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Managing: Its Evolution

In baseball's pioneering days a man named Fred Dunlap managed 1880s major league teams known as the Cleveland Blues, St. Louis Maroons, and Pittsburgh Alleghenys. His four-season record was 145 victories, 102 losses, five ties, one league pennant, and three second-division finishes.

Fred Dunlap could not read or write, according to old reports. He was illiterate.

During the 100-plus years since Dunlap last managed, baseball's dugout directors have often been described as far worse than "illiterate." Aware of Dunlap, some critics question the degree of intellect required of a manager. If Dunlap, with his acknowledged deficiencies, could win a pennant, must be an easy job, eh?

Mountains of evidence repudiate such a suggestion. Hundreds of firing notices, and dozens of managerial resignations citing various pressures, testify to the difficulties surrounding what has become an extremely high-visibility occupation. On the other hand, when analyzing only the wins-losses aspect of a manager's job, even the most successful of modern-day pilots will tell you that the manager's in-game decisions have but minimal connections with his team's final standing. Said Johnny Keane, a 1964 World Series victor at St. Louis, "If he's [a manager] really great he might be the difference in six to 10 games. If

he's lousy, of course, he could lose a lot. But for most of us, once the game starts it's really the players that have to do it for us." Whitey Herzog, a Cardinals' multiple pennant winner: "There are 50 games you're going to lose no matter what. You'll win 50 no matter what. Those other 50 are the one- or two-run games that can go either way. And of those, maybe a dozen or so can be directly decided by a manager's strategy." Casey Stengel, probably the most frequently quoted of managers, was an egoist of large proportion. But when he focused purely on the business of baseball, which was most of the time, he admitted after his Yankees came from a 3–1 deficit to win the 1958 World Series over Milwaukee, "I couldn't have done it without the players."

While managerial strategy during most games is arguably overemphasized by second-guessers, the importance of a man's leadership abilities in both the dugout and the clubhouse cannot be over estimated. The converse of Stengel's "I couldn't have done it without the players" quote is the occasional player's debatable opinion that "we *could* have done it without *that* manager."

The 1940 "mutiny on Lake Erie" comes to mind. Oscar Vitt, a hardboiled infielder in his Detroit playing days under Old Oriole Hughie Jennings, was Cleveland's skipper for three seaons—1938 through '40. His team ranked a competitive third in his first two seasons, then challenged for the 1940 pennant. The Indians lineup featured several All-Stars, including Lou Boudreau, Jeff Heath, Mel Harder, Ken Keltner, Bob Feller, and Hal Trosky. At midseason Harder, later an interim pilot at Cleveland, was the chief spokesman when a majority of players signed a petition calling for Vitt's ouster. Newspapers and opponents referred to the incident as "the Crybaby Rebellion." Harder presented the plea to owner Alva Bradley, who promised to investigate the complaints. Whatever his findings, he chose to keep Vitt (who was eventually dismissed after the season ended). Cleveland finished just one game behind flag winner Detroit, and many of the players believed a change in managership at midyear would have made a difference. Players weren't comfortable with Vitt, feeling that he was overly critical of mistakes. Boudreau, later a successful player-manager at Cleveland, remembers the situation this way: "Vitt was a good baseball man, but a two-timer. He'd tell you one thing, applaud your good efforts, but then criticize you behind your back. He was forever giving players hell on the bench in front of teammates."

A rarity—sacking a first-place pilot—occurred 43 years later. This time the owner acted long before the season was over. Manager Pat Corrales had the 1983 Phillies in first place in early July when owner Bill Giles abruptly fired him. Why? "It seemed to me that he disliked the players," Giles recalls. "He'd be in my office every other day saying so-and-so is no good, somebody else is an s.o.b.,

and so forth. I knew we had a chance to win the pennant [they did] and I didn't want the manager to mess up our chances. There was simply too much pressure in the clubhouse." General manager Paul Owens was sent "downstairs" as manager. He had players' respect, and the also had a close-up view for long-range personnel planning. Bench coach Bobby Wine, who later managed Atlanta briefly, was Owens's chief strategist.

More than a decade later Corrales reminisced about the 1983 circumstances: "I was shocked, sure. We were in first place at the time. But, hey, Bill was the boss. It was his team, and he can make those kinds of decisions. When I left I wished him and the organization success, and thanked him for the opportunity to manage. [Two weeks later Corrales was named as successor to manager Mike Ferraro at Cleveland.] The thing that disappointed me more than anything was that Bill didn't speak to me for 10 years, but during the 1993 National League Championship Series (NLCS) [Corrales was then a coach at Atlanta, which met Philadelphia in the playoffs], we had a nice little talk."

