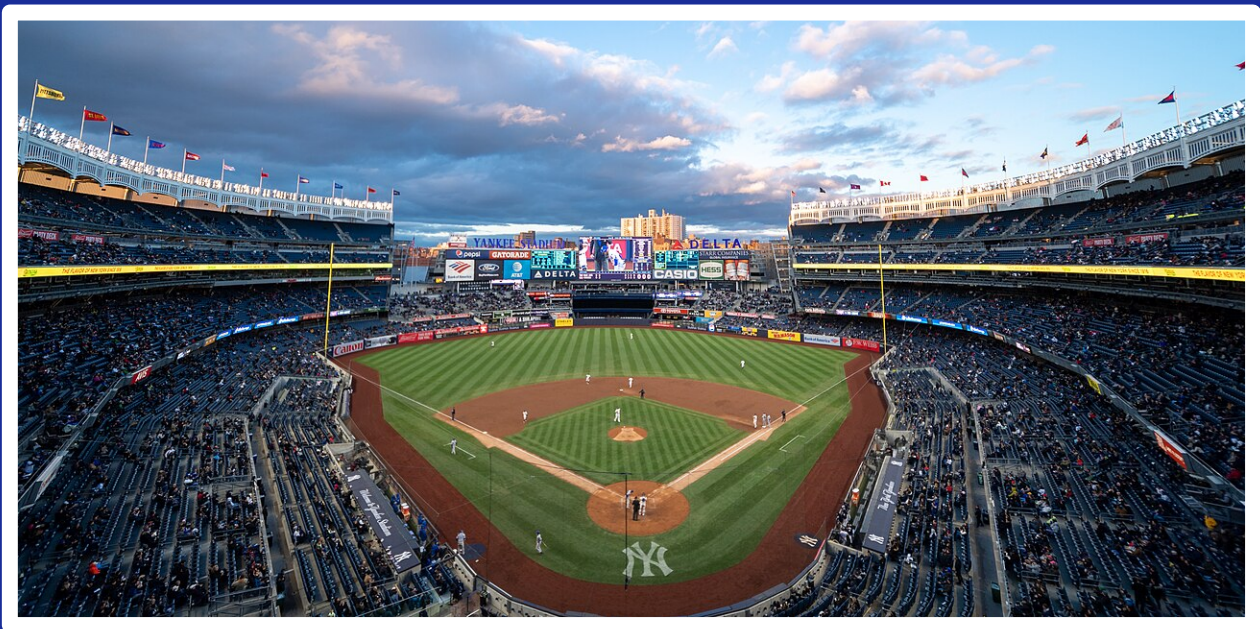# Yankalytics

An Analytic History of the New York Yankees Baseball Team by a Rabid Fan with Strong Opinions Backed up by Hard Fact and Cold Logic

By

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

There are lots of books about the New York Yankees. There are books about the Yankees before Babe Ruth and after. There are books about DiMaggio's Yankees and Mantle's Yankees. There are books about the "Bronx Zoo" of the mid 1970s and the "Core Four" of the 1990s. There are biographies, and memoirs and a few tell-alls. There are books that list the Yankees' greatest players, books of Yankee trivia, even books for Yankee haters.

There are also lots of books about what has come to be called "sabermetrics," the effort to analyze baseball strategy, baseball teams and baseball players with statistical data. Bill James likely has pride of place among the "sabermetricians" (who, I think, I will just call analysts). Bill James did not invent baseball analysis. As I suspect he would be quick to acknowledge, he had plenty of predecessors and plenty of successors. John Thorn and Pete Palmer, the authors and editors of *The Hidden Game of Baseball* and *Total Baseball* also deserve credit (or blame, if you are so inclined) both for assembling an incredible data set of baseball history and introducing ways of thinking about the massive pile of data they assembled. The methods and measures that James and Thorn and Palmer invented and popularized are now the standard stuff of baseball broadcasts, most (if not all) front offices, and more websites than I can count.

What there is not, though, is a book that thinks through the Yankees (or, so far as I know, any other team) with analytic principles. That's what I do here. The New York Yankees are

unambiguously the most successful franchise in baseball history, probably the most successful team in the history of American sports. They have won more league championships and more World Series than any other team. This book is my effort to explain what, on the field and occasionally off, made—and makes—the Yankees successful. It is about the great teams that won World Series and, sometimes, about the teams that flopped. It is about the Yankees' great players, their underrated stars, and those players who were--or are--overrated. I have opinions and I am not shy about stating them. But I try to back up my opinions with evidence. If you are looking for inside info, you won't find it here. I have nothing against inside info and I am happy to draw from those who have it on the pages that follow, but I have nothing new to add. If you are looking for anecdotes or stories, you won't find much of that here, either. I like stories and I like anecdotes but that's not what I'm (mostly) doing here. What you will find, I hope, is clear thinking and a way of thinking about the Yankees' history that goes beyond simply saying that this happened and then that happened and then we all cheered.

