control. "The really good pitcher, when you keep watching him—that first pitch is invariably a strike, or at least most of the time. He's in charge. If you see a pitcher 'pitching backward,' as they say—if every time you look, it's two balls and no strikes or three balls and one strike, you know he's laboring, you know there's a problem."

A lot of fans try to tell what type of pitch is being thrown—fastball, curve, knuckleball. But it's simply not always possible to be sure, even from Scully's excellent vantage point in the press box. "A lot of times I'll say breaking ball because I just cannot be sure whether it was a curveball or a slider (a variation of the curve which breaks away sharply just before it gets to the batter)."

## Keep an Eye on the Catcher

Because the catcher is so much at the center of the game and gets play started by signaling to the pitcher what kind of pitch he wants, Scully recommends watching that player periodically. "Most of the time the catcher will set up where he wants the ball, sometimes inside, sometimes on the outside. So, there's another cat-and-mouse game—a lot of the hitters would like to peek just before the pitch. If they can see the catcher sitting on the outside part of the plate, the hitter is now thinking outside part of the plate. But good catchers—as they give the sign and as they're shifting, they're looking at the hitter to see if he's peeking. And if you get a hitter who's a peeker, they'll drive him crazy. They'll give the indication to the pitcher 'I want a fastball inside' and they'll sit outside. That's a horrifying experience, because if the hitter thinks it'll be outside and he leans outside, and here comes the pitch inside. . . ." At best, the hitter must alter his swing at the last moment to compensate for the pitch coming where he doesn't expect it; at worst, he'll be forced to duck to avoid being hit.

The cat-and-mouse game between the hitter and the catcher can be carried quite far, Scully says. Once in a while, if a catcher wants to trick a batter into thinking an inside pitch is coming, the last thing he'll do as he's getting in a crouch is to pound his glove, reasonably near the hitter's ear. "That sounds inside. But then the catcher / *Continued*

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## Scully's Primer

*Continued* / will sit on the outside part of the plate. So there are wonderful games going on all the time besides players just throwing, hitting and catching the ball. You can be anywhere in the ballpark and watch these things."

The fan can also look into the dugouts to see if the manager or a coach is giving any signals to the fielders on where they ought to be positioning themselves. "For example, if (Atlanta Braves slugger) Dale Murphy is hitting and the first pitch is ball one, I'll look in the dugout and then I'll look back out. You'll see a coach moving an outfielder, an infielder; it might just be a couple of steps.

"Then if the ball is hit, you have tremendous satisfaction in one of two ways. He'll hit it where they moved the fielder, or they'll move a guy and he'll hit the ball where the fielder had been and it's a base hit. Now you can understand the frustration either of the bench or the pitcher because supposedly they set the defense up according to the way the pitcher wants to pitch the hitter. Then you would infer that the pitcher, not the bench, made a mistake. And that's the fun of this game. If you're watching these things, you can see it all unfold."

### Subtleties

Still, it's virtually impossible from even the best seats or the press box to pick out some details that can be critical in how a game is played. For example, teams with mediocre infielders often let the grass grow long on their home field to slow down ground balls, making them easier to handle. A hitter may have changed his stance to get out of a slump. For example, when Pedro Guerrero suddenly went on a hot streak in June, he told Scully he had lowered his hands a bit at the plate. "It was a matter of inches. Nobody could see that."

On the other hand, a small but critical detail might be spotted by an observant fan, even one watching a game 3,000 miles away on television. Earlier this summer, Met first baseman Keith Hernandez, normally an excellent hitter, was mired in a slump. "He was really struggling. He took extra batting practice. He tried this; he tried that. Nothing was working." Then, one day, he got a call from his father, a San Francisco

firefighter, who watches many of Hernandez's games on television.

According to Scully, Hernandez's father said: "I don't see the 1 anymore." Keith replied: "What do you mean?" His father said that watching the center-field camera shot of Keith batting, he'd normally see part of the 1 as well as the 7 on the back of his uniform (number 17), but that he didn't see the 1 anymore. Keith immediately realized he wasn't closing up enough (had his front foot too far away from the plate). As soon as he changed—base hit."