An earlier Phillies team, back in 1898, was more successful in ousting its manager than was Cleveland 42 years later. George Stallings, who would later manage the "Miracle" Boston Braves of 1914 to a World Series sweep of Connie Mack's Athletics, was in his second year at Philadelphia when players threatened to strike unless he was removed. The manager, throughout his 13-year piloting career, was tyrannical and abusive, according to the vast majority of men who played for him. A native of Georgia, Stallings was reputed to be a dignified southern gentleman at home in the off-season. But according to Hank Gowdy, one of his Braves catchers, once the season began, "tongue-lashing was an art with him."

Stallings was one of the few pilots of his day who were not player-managers. He normally eschewed wearing a uniform, managing instead in street clothes. Connie Mack also wore civilian apparel to the dugout. Burt Shotton at Brooklyn managed in street clothes, too, but when he and Mack retired following the 1950 season a regulation was instituted compelling managers to wear their team's uniform during games. Baseball is the only major sport with such a requirement. Connie Mack was also the last club owner who legally operated as field manager. A rule prohibiting that dual-capacity role was adopted after the Cardinals traded player-manager Rogers Hornsby to the New York Giants for Frankie Frisch after St. Louis won the 1926 World Championship. Hornsby, a stockholder in the Cardinals at the time, refused to sell his financial interest unless he received an exhorbitant buyout. Agreement was eventually reached, but the new regulation was soon put on the books. Mack was "grandfathered" in and allowed to own and manage at the same time.

Ted Turner, chief executive of the Atlanta Braves, was evidently unaware of the owner-manager prohibition. His 1977 troops had lost 16 straight when he chose to replace manager Dave Bristol with—himself. Turner "directed" the Braves to their 17th loss in a row, a 2–1 defeat at Pittsburgh. (Actually, Vern Benson and other coaches ran the ball game, but Turner, offering advice occasionally, was officially charged with the loss.) The next day Commissioner Bowie Kuhn notified Turner that his action was "not in the best interests of baseball" and ordered him to relinquish his managership. He did, returning Bristol to the post.

Turner was philosophical in commenting on his one game as skipper. "This losing streak is bad for the fans, no doubt, but look at it this way: We're making a lot of people happy in other cities!"

The team was Bristol's again for the rest of that season. Then he was gone, to resurface two years later in San Francisco. It begs that shopworn question, If a manager is fired for incompetency, then why do others hire him? Answers vary from owner to owner and sometimes involve box office attraction or, simply, impulse. The most logical conclusion relates to ability. Perhaps the situation was different in the early days of this century when the recycled men—most of them having been player-managers—were considered inspirational field "captains" whose all-star-caliber playing careers insured instant recognition by the ticket-buying public. Today, the question of Why him, again? can usually be answered more rationally: Recent history confirms that nearly all of the men who've managed three or more teams have been successful in their initial assignments. Perhaps not in terms of multiple championships, but in regard to their qualifications as thoughtful strategists and leaders.

Billy Martin, in addition to his five terms as Yankees leader, managed Minnesota, Detroit, Texas, and Oakland. Invariably, the team he took over rapidly improved its standings position. Tony LaRussa is handling his third big-league assignment at St. Louis now. He was successful at both Chicago and Oakland. Joe Torre, at Yankee Stadium, is engaged in his fourth managing job. He brought along solid credentials. Dick Williams, in spite of his ornery disposition, was hired by six major league owners because his previous managing was continually productive. The less-qualified managers do not get recycled. Thus, the "good ol' boy network" theory is largely a myth.

Jimmie Dykes was an exception. He was head man of six teams—White Sox, Athletics, Orioles, Reds, Tigers, Indians—during 21 seasons. Only Williams and John McNamara piloted as many different clubs (although Hornsby also is officially credited with six when his interim assignment with the Giants during John McGraw's 33-game absence in 1927 is included). Dykes never won a pennant but was considered a top-drawer inspirational leader.

Dykes forged this long-term formula for evaluating managers: "Managers are usually hired to restore a team's health. Their first year should be devoted to a study of the team's weaknesses and needs. New players should carefully be fitted into the pattern in the second season. By the third year the manager should be able to improve the team's standing. Only then can his talents be fairly judged." At his final four posts Dykes did not get three years to accomplish his task. Toward the end of his single season at Baltimore, when he correctly assumed his contract would not be renewed, Edgar Munzel of the *Chicago Sun Times* dropped by the Orioles' clubhouse and casually inquired, "What goes around here?" "Dykes," answered Dykes.