A Note to the Reader

Any time I open a book and see a note to the reader saying that I'm welcome to read that book in any order I please, I get mildly annoyed. I get annoyed first because I suffer from the kind of infantile ant-authoritarianism I associate with fourteen-year-olds: "I paid good money for the book—or made the effort to find someplace I could download it for free. Of course, I can read it in any order I please. Who are you to give me permission I don't need?" My second reason is almost the

exact opposite of the first. "I paid good money for the book—or made the effort to find someplace I could download it for free. This isn't a dictionary or an encyclopedia, which only someone really compulsive would try to read from beginning to end. I paid for your words *and* your judgment. It's your obligation—you, the author—to organize the book in an order that best tells your story or makes your argument. If I can read the book in any order I please, you haven't done your job"

So, it is with some chagrin that I tell you that you can read this book in any order you please, not that you need my permission. I have organized the book in the way I think makes sense. The introduction introduces. The next chapter explains some basic ideas. After that, most of the material follows in roughly chronological order, but not always and often the later material not only comes later but depends on concepts or measures I've introduced earlier. I recommend reading the book in the order it appears. But, if you have some special fetish about the 1933 Yankees or Gil McDougald, for example, I promise that you will not spoil the ending by skipping backwards or forward. There's some narrative but not too much and it's a lot easier to pick up in the middle than, for example, *War and Peace* or, for that matter, *Game of Thrones*. At the end, the Yankees have still won 27 World Series, in whatever order you count them.

PART I: PRELIMINARIES

CHAPTER ONE
THE NEW YORK YANKEES AND ME

I've been a New York Yankees fan since the 1958 World Series. The Yankees were down three games to one to the Milwaukee Braves, then swept the final three games. I could not tell you, without looking it up, who the winning pitcher was in any of those games or who had the key hit. What I do remember is this: When Enos Slaughter came up to bat my father, who was not a big sports fan, wandered past the TV I was watching. "Enos Slaughter," he said with some surprise, "He's my age." It was true. My father was 43. Slaughter was 42. I was ten. It was, I think, the first time I had realized my father was any particular age other than generic grown up. It was certainly the first time I realized that baseball players, like the rest of us, start young and grow old. I've been learning from the Yankees ever since.

When I was in junior high and the first couple of years of high school, baseball gave me something to talk about over cafeteria lunches. I'm amazed by how little I remember from those years, but I do remember that my friend Dickie was a Cardinals fan and my friend Robbie was a Dodgers fan. My infatuation with the Yankees faded a little in my last couple of years of high school and my years in college. I imagined that I had better things to do and the Yankees in those years (1965-70) stunk. I even carried on a brief infatuation with the Mets. I

was at the game at Shea Stadium in 1969 when the Mets clinched their first pennant. My interest in the Yankees revived in the early 1970's as the Yankees themselves revived with Thurman Munson and Roy White and, later, Ron Guidry and Craig Nettles and Willie Randolph. I was delighted when they won the pennant in 1976 and ecstatic when they won the World Series in 1977.

In 1978 I moved from New York city to Western Massachusetts. My now wife had been offered—and accepted—a job at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. I spent a lot of time hemming and hawing about whether I would go with her—it seems borderline insane in retrospect—before packing up and leaving the city. It was, for me, a horrible year. I was in graduate school, pretending to work on my dissertation, its own special kind of hell. I was isolated. I knew nobody. We were living in a housing development in a type of countryside that seemed completely alien to me. (I remember spending a fair amount of time driving around late at night looking for the all-night diners and fruit stands I had frequented in New York. It took me years to realize that there weren't any because there wasn't much reason to stay up late.) And, insofar as I did see anyone, they were all Red Sox fans. The Yankees got me through the year. 1978 was the year the Yankees trailed the Red Sox by 14 games in mid-July then won 52 of their next 73 to finish the season in a tie with Boston. They won the pennant on Bucky Dent's famous home run over the Green Monster in Fenway Park.