Although much of baseball is a game of individual battles, particularly the hitter against the pitcher, it is also a team sport. A well-executed cutoff play is a prime example of good baseball teamwork in action and can be a joy to watch. For example, in a late-August game, with Gary Carter on first base, Darryl Strawberry of the Mets hit the ball sharply into left-center field. Dodger left fielder Guerrero fielded the ball, moving to his left, made a full turn and threw the ball toward the cutoff man, shortstop Duncan. It was Duncan's role, as cutoff man, to take Guerrero's throw and decide instantly whether there was a chance to get Carter with a relay throw to third base or whether there was another play to be made.

In this instance, Duncan caught the ball, whirled and threw to second baseman Sax, who tagged out Strawberry, who was trying for a double. "Strawberry had every reason to think he had a double, because in that situation Guerrero typically would throw to third, trying for the lead runner." But Guerrero had decided, because of where the ball had been hit, that there was little chance to get Carter. So the Dodgers got Strawberry out and saved themselves at least one run.

"The mark of a good player is that he anticipates, and then when it happens, he's ready to do what he's anticipated," Scully says. "This was a wonderful play because there was anticipation, a great decision and great execution." Similar situations arise in virtually every game.

Sometimes, you can even glean something about the game by watching a player who's not directly involved in the action. "Let's say it's a base hit into left-center field with a runner on first. Is the center fielder hustling over to back up the left fielder? Where is the pitcher? Is the pitcher standing on the mound like a spectator, or is the pitcher racing to cover behind third in case of a bad throw?" / *Continued on Page 62*



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**Several wild or "species" tulips** have been very successfully grown in our area—*Tulipa clusiana*, *T. saxatilis* and *T. sylvestris*. All three can now be planted without pre-chilling. *Tulipa clusiana* have been in my garden for more than 30 years; the bed has spread six or seven feet on either side of the old row. This tulip, commonly called the candlestick or lady tulip, has alternating red and white petals and a dark center blotch. Being a wild tulip, it is not as large as the hybrids—only one foot tall, with a slender flower that is star-shaped when it's wide open. Each subsequent year, many more of these plants—with their narrow, red-edged leaves—emerge on their own and bloom. They don't bloom as a sol-

id mass but rather look like wildflowers blooming here and there because it takes about three years for a bulb to build up the strength to flower a second time. This tulip apparently does equally well in inland valleys and at the beach. I pamper mine by giving the plants extra water during the growing season, to compensate for the sandy soil. □



ILLUSTRATION BY GWEN ROBINSON

## Scully's Primer

*Continued from Page 56* / Those moves would indicate if a team has schooled its players in the fundamentals that can make the difference between winning and losing. And for Scully, checking on those seemingly peripheral but often essential moves is a key part of what he loves about baseball: "That's the fun of it, the tapestry of the game—all the shadings and the colors, rather than just the impact of something's that hung on the wall."

(For more of the tapestry, Scully suggests a book or two to get the flavor of the baseball world. He recommends "almost anything" by Roger Angell, author of "The Summer Game," who periodically writes about the game for *The New Yorker*; "The Glory of Their Times" by Lawrence S. Ritter, reminiscences of the

early days of baseball; Roger Kahn's "The Boys of Summer," a memoir of the 1950s-era Dodgers, and "Bang the Drum Slowly," a novel about an ill-fated catcher, by Mark Harris.)

## When It's Safe to Get Up and Go for a Beer

Although baseball is played at a leisurely pace that's found in no other competitive team sport, Scully says there are only a few occasions when it's opportune to leave your seat and get a hot dog and a beer—and even those moments don't occur in every game. "The only time I would make any severe quick movements is when the manager is bringing in a new pitcher from the bullpen. You've got the time for his walk in from the bullpen and his eight warm-up pitches. A pitching change will take a minute and a half to two minutes."

Other than that, there's no safe time to get away. One night in New York, for example, Met pitcher Ed

Lynch was rolling along, pitching a shutout for five innings. "You might say: 'I'll run out and get a hot dog.'" All of a sudden the Dodgers got five straight hits, scored four runs; you would have missed the turning point of the contest. "That's the great thing about this game. You don't take anything for granted, and you don't turn your back on anything either."

Even so, Scully says, there are no hard-and-fast rules on how to watch a game. And he balks at the idea that there might be an essential part of the game that fans commonly miss. After all, baseball games are for relaxing and having a good time, and he doesn't want to tamper with that pleasure.

"It shouldn't be work. You're going there to have fun. The last thing I would want to convey to any fan (with these comments) is: 'I want you to go to the ballpark and do *this* . . . Baloney! I don't want to sound like some stern taskmaster. Holler and have a ball.'" □