# The Yankee Way


They were America's best road show when a certain Ohio schoolboy was growing up in the thirties, a collection of summer homes who appeared just long enough in your town to establish their irresistibility.

Gehrig, DiMaggio, and the rest of them would check into the Hotel Cleveland, perform flawlessly for three days at Municipal Stadium, then move on to Detroit, Chicago, and the world championships.

"When the Yankees came to town it was like Barnum and Bailey coming to town," George Steinbrenner would reminisce after he'd bought the club decades later. "The excitement."

The New York Yankees have been larger than life ever since a wealthy brewery owner named Ruppert imported a boisterous man-child named Ruth and built a stadium at the Bronx to accommodate him.

Joe McCarthy, who managed the club during Steinbrenner's childhood, deliberately kept the conference call a size large and the caps squared off. The Yankees, he reasoned, would thus appear more intimidating to rivals.

The amateur psychology was unnecessary. Any baseball team that won seven pennants in eight years was likely to be imposing enough in street clothes.

When manager Miller Huggins realized that the Pirates were watching his Yankees take batting practice before the 1927 World Series, he had Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and Bob Meusel casually stage a home run derby for their benefit.

"Do they do this all the time?" Pittsburgh shortstop Glenn Wright quipped as ball after ball plopped into Forbes Field's upper deck.

For most of this century, the Yankees have performed with the manners, continuity, and success of a blue-chip corporation.

Rooting for New York, as the cliché had it, was like rooting for U.S. Steel—the players even wore pinstripes. The Yankees were crisp, dignified, and disproportionate.

And their engineers, from Jacob Ruppert to George Steinbrenner, have believed that those qualities were part of a club tradition, a certain way of conducting business.

The Yankee Way was a 10-game lead by Sept-

pendence Day, a clinched pennant by Labor Day, and champagne in October.

The Yankee Way was generations of players—from Gehrig to DiMaggio, from Mickey Mantle to Thurman Munson—who never wore another uniform. Many others either retired with a handful of championship rings or wept when traded away.

The Yankee Way was also a front office that took those championships as its due. "Fine, fine, McCardy," Ruppert would tell McCarthy after each Series triumph in the 1930s. "Do it again next year."

By the '50s, championship money was routinely figured into a player's salary. "Don't forget you get a World Series share," a club executive assured pitcher Jim Bouton in 1963 while offering him a $9,000 contract. "You can always count on that."

For decades, until Steinbrenner spent handsome sums to rebuild the franchise in the '70s, the New York front office was corporate America in microcosm.

It coolly looted the Red Sox roster in the early '20s once it realized that Boston owner Harry Frazee was desperate for ready cash. It used the downtrodden Kansas City Athletics as a separate farm system in the '50s, exchanging used-up veterans for promising young talent. And it paid salaries that were no higher than they had to be.

"What do you fellows think I am, a millionaire?" Ruppert, a millionaire, told his players in the '20s, thus setting the negotiating stance for decades to come.

Gehrig, a walking embodiment of Yankee virtues, never earned more than $37,000. Other employees were frequently treated as replacement parts, their service records given cursory consideration. After winning 10 pennants in a dozen years, manager Casey Stengel was shunted aside at age 70.

To baseball fans and rivals who resented their monopoly, the Yankees appeared smug, insensitive, and tightfisted. But what Yankee-haters resented most was their monotonous consistency, one Chinese-style dynasty rising from the ashes of its predecessor, producing more than 8,000 victories in all, 34 American League pennants, and 23 world championships.

By 1954, after New York had dominated baseball for six of the previous seven years, Douglass Wallop would write an enormously popular, if wistful, tale—*The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant* (later to be a Broadway and film hit, *Damn Yankees*). Even the devil, Wallop mused, was a Yankee fan.

From 1921 until 1929, New York lost only two pennant races. From 1936 until 1944, they lost one. From 1947 until 1965, only three. "Every year is next year," New York sportswriter Roger Kahn typed moments after the final game of the 1952 World Series, "for the New York Yankees."

It was the farm system, carefully stocked and replenished since the days of general manager Ed Barrow, that produced New York's autumn monopolies.

"It's good to see some good young players coming into the league," well-traveled American League manager Jimmy Dykes would say in 1963. "But why do they always have to be wearing the Yankee uniform?"

There was always another .350 hitter ripening in Newark, a 20-game winner waiting in Kansas City. The year Ruth left, creaky with age and dissipation, a Yankee scout was scribbling notes on a San Francisco minor leaguer named DiMaggio. When DiMaggio retired, Stengel merely beckoned to "the kid," Mantle.