I spent much of the next twenty years splitting time between Western Massachusetts and New York. I taught for a

few years at Columbia and for a decade at Stony Brook on Long Island before moving to Western Massachusetts full time in 1997. I think the Yankees may have become all the more important to me precisely because I was not in New York. They were my way to claim that, wherever I might be living, I was, underneath it all, a New Yorker. I've found a few other Yankee fans here, also transplanted New Yorkers (thank you Greg), and just like middle school it has given us something to bond over.

There was a lot I did not know when I became a Yankee fan in 1958. I did not know that they had been the dominant team in baseball for nearly four decades. I did not learn about that until the next year when the Yankees' brief fall to last place in late May inspired a spate of newspaper articles about their glorious history. I obviously did not know that the Yankees would win an additional 16 American League Championships over the next half century. I also did not know that Enos Slaughter was, in all likelihood, a diehard racist, who had tried to organize a boycott when the Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson and then spiked Robinson at his first opportunity. (Slaughter denied all this. The evidence seems to be pretty strong that it's true.) I also didn't know that the Yankees had been one of the last teams to promote a Black player to the major leagues. I didn't know that George Weiss, who was running the Yankees, was a skinflint or that another George would come along who was just as bad. (I should be fair: Steinbrenner was clearly difficult to work for, but he also had moments of great generosity and did restore the Yankees to glory.) I did not know that Lou Gehrig was a mensch or that

Derek Jeter and Aaron Judge would carry on his tradition. I did not know that Joe DiMaggio had been aloof and unfriendly or that Mickey Mantle had probably been too friendly. I did not know that the Yankees would, over the years, employ their fair share of wife abusers, petty thieves, and borderline sociopaths as well as "many fine people." All of this matters, but not to how I feel about the Yankees. Rooting for a team is a lot like loving your kid. You're happier—at least I am—when your kid does well and does good. If the kid does not do well and does not do good, you're unhappy and you worry—but you love her nonetheless. (Let me stipulate that my daughter, who is an excellent young woman, has never cost me a minute of concern, at least not recently.) A long time ago, the philosopher William James wrote about the "moral equivalent of war"—something that would bring out the virtues of loyalty, the sense of belonging to a group bigger than oneself, without the awful costs of war. For many of us, that's sports. For me, it's the Yankees.

I am a Yankee fan, but I am also a particular type of Yankee fan. When I lived in New York I probably went to a couple of games a year. These days I'm lucky if I get it together once a year to take the drive down to Yankee Stadium. XM Radio and ESPN and the MLB network have made it much easier to follow games even from Western Massachusetts. In retirement, I have time at least to check in on most games. But I will admit I rarely sit down and watch a game without also cooking dinner or answering email or even surfing the internet. There are few pleasures equal to sitting in the stands at Yankee Stadium on a beautiful spring or summer day. But that has as

much to do with the weather as the game. On TV? If I'm really paying attention, I would much rather watch basketball or football. Trying to keep track of what's going on in a basketball game or football game is hard, even with full attention. In basketball, there are ten players in almost constant motion, moving with the ball and without, switching on defense, battling for position. In football, there are 22 players, also all in motion at the same time. Baseball isn't just slower—although it is that—but also much more linear. The pitcher throws, the batter swings, the fielder fields. Yeah, I know there's more than that, but baseball is much more about individual actions taken in sequence than is the case for any other team sport I can think of. Have you ever thought about how much action there is in baseball? In an average game these days, there are about 74 plate appearances for the two teams combined. Roughly 23 or 24 of those appearances are walks or strikeouts. Say 50 balls are in play over the course of an entire game. And how long does a play take? Well, I just timed an Anthony Rizzo triple that scored Aaron Judge from first base, about as exciting a play and about as long a play as you're likely to see in a game. From the time Rizzo swung his bat until he pulled up at third was the grand total of about 10 seconds. Multiply that, very generously, by 50 balls in play and you still only have about 8 minutes of action over the course of a game that typically drags on for three hours or more. And it's not just that baseball is linear and slow, it also isn't very visual. Yes, the controlled fury of Mickey Mantle's swing was great to see and I have just spent a season suspending all other activity whenever Aaron Judge came to bat. A long running catch in the outfield is exciting to

