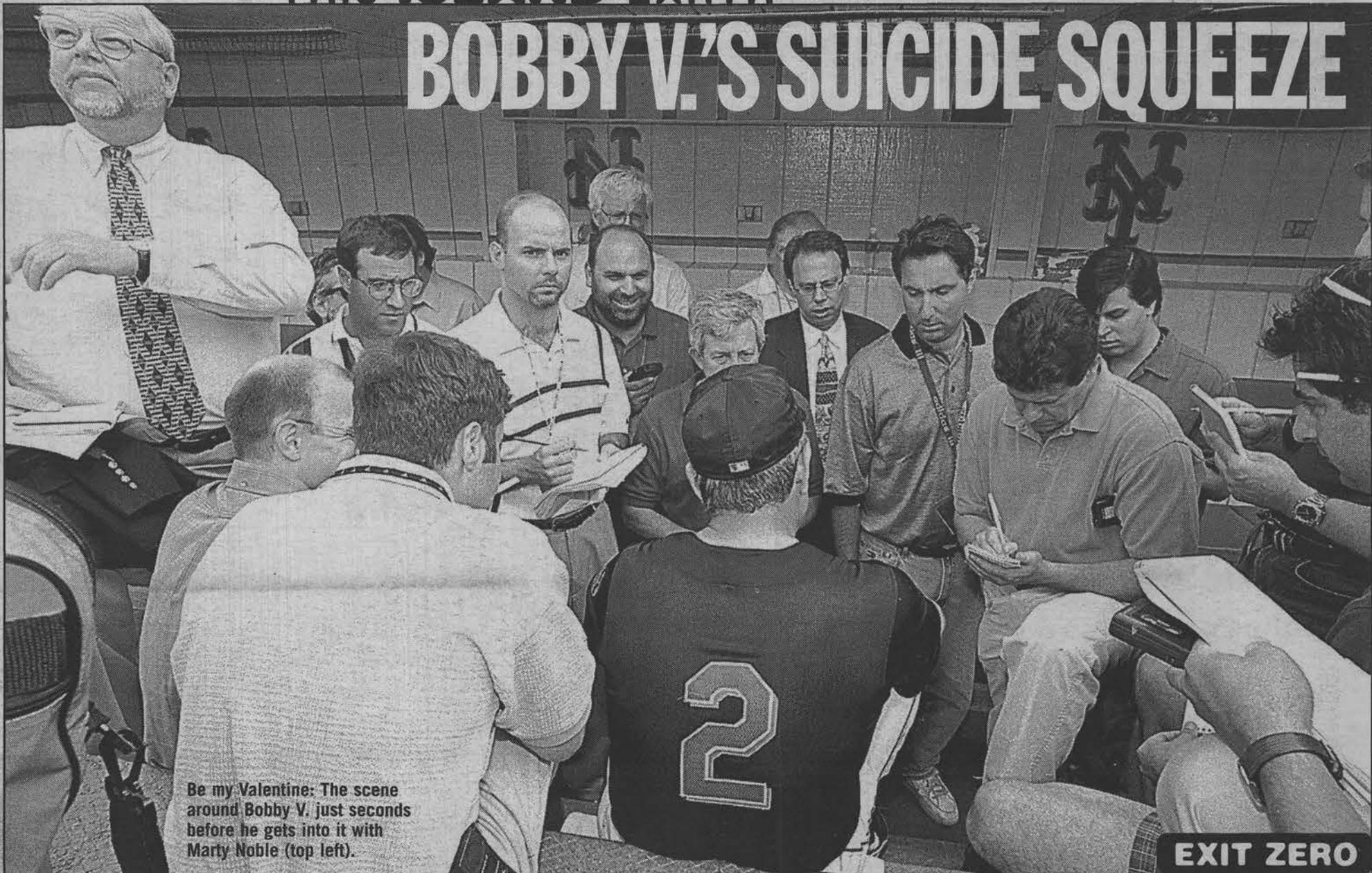


## THIS ISLAND EARTH

# BOBBY V.'S SUICIDE SQUEEZE

KIRK CONDYLES



Be my Valentine: The scene around Bobby V. just seconds before he gets into it with Marty Noble (top left).

EXIT ZERO

## Bearing witness to the Met manager's meltdown by Bill Jensen

**T**he long day's journey into night begins as Bobby Valentine paces in front of the Met dugout before a game against the Blue Jays, his hands locked behind his back in a Napoleonic gesture that looks appropriate for a grown man wearing a skintight double-knit uniform.

The manager squints warily at his charges as they take batting practice in the late afternoon sun at Shea. The once-promising season has turned into a circus dominated by bad clowns. When Valentine takes a seat on the dugout steps, a horde of reporters immediately circles him. Their questions are pointed but repetitive.