Thus the Yankees linked generation to generation and championship to championship. Whatever the year, there was always a Hall of Famer three cubicles away to point to as an example.

Gehrig played 2,130 straight games, shrugging off split fingers, beanings, and lumbago until his body literally gave out on him. DiMaggio performed flawlessly, spoke softly, and picked up all dinner checks. "When you eat with the dago," he informed the greenest rookie, "the dago pays."

Mantle stuffed bleeding abscesses with gauze and went out to play on rickety knees in August heat.

A team code evolved, unspoken unless it was violated. "You're with the Yankees now," McCarthy admonished newcomer Jake Powell, who'd just administered a hotfoot to a teammate in a Boston train station. "We don't do those things."

It might be a road show, but Barnum and Bailey it wasn't. The club furnished three sets of pinstripes, so the players would always be immaculately turned out. Off the field, coats and ties were the rule. From the day McCarthy had the card table broken apart with an axe in 1931, the Yankee clubhouse was considered a place of business. When former player Billy Martin arrived in August of 1975 to take over a club that had fallen 10 games behind Boston, he quickly pinpointed the clubhouse atmosphere as one reason.

"It wasn't the Yankee clubhouse the way I remembered it," he remarked. "Anyone who wanted to was running around."

When seasons went sour, as they did from

time to time, divergence from the Yankee Way was invariably listed as a reason.

"The trouble with this club," growled one veteran, as the 1930 club slipped to third, "is that there are too many fellows on it who aren't Yankees."

It meant something to play for New York. DiMaggio's own story, published in 1946, was entitled *Lucky To Be a Yankee*. After he retired, Mantle had nightmares about hearing the Stadium loudspeaker announcing his name and not being able to get there.

Rollie Sheldon wept when the front office traded him. John Blanchard, who said he'd rather sit on the bench as a third-string Yankee catcher than start anywhere else, was crestfallen when he was dealt to Kansas City. "I don't want to play every day," he said. "I want to stay here."

Even during the turbulence that marked much of the Steinbrenner era, when the franchise was dubbed the "Bronx Zoo," free agents still were drawn to the Yankees by the pinstriped mystique and the legendary promise of a pennant.

Wade Boggs, one strike away from a world championship with the Red Sox, sobbed in the visitors' dugout of a Queens ballpark in 1986 after the Mets had prevailed. A decade later, he rode a police horse in the Stadium outfield with an index finger in the air after the Yankees had brought down the Braves and returned the championship to the Bronx. "The feeling," said Boggs, "is something you can't describe."

That's the Yankee Way.

# All the Seasons


## 1903 to 1914

They began as one of Byron Bancroft Johnson's daydreams and grew out of his hatred for the National League and his bitterness toward New York Giants manager John McGraw.

The New York Highlanders played in a wooden ballpark on a rocky hilltop in uptown Manhattan. Their record fluctuating wildly from year to year. They were known by any number of last names—the Hilltoppers, Clifftops, Gardenhighlanders, Porch Climbers or Bridgies—but their first name would remain New York.

To Ban Johnson, whose embryonic American League was embroiled in a fierce struggle for primacy with its established National League cousin, that was the important thing. You could not be taken seriously without a New York franchise.

Ban Johnson finally got one there in 1903 was the product of a chain reaction that began in the previous season, after he'd indefinitely suspended McGraw, then the Baltimore Orioles' manager, for abusing umpires.

So McGraw had gotten Giant owners John T. Brush to buy the team and lure half a dozen players to sign with National League clubs. And when the Orioles were unable to field a team against St. Louis one afternoon, Johnson revoked the Baltimore franchise, enriched the roster with temporary help from other league clubs, and appointed Wilbert Robinson as manager.

Then he moved the club to New York that fall and raided National League rosters—most notably Pittsburgh's—to build a contender. The only thing Johnson lacked was land for a ballpark, and Brush and partner Andrew Freedman had vowed to make that impossible.

Bleacher crowd at Yankee Stadium during the 1962 World Series

**Left:** *Frank Farrell was one of two partners who purchased the Baltimore Orioles franchise that moved to New York. He was a gambler who was betting that his Highlanders and the fledgling American League would succeed in the National League Giants' backyard.* **Right:** *"Big Bill" Devery, onetime bartender, prize fighter, and police chief with political connections, was the Highlanders' other co-owner. Purchasing the franchise for $18,000, Devery and Farrell owned the club a dozen years until early 1915, when they sold it for $460,000 to Jacob Ruppert and Tillinghast L'Hommedieu Huston.*

They had friends in Tammany Hall, the corrupt but powerful political organization that had run New York for decades. Any likely parcel of land, Johnson was told, either would be unavailable to him or would soon have streets cut through it.