watch. So is a well-turned double play.   But compare any of those plays to a Michael Jordan jump shot or a Magic Johnson pass or Ja Morant on an impossibly acrobatic drive. Compare any of the baseball plays to a twisting run by Barry Sanders or a long pass from Matt Stafford to Cooper Kupp. Maybe you don't agree with me. That's okay but I think the data back me up. By just about any measure the National Football League outdraws MLB on television.   The data on baseball and basketball are more complicated.   It seems as if nationally televised basketball games draw better than nationally televised baseball, but regional baseball draws better than regional basketball. That suggests to me that people watch baseball because they're rooting for a particular team while people watch basketball because they like the game itself. What I find surprising about this is not that baseball or basketball outdraws the other. What I find astonishing is that it's even close (especially without considering the enormous market for college basketball and the growing market for women's basketball).   Thirty years ago, it was not. Although TV ratings for both baseball and basketball have fluctuated over the last twenty years, they have much more clearly dropped for baseball. Only about one third as many people now watch the World Series as did in the 1980s.

Baseball, in my not particularly humble opinion, is a lousy television sport. But the very things that make baseball a lousy television sport make it very good for some other media—for radio, for newspapers, for internet websites, for books, both fiction and fact, and, not least, for statistical analysis. Much as I like basketball on TV, I cannot listen to it on the radio. Even

the staccato pace of radio announcers can't keep up with the even faster pace of a good basketball game. They cannot keep up with everything that's happening. They cannot make me see the picks, the cuts, or the screens let alone the athleticism. In contrast, the languid pace of baseball is perfectly suited to radio. An announcer has all the time he or she needs to describe the action and still have plenty of time to wax nostalgic about old teams and players, to talk about the players and their backstories, to speculate about strategy. If anyone is as old as I am and remembers the rambling style of Phil Rizzuto (the Yankee announcer for 40 years)—talking about the game only as it interrupted wandering monologues about his plans for dinner or his delivery of birthday wishes—try to imagine him as a basketball announcer. It just doesn't work. I also have trouble reading about basketball or football in the newspaper or, these days, on internet websites. There are too many scores or too many plays to keep in my head. I can't see how the defense is set. I can't see the strength or the speed. Baseball, though, is linear in the same way a newspaper article is linear. I don't miss seeing things going on simultaneously in baseball, the sort of thing the written word has trouble conveying, because there aren't many in baseball. A baseball game has a few key moments—a couple of scores, a threat that doesn't materialize, a dramatic fielding play. Those key moments lend themselves perfectly to a newspaper (or website) summary. That article can describe just about everything I care about (especially if there's also a box score) without my feeling I've missed out on a lot.

For reasons that are less clear to me, baseball also lends itself to books. Basketball has its share of good movies (*White Men Can't Jump*, *Hoop Dreams*, to mention two) as does football (I'm partial to *North Dallas Forty*). So does baseball (*Bull Durham* and *Eight Men Out*, among many others). But I can't think of a any great novels about basketball or football. Baseball has Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* and W. P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe* (the basis for the movie, *Field of Dreams*) and Phillip Roth's *Great American Novel* and Robert Coover's *Universal Baseball Association.* Baseball also has more than its share of good non-fiction writing. There are few basketball or football equivalents to Roger Angell's *New Yorker* essays or Pulitzer Prize-winning David Halberstam's *Summer of '49* or Michael Lewis' *Moneyball*.

Most of all, baseball is good for statistics. Here, too, it helps that baseball is linear. A single fan, sitting in the stands with a scorecard and pencil, can keep track of every play—every hit, every walk, every fielding play, every run scored and every run driven in. Baseball is also, by its very character, particularly well-suited for a kind of dual entry bookkeeping which has a certain beauty for those of us born with the soul of an accountant. Every hit is also a hit given up. Every run scored is also a run allowed. By statistics, I do not mean just the fancy calculations that have become commonplace on websites like Baseball Prospectus as well as the new-fangled analytics departments of major league teams. I also mean simple counts and simple averages. Baseball has more than its share of sacred numbers—Babe Ruth's 60 home runs in 1927, Joe DiMaggio's 56 game hitting streak, Roger Maris's 61

in '61, Aaron Judge's 62 in 2022 or a team record of 125 wins in 1998. These are all counts. There are also simple averages that resonate deeply--a .300 or a .400 batting average, a .500 on base average. I am sure I am not the only boy who learned long division by dividing hits by at bats. More, I think, than any other sport baseball tells its story in numbers.

