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GIANTS SEIZE CONTROL OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUE

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GIANTS SEIZE CONTROL OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUE

NEW YORK — One year removed from a disappointing fifth-place finish, Leo Durocher's New York Giants have spent the first seven weeks of 1954 making a forceful argument that last season belongs firmly in the past. The Giants closed May with a 31–11 record, best in the National League and 6½ games ahead of the Brooklyn Dodgers. What began as an impressive 11–3 April became something considerably more substantial in May. New York went 20–8 during the month. And they did it everywhere. The Giants were 10–4 at the Polo Grounds and 10–4 on the road during May, displaying the sort of consistency that has separated them from the rest of the league. At the center of it all are two extraordinary performances. One from a 23-year-old center fielder. The other from a 24-year-old lefthander.

SAY HEY — WHAT A START

Willie Mays has returned to the Giants and promptly begun terrorizing National League pitching. Through 42 games, Mays is batting an almost unbelievable .429, with a .470 on-base percentage and .857 slugging percentage. He has already accumulated 72 hits, 51 runs, 18 home runs and 47 RBI. Those aren't merely excellent numbers. They're extraordinary numbers. Mays is averaging better than a run scored per game and has produced 18 home runs in only 168 at-bats. But New York isn't a one-man offense. Don Mueller is batting .327, while captain Alvin Dark is hitting .312 with nine home runs. Whitey Lockman has driven in 31 runs, and Hank Thompson has contributed six homers and 24 RBI. The Giants have scored 236 runs through 42 games, an average of 5.62 per game. Yet remarkably, offense may not even be the primary reason they're sitting atop the National League.

ELEVEN STARTS, ELEVEN WINS

Johnny Antonelli's remarkable April didn't end when the calendar changed. It got better. Antonelli finished May with an 11–0 record and 0.75 ERA. In 96 innings, the lefthander has allowed only 56 hits and eight earned runs, while striking out 65 and walking 17. He has completed eight of his 11 starts and carries a microscopic 0.76 WHIP. Most remarkable of all, New York went 8–0 in games started by Antonelli during May. When the Giants needed him, he repeatedly delivered. On May 8 at Pittsburgh, Antonelli shut out the Pirates, 6–0. Four days later, he blanked Cincinnati, 8–0. On May 21, he beat Robin Roberts and Philadelphia, 3–2. On May 30, with Brooklyn trying to cut into New York's lead, Antonelli beat the Dodgers, 2–1. Then, one day later, he helped finish a Memorial Day doubleheader sweep of Pittsburgh. The Giants haven't lost a game Antonelli has started since April began.

MORE THAN ONE ARM

Antonelli has been spectacular, but he's not working alone. Ruben Gomez stands 6–1 with a 2.87 ERA, while Marv Grissom has been superb in relief, posting a 0.83 ERA in 32■ innings. Grissom and Hoyt Wilhelm have each recorded six saves. The pitching staff as a whole has been the foundation beneath New York's fast start. Through May, the Giants have allowed only 134 runs while scoring 236—a remarkable +102 run differential. That dominance becomes even clearer game by game. When New York has held an opponent to three runs or fewer, the Giants are 26–1. And when the offense has scored five runs or more, they're 23–1. For Durocher's club, the formula has been remarkably simple: Get to five. Keep the other club below four. Do that, and the Giants have been almost impossible to beat.

THE BARBER HAS NOT FOUND HIS EDGE

If there's one concern in an otherwise brilliant opening to the season, it is Sal Maglie. "The Barber" finished May at 2–4 with a 3.55 ERA, a surprisingly ordinary record amid an extraordinary start by the club. In 71 innings, Maglie has surrendered 77 hits and 28 earned runs. During May, New York went only 2–4 in games started by Maglie. That stands in stark contrast to Antonelli's 8–0 mark. For now, the Giants have been good enough to overcome it. But if Maglie rediscovers his form while Antonelli and Gomez continue pitching well, this staff could become even more formidable as summer arrives.

A MONTH WITH SEVERAL PERSONALITIES

May wasn't one uninterrupted winning streak. The Giants had to fight for their position. They took over first place on May 9, defeating Pittsburgh 4–3. Three days later, Antonelli's shutout of Cincinnati began another surge. New York followed it with wins of 7–3 over Chicago and then an extraordinary 17–9 slugfest against the Cubs. By May 18, the Giants' lead had grown to five games. Then came some turbulence. New York lost three of five from May 19 through May 24, including consecutive losses at Philadelphia that trimmed the lead to 3½ games. For the first time in weeks, perhaps the door had opened. The Giants promptly slammed it shut. They won six of their final seven games. And they did it with both kinds of baseball. There was a wild 9–8 victory over Pittsburgh. Then a 13–9 win over Brooklyn. But two days after that slugfest, Antonelli took the ball against those same Dodgers and delivered a 2–1 victory. Finally, on Memorial Day, the Giants swept Pittsburgh, 9–5 and 4–2, to finish May riding a three-game winning streak. Their lead stood at 6½ games.

BROOKLYN CAN HIT — BUT NEW YORK CAN PITCH

The standings don't tell the entire story of this pennant race. Brooklyn's offense has actually been more productive than New York's so far, scoring 262 runs to the Giants' 236. The difference has come on the mound. New York has surrendered just 134 runs. That combination has given the Giants a +102 run differential through only 42 games. So while Willie Mays' remarkable hitting commands the headlines, this club's early dominance is being built just as much—perhaps more—on preventing runs. Brooklyn remains the nearest challenger at 24–17, 6½ games back. Cincinnati, the early April surprise, has fallen to 23–19 and sits eight games behind New York. Milwaukee is also eight games back. The pennant race is far from over. There are 112 games still to play. But as June arrives, one fact has become impossible for the rest of the National League to ignore. The New York Giants are no longer trying to prove they're contenders. Everyone else is trying to catch them.

MAY SCORECARD

May record: 20–8 Season record: 31–11 (.738) NL position: 1st Lead: 6½ games over Brooklyn May home record: 10–4 May road record: 10–4 May runs: 148 May runs allowed: 96 May run differential: +52 May one-run record: 5–4 Longest May winning streak: 4 games Longest May losing streak: 2 games Final 9 games: 7–2

THE MAGIC NUMBERS

The Magic Numbers Scoring 5+ runs: 23–1 Allowing 3 or fewer: 26–1

MAY AWARDS AND MEMORABLE GAMES

Player of the Month Willie Mays The centerpiece of an explosive Giants offense and already producing numbers that look like they belong much later on the calendar. Pitcher of the Month Johnny Antonelli There isn't much debate: 11–0, 0.75 ERA through May 31, with the Giants going 8–0 in his May starts. May's Biggest Win May 30 — Giants 2, Dodgers 1 The 17–9 victory over Chicago was the month's biggest offensive explosion, but Antonelli's 2–1 win over Brooklyn gets the nod for significance. It came against New York's closest pursuer during the final weekend of the month. May's Wildest Game May 14 — Giants 17, Cubs 9 Twenty-six combined runs in the Giants' largest offensive output of the season to that point. Concern to Watch Sal Maglie The Giants went 2–4 in his May starts. With Antonelli pitching at a historic pace, Maglie finding his form could make an already imposing rotation considerably stronger.

THE JUNE QUESTION

June Question Can anyone slow down Mays and Antonelli? Mays enters June hitting .429. Antonelli enters June 11–0. And the Giants enter June with a 6½-game lead. Now the season returns to the APBA tabletop.