Managers' musical chairs were little more than a memory by the 1990s. Entering the 1998 season, 15—precisely half—of the major leagues' 30 skippers were in their first managing assignments. Ten others—Gene Lamont, Jim Leyland, Ray Miller, Bobby Valentine, Jimy Williams, Jim Riggleman, Buck Showalter, Art Howe, Johnny Oates, and Terry Collins—were then in only their second terms. It's true that a record number of manager firings occurred in 1991. However, with few exceptions, rookie managers took over.

Figures confirm that most managers, despite notions otherwise, do not automatically enter a recycle bin when their dugout time runs out. Of the 421 pilots since 1901, 256 of them—61 percent—managed only one team. Just one. Another 99 men were hired by two teams, but no more. Only 66 of the 421 big league managers signed on with three or more different clubs. We know that managers don't get the luxury of a second guess. They seldom get a second chance, either.

What aspects of the game, and the managing of it, have changed since John McGraw, Connie Mack, Clark Griffith, and their pioneering colleagues stamped their leadership imprints on it when the 20th century was new? On a continually growing list, over which managers have minimal influence, would be artificial turf, double-knit uniforms (much more comfortable than the baggy flannel of generations past), radio and television's pervasiveness, free agency's replacement of the old reserve clause, multimillion attendance figures instead of a few hundred thousand fans, standing room only at many spring training games, salaries (players' and managers'), and roster size.

Back in 1901 the new American League's managers rarely had tough lineup decisions to make. Only 18 players per team were permitted, and by May that was reduced to 14. Seventeen men on a team was standard in 1908, and in 1912, for the first time, rosters expanded to 25 from May 15 through August 20. Generally low attendance, World War I, and encroachment by the Federal League dictated the reducing of rosters to 21 in 1915, but since 1919 most teams most years have operated with 25 players. A typical roster breakdown

from 1906 would look something like this: seven pitchers (up from four or five just a year or two earlier), four infielders, three outfielders, and three catchers. Spare pitchers and reserve catchers would fill in as fielders if necessary. And typically, as we've seen, one of the players was also the manager.

Managers didn't have scouting reports back in the old days. They pretty much relied on their own observation of the opposition, and on appraisals offered by confidants. When there was scouting, it usually involved the evaluation of amateur youngsters rather than assessing the big-league opposition. One exception was Connie Mack's assigning pitcher Howard Ehmke to scout the Chicago Cubs, Philadelphia's forthcoming opponent in the 1929 World Series. Ehmke earned an A for espionage. On the mound for the Series opener, he struck out 13 Cubs, a World Series record that stood for 24 years. Today each big-league club has at least one advance scout on its payroll, in addition to scouts who scour the majors for players that might be targets for trades.

Ed Liberatore, a scouting official with the Reds, Dodgers, and Orioles for many years, confirms that scouts keep an eye on managers as well as on the players. "We try to focus on tendencies—does he often hit-and-run in particular situations, will he usually pitch out on the same count with a runner on first, is the guy a hothead whose team gets a little out of control when the manager's excited, does he always play the infield in with a runner on third and less than two out—things like that. And you notice if he might have a tendency to overmanage by using most of his bench early in a game or running out of righty or lefty pitchers. That kind of information is useful to the team you're working for."

Former Red Sox All-Star third baseman Frank Malzone has been scouting at the major league level for Boston for many years. He agrees with Liberatore. When scouting opposing managers, he focuses on areas of repitition. "For instance, I write down the count on the batter. You might discover that the manager always tries the hit-and-run on the same count." Malzone also talks about his daily responsibility to the Boston manager. "It's important to get your scouting report to your manager so that he and his coaches can evaluate the team's next opponent quickly and pass on their observations to the players. With modern technology—voice mail, e-mail, and so forth—there's no excuse for being late with a report. Right now I'm more involved with watching players in both leagues. Maybe we'll find somebody that might become available who's doing a better job than the guy we have at his position now. When I was doing advance scouting, Ralph Houk was a Red Sox manager for four years. He was always patient with us scouts and suggested you take a couple of days off once in a while to avoid getting stale. He'd call you for your ideas, and to let you know he appreciated your efforts. Eddie Kasko did that a lot, too."