

La Russa expertly guides Cardinals' ship

By Gerry Fraley - Special to ESPN.com - Updated July 2, 2008

ST. LOUIS -- Tony La Russa has pulled out every gadget from his managerial bag of tricks this season:

A total of 74 lineups. Pitchers batting eighth. Relievers in the rotation.

Nine starting infielders. Eight starting pitchers. Seven starting outfielders. One standing ovation.

It happened at Boston in mid-June. Playing short-handed as they have since Opening Day, the Cardinals went for a three-game sweep of the Red Sox but lost a gripping game in 13 innings. The effort, La Russa thought, demanded more than a pat on the collective back.

So as his weary players, nearing the end of a brutal stretch of the schedule, trudged into the cramped visitors clubhouse at Fenway Park, La Russa met them with applause. Coaches and staffers joined in, recognizing their effort in a game that helped explain the Cardinals' against-all-odds success.

Little was expected of this club, entering a transition period that brought younger players into the mix. Low expectations dipped lower when injuries struck several vital players.

Yet here were the Cardinals, the reflection of their manager, nearly sweeping the defending world champions.

"It's everybody that's in uniform, everyone that's involved in this clubhouse," La Russa said. "We're all here to compete, whatever the set of circumstances. It's that simple.

"You grow to like certain teams. I like this team. It has a big heart. They come to compete every day.

"It's never completely fair, but you don't want to see it get so unfair that the season gets away from this team. That would break my heart."

The degree of difficulty to this season has been off the chart for the Cardinals. They have used the disabled list 17 times, tying them with Washington for the unwanted major league lead in the category.

The Cardinals' injured list has had star power. At various times the DL has included a Most Valuable Player winner in first baseman Albert Pujols, a Cy Young winner in right-hander Chris Carpenter, his successor as the No. 1 starter in right-hander Adam Wainwright, an All-Star closer in Jason Isringhausen, a pair of All-Star starting pitchers in Matt Clement and Mark Mulder, and the front-line shortstop in Cesar Izturis.

Through it all, the Cardinals have been unbowed. They have the second-best record (48-37) in the National League. With a win on Sunday at Kansas City, the Cardinals completed a test during which they played 32 of 51 games on the road and were 27-24 overall and 18-14 on the road.



In 12 seasons as the Cardinals' manager, Tony La Russa has led the team to the postseason seven times.

How is this happening?

"It starts with our leader, No. 10," Isringhausen said. "He doesn't allow us to let up. That's the way he goes about it, and that's the way we go about it."

La Russa wears No. 10.

Walt Jocketty has seen this before.

"I really think Tony is at his best in these situations," said Jocketty, Cincinnati's general manager and former GM of the Cardinals. "He takes it as a challenge, and he relishes challenges. He keeps pushing to find the answer."

Jocketty and La Russa struck up a working relationship and friendship while in the Chicago White Sox organization. They were together in Oakland and from 1996 to 2007 formed a dynamic leadership team with the Cardinals: Jocketty as general manager and La Russa as manager.

From his position, Jocketty saw close up how well La Russa kept his team focused on the task when adversity arose.

There was 2000, when the Cardinals had 19 players on the disabled list and used 24 pitchers but still won the division. There was 2003, when the club placed 18 players on the disabled list and had 13 players get more than 200 at-bats and still pushed the division-winning Cubs to the finish.

Every manager must live with setbacks. It is, as they say, part of the game. La Russa has also dealt with unspeakable tragedies that were not part of the game.

He has twice had a player die: Darryl Kile in 2002 and Josh

Hancock last season. If ever there was a good reason for a team to curl up into a ball and melt away, it came in those seasons.

It did not happen. St. Louis carried Kile's memory into the National League Championship Series. Last season's club regrouped from a terrible start compounded by Hancock's death to get within one game of the Central lead in early September before its emotional tank hit empty.

"Like anybody, there are times when Tony gets frustrated," Jocketty said. "He's human. But he has tremendous mental discipline. He just will not let it break him, and he will not let it break his team."

La Russa has been at his emotional and strategic best this season.

La Russa the motivator has prevented even a hint of self-pity from seeping into the room. The club has dealt with each new obstacle in a matter-of-fact way.

"It's the mentality of these guys," reliever Russ Springer said. "We don't give anything away. We don't fold."

La Russa the manager has turned his creative energies loose.

The Cardinals essentially have only three everyday players: catcher Yadier Molina, third baseman Troy Glaus and Pujols. La Russa has used every bit of the roster to fill in the remaining spots.

The Cardinals could end up with 14 players receiving more than 200 at-bats and more than 100 lineups used. No NL playoff team last season had more than 11 players with 200 at-bats. Two of those clubs, Colorado and Philadelphia, used fewer than 70 lineups.

"That's what makes Tony special," Cardinals general manager John Mozeliak said. "He keeps finding ways to win."

La Russa looks at this as competition bringing out the best in players such as outfielders Rick Ankiel, Ryan Ludwick and Skip Schumaker and infielder Aaron Miles.

None was a proven major leaguer before this season. Each has performed well. Miles is hitting better than .300 with a .360-plus on-base percentage, and while Schumaker is batting just below .300 (.299), he has a .362 on-base percentage. Ankiel and Ludwick each has 15-plus homers.

Each goes in and out of the lineup as La Russa weighs who is hot against who could suffer from overexposure.

"Tony is the best manager in the game, a Hall of Famer for sure," Pujols said. "He has a lot to do with this. He keeps the pressure off those young guys."

The pitching staff has received similar treatment.

Pitching coach Dave Duncan has added to his long line of reclamation projects with successes such as starter Todd Wellemeyer, who has a 7-3 record and a 3.86 ERA, and emergency closer Ryan Franklin. Duncan and La Russa have also worked rookies into the staff.

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--Tony La Russa

The Cardinals are 4-0 in the starts of right-hander Mitchell Boggs, who took Wainwright's spot. Right-handers Kyle McClellan and Chris Perez also work key late innings out of the bullpen.

"If you have the right people, people who are competitive and want to win, they're going to give you their best effort and not look for excuses," Duncan said.

Through three months, the Cardinals have walked a fine line.

"Our winning edge is a very fragile one," La Russa said. "We can't walk around thinking we're better than we are. We haven't proven anything except that we play hard.

"Because people didn't know our club, they underestimated our talent. What I don't want our club to do is overestimate our talent."

The Cardinals have obvious holes. The most glaring need is a big bat to provide lineup protection for Pujols. He leads the majors in intentional walks with 20 and is on pace for the first 100-walk season of his career.

Isringhausen's troubles triggered a chain-reaction wreck in the bullpen, which leads the majors in blown saves with 19. The Cardinals also lead with eight losses when leading through seven innings.

The strike-throwing rotation has been the rock, topping the NL in wins with 38 and ranking second in ERA at 4.01. To stay at that level, the Cardinals need Wainwright to return from an injured right middle finger early in the second half.

Carpenter, whose last start was on Opening Day 2007, could return to the rotation after the All-Star break, but Mulder and Clement are unlikely to follow. The Cardinals have moved Mulder into the bullpen in an attempt to squeeze something from him.

La Russa soldiers on with the roster he has. The players take their cue from him.

"Everybody knows how we play the game," Pujols said. "Everybody knows we're not afraid."

No. 10 wants it that way.

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