His friend Bob Apodaca was fired as pitching coach just a week ago, a front-office move designed to tighten the screws on Valentine. The Mets, who have a \$63.5-million payroll, are supposed to make the playoffs but are struggling to stay over .500. Valentine's got five outfielders but only three spots on the field and he's got to contend with Bobby Bonilla, Rickey Henderson and Brian McRae, who would like him to tell them whether they'll be playing at least 24 hours before game time.

Valentine answers the questions in a deliberate, soft-spoken tone, tossing in dramatic pauses and patient glares to intensify the illusion of his serenity. Then Marty Noble from *Newsday*, a writer identified even by his own paper as the manager's "adversary," appears.

Noble, a giant of a man with a prominent belly, blond beard and glasses, is holding a transcript of what Valentine said about him on WFAN's *Mike and the Mad Dog* show the previous day. Valentine had said that Noble hadn't spoken to him in more than a year. But Noble says he talked to Valentine for his reaction to Joe DiMaggio's death.

"Why did you lie about me on the radio?" Noble shouts. "You did it on the radio and it was wrong and it was untruthful."

"Have you ever asked me a question in over a year?"

Valentine shouts back. "You're not doing your job."

The writer and the manager have a running feud that is fueled at intermittent stops each year by juicy gossip. Every writer on the beat has heard the story that Noble has in his possession a seven-word Valentine quote that could get the manager fired. Noble won't talk about it. Maybe during one of his screaming matches with Valentine, it'll slip out.

"Look at my record," Noble shouts. "It's better than yours." "You want to check your credibility amongst your peers?" Valentine replies, grandly gesturing to the writers surrounding him. "Take a hike." Noble, who isn't working on a daily story, leaves to walk toward the batting cage. The rumor about the rumored quote will have to wait for another day.

Ten minutes later, Valentine stands on the first-base side of the field watching phenom Benny Agbayani take BP.

"Charlie!" Valentine shrieks in horror and bolts into the batting cage. Charlie Samuels, the Mets' equipment manager, follows to aid the rookie, who has just been hit in the eye by a ball that ricocheted off the cage.

Valentine escorts Agbayani off the field and then returns to the dugout to tell the reporters Benny "broke his face" and will not be playing tonight. The manager says he just informed speedster Roger Cedeño that he will be starting in Agbayani's place. I ask Valentine if Cedeño is upset that he didn't give him more notice.

Valentine gives me a pissed-off look and immediately ends the impromptu press conference. Back in the clubhouse, Valentine passes Noble in front of pitcher Rick Reed's locker and gives him a disingenuous thumbs-up and a maniacal smile.

The game commences none too quickly for Bobby V. Blue Jay pitcher David Wells is in control until the Mets rally with two outs in the bottom of the ninth. McRae belts a foul ball into the press box, where reporters have been replaying the Noble-Valentine battle on their microcassette recorders and trying to keep up with the Knick game. The ball wrecks *Newsday* columnist Jon Heyman's laptop before rolling under my seat. On the next pitch, McRae's single ties the game.

In the 12th, Met slugger Mike Piazza is called for catcher's interference. Valentine comes out to argue. He says his piece, starts walking back to the dugout, then listens to the devil on his shoulder and walks back to the umpire. He gets tossed.

Valentine, who is now supposed to remain in the clubhouse, steps back into the dugout wearing sunglasses, a T-shirt, a generic cap and a mustache made from black tape. He says later that he meant it as a joke, but it will cost him \$5,000 and a two-game suspension.

The Mets pull out a win with a Rey Ordoñez single in the 14th. In the victorious clubhouse, most of the reporters have left Valentine's office when someone brings up the fact that Bonilla, who is to be paid \$5.9 million this season, didn't play despite the game's marathon length.

Following an astonishing 20-second pause, Valentine says, "I'm just gonna say he wasn't available...I'm figuring out how to deal with this." It later is revealed that Bonilla, miffed at being benched, refused to go in as a pinch hitter in the 13th.

When the reporters approach Bonilla, all he'll say is "go that way" as he motions toward Valentine's office. "See you later, Sweetness," Bonilla says to the departing Henderson. "Enjoy the off day." The reporters are still there.

"This way isn't working," Bonilla says. "So maybe I should use what the airlines use to park fucking planes and shit." The reporters won't budge.

"Hey, look at that. Omar is right there," Bonilla says as he points to Met assistant general manager Omar Minaya. "He'll give you the Spanish version, the English version, whatever version you want."

Soon, the reporters give up, leaving Bonilla to pack up a small green purse and sing along to the clubhouse stereo as it plays a Hootie and the Blowfish song called "Let Her Cry." ■