A long time ago, I had a copy of Hy Turkin's *Baseball Encyclopedia*. My guess is that someone gave me a copy for my Bar Mitzvah. That would have made it 1961. I didn't know it at the time but the *Baseball Encyclopedia*, the first of its kind, had originally been published in 1951. The copy I had must have been the third or fourth edition. By current standards, it was pretty primitive. It did have a list—a register—of every player who had appeared in the major leagues since 1876 but all it said about each player was date and place of birth, with a list of years played for which team and at what position. For each batter, it listed games played and batting average. For each pitcher, it listed games played and won-lost record. That was it: No home run totals or runs batted in, no earned run average or games saved let alone any of the complicated calculations like OPS (On Base plus Slugging Average) or Wins Above Replacement (WAR) that have become pretty much standard in recent years. But that was more than enough—especially as it was accompanied by a brief history of the game, annual standings, a review of each World Series (with line scores for every game), a list of Hall of Famers, and a section on seasonal and career records. And it just kept getting better. In 1969, MacMillan published its own *Baseball Encyclopedia*, a monumental book in many senses. It took a

staff of 21 three and a half years to do the research. It cost $25, a huge sum for a book in 1969. It was over 2000 pages. And it included not just batting average but also runs and runs batted in, doubles triples and home runs, bases and balls and slugging average, for every major league player, ever, plus an equivalent list for every pitcher, ever. In 1989, the Macmillan Encyclopedia was succeeded, in turn, by Pete Palmer and John Thorne's *Total Baseball*, a book of equal heft and greater accuracy, that was also the first encyclopedia to include what we now think of as "sabermetric" statistics.

I still have my copy of *Total Baseball,* but I rarely look at it anymore because there is now the internet. I do not know the full history, nor anything close, of baseball internet sites. Over the years I have pored over more than I can remember. I do know that there is Baseball Prospectus, which I thought was terrific before they started charging more for access than I was willing to pay, and Fangraphs (famgraphs.com) which I still think is terrific. Most of all, though, there is Baseball Reference (baseball-reference.com). Baseball Reference contains a range and depth of information I could not have imagined—that possibly nobody could have imagined—when I opened my first baseball encyclopedia sixty years ago. It includes all the "counting stats" from the old encyclopedias (home runs and doubles and caught stealing and pitchers' strike outs and home runs allowed). It also includes "sabermetric" statistics that nobody had thought up yet—Wins Above Replacement and Win Probability Added and Wins Above Average and Clutch, all of which I try to make sense of just a little later. It includes these statistics for individual players and for teams. It allows

you to compile lists of mosts and leasts, to sort and search for even the most arcane combinations. (What Yankee, for example, hit the most triples in a season while getting caught stealing more than ten times? The answer, I just learned with a couple of clicks, is Snuffy Stirnweiss with 22 triples and 17 caught stealing in 1945. Lou Gehrig is second with 17 triples and 14 caught stealing in 1930. I would not have guessed that.) What are the most strike outs in a season by a Yankee pitcher older than 30 and shorter than 6'? (Whitey Ford, 209, in 1961. I would not have guessed that either.) And that's only scratching the surface. I can find a box score for every game the Yankees have ever played and a play-by-play record for most games. How did the Yankees do the day I was born? Well, they won a double header against the St. Louis Browns, the first game 4-3 on a walk off single by Bobby Brown with one out and the second game 3-0 behind a three-hit shutout by Vic Raschi, who raised his record to 7-1. Bobby Brown, the hero of the first game and later President of the American League, batted leadoff and went two for four to raise his batting average to .355. Attendance was 56,101 and the Yankees ended the day three games behind Cleveland. You really can look it up.

There is now much more information than anybody could possibly absorb in a lifetime. The issue, it seems to me, is no longer how we can get more information (although that will surely happen as Major League Baseball begins to trace the "spin rate" of every pitch thrown and the "exit velocity" of every batted ball). Rather, the issue, it seems to me, is making sense of the information we already have. This book is my effort to

do just that, not as a baseball fan in general but as a Yankee fan in particular.

Analytics

Like just about everyone else who has tried to think analytically about baseball for the last forty years, I have followed the path set by Bill James.   Bill James was not, is not and, so far as I know, has never claimed to be a particularly sophisticated statistician.   For fancy statistics, for averages carried out to a few extra decimal points, for the massive data management that characterizes some of the best websites, even for particularly accurate calculations, you are better off looking elsewhere. If James was breaking a path, others, (like Palmer and Thorn in *Total Baseball* and *The Hidden Game of Baseball* and all of Baseball-Reference) have paved that path with huge piles of data, all carefully measured. Still, what Bill James knew better than anyone else was both how to ask interesting questions and that you could actually answer those questions with solid evidence.