But during the winter a derbied gambler named Frank Farrell turned up at Johnson's office with a certified check for $25,000 and a plot of ground in mind. He and his sidekick William Devery, an unusually wealthy retired police chief with an ample belly, would buy the Orioles for $18,000, Farrell said, and build a stadium along Broadway on Washington Heights between 165th and 168th Streets.

The $25,000 check was a token of good faith. "That's a pretty big forfeit, Mr. Farrell," Johnson reminded him. *New York Sun* sports editor Joe Vila, who'd accompanied Farrell, snickered. "He bets that much," he assured Johnson, "on a horse race."

Besides the cash, Farrell and Devery had political friends of their own. Within three months they'd bought the land (a former Revolutionary War battlefield; workers unearthed bullets, gunstocks, grapeshot, and bayonets), surrounded it with a wooden fence, leveled the hummocky ground, and erected a grandstand and bleachers that would accommodate 15,000 spectators.

"You could look from the stands," said infielder Jimmy Austin, "and see all the way down the Hudson River." Hilltop Park was neither as large nor as dignified as the Polo Grounds, where the Giants gamboled, and it was barely ready for opening day—right fielder Willie Keeler nearly fell into an unfilled ditch chasing a fly.

But it was a stadium in New York, and the club that played inside quickly became a pennant challenger under new manager Clark Griffith, a seven-time 20-game winner who doubled as a

*Hilltop Park was built in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan, on the west side of Broadway between 165th and 168th streets. It was the Highlanders' home from 1903 to 1912. Since the 1920s it has been the site of the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center.*

*The Broadway entrance to Hilltop Park, which seated 15,000 plus standing room.*

starting pitcher that year—at age 33—and won 14 games.

They were christened the Highlanders, a name recognizing both the elevation of their workplace and figurehead president Joseph W. Gordon (the Gordon Highlanders were—and are—a legendary Scottish regiment). But newspapers called them anything that fit conveniently into a headline.

Their first-year roster was a pastiche of seven rookies and refugees from 11 clubs, and injuries and poor hitting consigned them to fourth place, 17 games behind Boston. But relying on a sturdy right-handed spitballer named Happy Jack Chesbro to pitch every third day, the Highlanders fought Boston down to the season's final day in 1904.

As Keeler, whose secret was to "hit 'em where they ain't," built a .343 average out of 162 singles, Chesbro started 51 games, completed 48, and won 41—a league record that still stands. Yet he blew the pennant with a single spitter that got away in his final inning as he pitched his third game in four days.

Defending champion Boston (then called the Pilgrims) had come to New York for the concluding doubleheader leading by a game and a half and were greeted by a crowd of 28,540 that clustered 15 deep around the Hilltop outfield. With the score 2–2 in the ninth inning of the opener Boston's Lou Criger beat out an infield hit, went to third on a bunt and a grounder, and lumbered home when Chesbro's 2–2 pitch to Fred Parent sailed over catcher Red Kleinow's head to the chicken-wire backstop.

Criger, hardly the fastest man in the game, scored without sliding. The Highlanders, winners of 92 games, would never again come so close to a pennant.

The 1905 season proved grim. At one point every regular was on the disabled list; the Highlanders had to borrow catcher Mike Powers from the Athletics to fill in for 11 games. Chesbro, who'd been 41–13, slumped to 19–13; his teammates followed, dropping to 71–78 and sixth place, 21½ games behind Philadelphia.

But along the way they'd found a nimble first baseman named Hal Chase (dubbed Prince Hal), one of the best fielders ever to play the position, a rollicking free spirit who lured crowds to Hilltop Park that otherwise had no reason to come.

Chase would hit .323 and steal 28 bases in 1906, and New York would contend throughout the season, winning five consecutive doubleheaders and holding first place several times. But erratic pitching—the fewest complete games (99) and fourth-highest earned run average (2.78) in

*Popular Wee Willie Keeler was the franchise's first gate attraction, earning $10,000. A classic place hitter with extraordinary bat control, the 5'4", 140-pound right fielder "hit 'em where they ain't" frequently enough to lead the Highlanders in batting their first three seasons.*