

JOHN McNAMARA'S BITTER LEGACY

He presided over the biggest meltdown in Red Sox history

By **Tim Casey**
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John McNamara spent most of his adult life in professional baseball. Retired and living with his wife in Tennessee, the 72-year-old Sacramento native will watch this year's World Series without any rooting interest, even though he's forever linked to the Boston Red Sox's miserable history.



John McNamara

Eighteen years ago, McNamara managed the Red Sox to within one strike of the franchise's first World Series title since 1918. For

the first time since, the Red Sox are back, trying to end their 86-year championship drought.

To this day, that Series loss overshadows everything else in McNamara's, 19-year managerial career and remains a sensitive subject.

"Hell, yeah, that's what people remember about me," McNamara said Friday in a brief telephone interview. "That's all that gets printed is that '86 World Series."

Is McNamara cheering for Boston over the St. Louis Cardinals?

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JOHN F. McNAMARA '50

McNamara: Loss in '86 not a popular topic

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"No," he said. "I don't have close relationships with the Red Sox anymore. I don't know the players or the guys running the place."

Still, the Red Sox will be reminded of 1986 repeatedly this week. Fresh from their first post-season series victory over the New York Yankees, the Red Sox hope to avoid a repeat of the infamous 1986 collapse.

Jimmy McNamara, John's older brother who lives in Sacramento, attended Games 3 through 5 of the 1986 World Series at Fenway Park with his son, Tom. For them, the trip harbors good memories.

After winning the first two games against the favored New York Mets at Shea Stadium, the Red Sox lost the next two before rebounding for a 4-2 Game 5 victory.

Outside Fenway Park, a raucous celebration began.

"Those people back there, boy, they live and die with baseball," Jimmy McNamara said. "They were astounded they might win a World Series. A lot of time had

elapsed since 1918. They were just in seventh heaven. It was a big, giant party. You'd think it was New Year's Eve."

The next day, Jimmy and Tom McNamara flew back to Sacramento, in time to host a Game 6 gathering for about 15 friends and relatives. Frank, the youngest of the three McNamara brothers who had been unable to attend the games in Boston because of work commitments, sat near Jimmy.

As kids in the 1940s, growing up on 24th and F streets, Frank, Jimmy and John McNamara loved baseball and closely followed the Solons, then Sacramento's Pacific Coast League team. All three went on to star at Christian Brothers.

Thirty-six years after graduating from CBS, John McNamara was about to reach the sport's pinnacle.

With the Red Sox ahead 5-3 with two outs and the bases empty in the 10th inning, Frank and Jimmy McNamara and others clutched champagne bottles.

"My nephew had already popped the first one," Jimmy McNamara recalled.

And then came the Mets' improbable comeback.

Red Sox reliever Calvin Schiraldi, who had recorded the first two outs, allowed two hits. Schiraldi then had two strikes on Ray Knight, but Knight drove in a run.

Bob Stanley replaced Schiraldi and threw a wild pitch, tying the score. Stanley then induced a grounder from Mookie Wilson, but the ball dribbled through first baseman Bill Buckner's legs. Knight sprinted home for the final 6-5 margin.

Some 3,000 miles away, the McNamara party grew silent.

"I'll never forget that," Jimmy McNamara said. "It was like a wake. God, we were sick. God, it was horrible."

Two days later, the Red Sox blew an early 3-0 lead and fell 8-5 in Game 7. For his work in helping the Red Sox improve from a fifth-place finish in 1985 to an American League pennant a year later, McNamara received the A.L.'s Manager of the Year award, yet he never regained much popularity in New England.

Midway through the 1988 sea-

son, the Red Sox fired McNamara. He finished his career as the then-California Angels' interim manager for the final 28 games of the 1996 season.

As a player, McNamara never made the majors. But in nearly two decades managing in six organizations, he won more than 1,000 games. Unlike most fans and critics, he views 1986 in a different light.

"Anytime you go into that profession, the object is to get to the World Series," McNamara said Friday before cutting the phone call short. "There's not a hell of a lot of people who have played or coached that have even gotten to the World Series. That was an accomplishment in itself."

Reached Saturday, McNamara declined to elaborate on the 1986 World Series.

"I don't walk to talk about that, period," he said. "Amen."

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