

WINNERS

They Might Be Giants

When a "600-pound gopher" hit the park

Duffy Jennings

Sunday, October 20, 2002

Not that long ago, almost anyone around here would have given you huge odds that the Big One would rip through the Bay Area long before the Giants made it to baseball's Fall Classic again.

Now, with another San Francisco World Series dominating the talk shows, and Oct. 17 just past, it all seems a bit too spooky.

Not to suggest that a cataclysmic event may be lurking beneath another October baseball celebration around here. But it does make you think.

It takes me back to 1989, when the Giants were giddy with the celebration of reaching their first World Series since 1962. And the A's had dominated the American League to earn their place in the Fall Classic. Bay Area baseball fans were beside themselves.

It absolutely killed the Giants organization to split the nation's attention with their rivals across the bay. I know because I worked for the Giants. It just wasn't fair. Oakland had been to the post-season dance several times, and there certainly was no love lost between the two teams' front offices. Now this. And the A's only twisted the knife by running the Giants out of Oakland in the first two games of the series.

Game Three, though, was another matter. It was to be the Giants' day of revenge. There was something in the air, you could tell. But it wasn't what anyone expected.

When the earth shuddered and heaved beneath Candlestick Park 13 years ago, those of us who worked there knew even before the shaking stopped that something ugly had crashed our historic party. A hulking intruder we couldn't even see rudely upstaged the first World Series game to be played at the 'Stick in 27 years, and ultimately forced its postponement for 10 days.

Like everyone else, I underestimated the power of the damned thing at first,

even though I always figured I could see a big story coming. As a Chronicle reporter in the 1970s, I had covered San Francisco's major news events -- the Patty Hearst kidnapping, the Zodiac serial killer, the Moscone-Milk murders, the Dan White trial and riot.

Then, while heading up the Giants' media relations throughout the '80s, I had managed press information for everything from the Crazy Crab to an All- Star Game, two league championship series, the Dave Dravecky story and now the World Series. But nothing had quite prepared me for this. At 5:04 p.m. on that sultry October afternoon, 15 minutes before Game Three was to start, it hit with a strong rolling motion that began beneath the right field stands and moved across the outfield.

It rumbled under the diamond "like a 600-pound gopher," as then-Giants pitcher Mike Krukow put it, then charged northward into the city, picking up force and spewing destruction.

The needle on the Richter scale whipped frantically back and forth for a mere 17 seconds -- not long by quake standards, but powerful enough to register a magnitude of 6.9 and to scratch out a new chapter in San Francisco baseball history.

Loma Prieta left death and destruction in its wake throughout the Bay Area, but at Candlestick, oddly, damage was confined to a few harmless chunks of fallen concrete in the upper deck seats in the outfield. Despite its advanced age, the oft-maligned old bowl did San Francisco proud.

More than 1,000 writers, broadcasters and photographers were covering the series. Most were already working on pre-game stories when the quake barged in.

Less than a half-minute later, they were frozen in place, with no hard information, not to mention power or telephones to transmit it to the world outside. Cell phones were still a bulky novelty, and those who had them couldn't get through to anyone. The Internet was barely a rumor.

Within minutes, players from both teams emerged warily from the dugouts or their clubhouses beneath the stadium, anxiously scouring the stands for their wives and children. They beckoned their families to join them on the field; several players drove away from the park in full uniform.

Giants and A's executives, then-commissioner Fay Vincent and other baseball officials, police commanders and fire department officers gathered to assess the situation.

We didn't know when or if the game would resume. Outside the stadium, then- Giants owner Bob Lurie and I joined broadcaster Al Michaels and the ABC-TV crew in their truck, waiting for updates while watching video of the crippled Bay Bridge, pancaked Cypress freeway and the fiery disaster of the Marina.

For the next several days, Vincent presided over candlelight meetings at the St. Francis Hotel. To his credit, he resisted pressure to resume the series quickly.

Ultimately, Game Three returned to the 'Stick, with pre-game honors for rescue workers and a rousing chorus of "San Francisco" by the "Beach Blanket Babylon" cast. The A's picked up without missing a beat, and quickly polished off the Giants in two more games, sweeping a series that,

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fortunately for the Giants, few remember for the baseball. Now World Series Game Three looms again for San Franciscans and Giants fans everywhere. Whatever happens at Pac Bell Park this week will create new memories for a new generation of fans.

I'm not taking any bets on the outcome, but let's just pray Mother Nature stays the hell out of it.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2002/10/20/IN2728.DTL>

This article appeared on page **D - 3** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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