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Show Them The Bench

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By Mitchell Moss

Last week, New Yorkers saw how much the game of baseball resembles the politics of education. The Mets and Mayor Dinkins called two old-timers in from the bullpen to help rescue two weak and dispirited teams. Dallas Green was named manager of the Mets and Victor Gotbaum was appointed to the Board of Education. While both men have had distinguished careers, their selection demonstrates the way in which organizations in trouble tend to reach backwards rather than outwards in looking for leadership and change.

In making their personnel choices, the mayor and the Mets have demonstrated their preference for the safe, if tired, approach rather than the bold and new. Don't the city's baseball fans and the 1 million children in New York City's public schools deserve more than just the familiar faces that baseball owners and mayors draw upon in crises?

The choice of Dallas Green is especially striking since the Mets could have displayed genuine leadership by choosing a highly qualified African American such as former Mets' first base coach Bill Robinson or former Yankee Chris Chambliss. In an era when major league baseball continues to operate as though it still thinks blacks lack the "necessities" for management, the Mets' owners proved that they are no different from the rest of the cabal that runs professional baseball. Despite the fact that minorities are underrepresented in major league

managerial positions, baseball team owners can't resist the opportunity to recycle old managers whose only qualification is that they are known, predictable corporate apparatchik. The legacy of Branch Rickey is certainly not alive and well in Flushing Meadow.

While Dallas Green is baseball's equivalent of a visiting fireman, Victor Gotbaum is part of a remarkable tradition of great New York labor leaders that includes Mike Quill, Albert Schanker and Dennis Rivera. Gotbaum made his mark as one of the wise leaders who helped save the city during the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. If ever someone was asked to play out of position, it is Victor Gotbaum on the Board of Education. Does it make sense to have a former union leader involved in decisions about union wages, work rules and benefits? Why not draw upon seasoned community board members or active parents who might bring first-hand knowledge and understanding to the school board's deliberations?

Most parents aren't certain whether the city's educational bureaucracy cares about anything but itself, and the mayor could have used this appointment specifically to reach out to them. The mayor might have even enhanced his own standing with the voters. The appointment of Gotbaum confirms the widely held view that the principal constituency for the schools is the teachers union, although the schoolchildren are the principal clientele. If one measure of a politician is his ability to attract the best talent within this city, couldn't the mayor have found someone whose best years are ahead rather than behind him - or better yet - her?

New Yorkers are known for their impatience, their low tolerance of mediocrity, and their loyalty to those athletes and politicians who do more than what is required, who make the extra effort to win or to make life just a little less harsh. City life is tough enough without surrendering to the forces of bureaucratic inertia and complacency. The appointments of Dallas Green and Victor Gotbaum should give all New Yorkers cause for alarm. Mayor Dinkins and the Mets' owners should recognize that New Yorkers want and deserve solid everyday players, not tired pinch-hitters whose glory days are behind them.

No one expects Gotbaum or Green to turn either our school system or our National League franchise around. But a troubled school system and a failing baseball team need more than just a change of command; they require energetic

leaders capable of providing new direction and mobilizing public support. New York Met fans and New York parents are great assets; they deserve a little more than what Dallas Green and Victor Gotbaum have to offer.

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