

The Dodgers Suspected Drug Use by Strawberry

By RICK WEINBERG

Special to The New York Times

LOS ANGELES, April 5 — Signs of drug use by Darryl Strawberry were evident as far back as last season, according to Fred Claire, the Los Angeles Dodgers' general manager.

"When someone is late for a meeting or a game, it makes you ask if something is wrong, and those questions arose with Darryl," Claire said today before the Dodgers won their season opener without Strawberry. Their No. 3 hitter was placed on the disabled list Monday after telling the team he had a drug problem and agreeing to undergo treatment.

Strawberry missed the Dodgers' final exhibition game on Sunday and did not notify the club until nearly 11 hours after he was supposed to arrive at Anaheim Stadium. As the first step in his treatment program, Strawberry flew to New York today to meet with two doctors who would evaluate him.

Last season, Strawberry was late many times for treatments on his ailing back, and last June 22 he showed up in the fourth inning of a day game, thinking the club was playing a night game.

Strawberry Confronted

When Claire suspected a problem last season, he said he spoke to Strawberry. "He was asked about it numerous times," Claire said. "We did not sweep it under the rug. We confronted him. But unless you catch him or have hard evidence or the player steps forward, you cannot accuse the player."

Claire expressed sympathy for Strawberry, but he said that he and Sam Fernandez, the team's general counsel, were looking into the possibility of voiding or reducing the team's financial obligations to Strawberry, who has two years left on his contract at \$4 million per season.

Strawberry flew to New York to

meet with Dr. Robert Millman, who represents the commissioner's office, and Joel Solomon, who represents the players association. Baseball has not had a joint drug program since the owners unilaterally terminated it in 1985. But the evaluation by doctors from both sides is a remnant from that agreement.

When he played for the Mets, Strawberry entered the Smithers treatment center in Manhattan for an alcohol problem.

A Different Spring

This spring, Strawberry had not been late for any meetings or games. He was one of the first players to arrive each morning at the team's training facility in Vero Beach, Fla. Bill Russell, the bench coach, said he had seen no signs of unusual behavior

in the outfielder.

Strawberry has been troubled since his second season with the Dodgers. He hit 28 home runs and knocked in 99 runs his first season in 1991. Over the next two seasons, he played in just 75 games because of back problems and hit .199 with 10 homers.

His behavior off the field was no less a problem. He was arrested on a battery charge of striking Charisse Simon, the woman he lived with. The charge was later dropped by Simon, now his second wife. When asked about the Los Angeles fires last winter, Strawberry said, "Let it burn."

Today, before the Dodgers beat the Florida Marlins, 4-3, the talk in the clubhouse was about how the team would get along without Strawberry.

"It won't be easy without Darryl

because just his presence in the lineup meant something," said Russell.

Manager Tom Lasorda was disappointed.

"I'm very upset because Darryl let the team down, he let Peter O'Malley down, he let his family down and he let the fans down," Lasorda said. "When you're weak enough to let something like that control you, it's disgraceful. How someone can be so dumb to put that substance in their body is beyond me. I get sick and tired of hearing people describe this as a sickness. It is not a sickness. It's a weakness. Sickness is cancer, a heart attack. Not substance abuse."

"But we will not let this distract from opening day or our season. We will not let one man's action destroy us."

Report says Dodgers questioned Strawberry about drugs last year

NEW YORK — The Los Angeles Dodgers questioned outfielder Darryl Strawberry several times last year about his possible involvement with drugs, *The New York Times* reported in today's editions.

"When someone is late for a meeting or a game, it makes you ask if something is wrong, and those questions arose with Darryl," Dodgers general manager Fred Claire said. "He was asked about it numerous times. We did not sweep it under the rug. We confronted him. But unless you catch him or have hard evidence or the player steps forward, you cannot accuse the player."

Monday, Strawberry admitted to a drug problem and agreed to rehabilitation. He was put on the disabled list.

Strawberry flew to New York Tuesday to meet with two doctors who will evaluate him: Robert Millman, who represents Major League Baseball, and Joel Solomon, who represents the players' union.

USA TODAY 4/6/99 From wire reports