I first saw a Bill James *Baseball Abstract* in 1981, while James was still self-publishing. An old friend of mine—Robbie, the Dodger fan—had ordered a copy through the mail direct from the author. The next year, Ballantine Books bought the rights and made the next several editions easily available in just about every Waldenbooks and Borders Books, long before Amazon put both chains out of business. The *Abstracts* were a revelation. I long ago loaned my copies of the old *Abstracts* to another friend who never returned them--you know who you are—so I'm working from memory. Here are some of the things I do remember. Reggie Jackson had a reputation as a big

game player. Was it true? Well, James had an elegant solution. Look at the games where the attendance was above 50,000 or so. Did Reggie actually do better in those games than other games? The answer was no. Whitey Herzog, the Cardinals manager, had said something to the effect that his great shortstop, Ozzie Smith, saved a run a game. "Really?" James asked. If that's true, where was the evidence? As it turns out, Smith was making about 5 ½ plays a game when the average shortstop was making about 5. That's very good but there's no way it translates to a run a game. Is the sacrifice bunt a good play? Well, no. Except in very unusual situations, giving up an out isn't worth advancing a runner. And that's even before you consider that sacrifice hits don't always work. And on and on it went.

The early *Abstracts* were jammed with insights about teams, players, and strategies. I hope to have done some of the same for the Yankees in the pages that follow. For now, though, I want to step back from the trees and look at the forest. I think the early analytics—Palmer and Thorn and many predecessors as well as James-- had three really fundamental insights that, once acknowledged, now seem so obvious that it's hard to imagine we hadn't had them all along.

The first insight seems so obvious that it seems odd anybody even had to state it. This was that the team that scores more runs and gives up fewer runs wins more often than the team the scores fewer runs and gives up more. At the level of a single game, that's about as obvious as it gets: A win is a game in which you score more runs than the other team. It is, however, less obvious at the level of a season. Conventional

wisdom held—and may still hold—that great teams win close games. James showed that that isn't exactly true. Great teams and even just good teams actually win a smaller percentage of one run games than of blow outs. In fact, there is a very predictable relationship between the runs a team scores, the runs it gives up and their won/lost percentage. James even invented a basic formula for this. In a tribute to High School geometry, he called it the Pythagorean theorem which it vaguely resembles. Winning percentage equals runs squared divided by the sum of runs scored squared and runs given up squared(W/L%=R2/(R2+OR2)). (If you did not remember—I did not and had to look it up—the original Pythagorean Theorem states that in a right triangle the square of the hypotenuse equals the sum of the squares of the other two sides.). James' formula has held up pretty well. Most analysts now raise runs and opponent's runs to the power of 1.83 rather than squaring them but that is not exactly abandoning the basic principle. There is also a corollary of sorts to James' "Pythagorean theorem." If the point is to score more runs than the other team, then players who help you score and help keep the other team from scoring are helping your team win. That seems pretty obvious, too, but it brings me to the second insight.

The second fundamental insight of the early analytics was that you could disaggregate team results into individual contributions. This needs some explanation. We did know, all along, that a home run is more valuable than a single. We did not know, though, how much more valuable. We knew that stealing a base helped the offense but that a caught stealing

hurt. We did not know what the break-even point was—what likelihood of success there had to be for a stolen base attempt to be worth the risk of getting caught. Despite all the Little League coaches yelling, "a walk's as good as a hit" with the bases loaded, we did not know how to think about bases on balls. (They were generally much undervalued.) You cannot figure out the answer to any of those questions by looking at individual players. You can see how many runs a player scored or how many runs he drove in, but both runs scored and runs driven in depend on what the batters did before or after. You can assign values to different events—say one to a single, two to a double, three to a triple, four to a home run as is the case in figuring Slugging Average (total bases divided by at bats). But those weights are, while not arbitrary, imprecise. You can, however, answer all of these questions at a team level. If you look at two teams and they are exactly alike except that one team gets more walks than the other, how much does scoring go up? Of course, you aren't going to find a lot of teams that are exactly alike in every respect but one. You can, however, do statistical manipulations to see how much runs scored goes up when you look at one type of event (say a home run) but "hold constant" or control for other values (hits, walks, stolen bases and so on). This is what is known as regression analysis. It allows you to write an equation that takes the general form of assigning different weight to different events (singles, doubles and so on) based on their actual contribution to runs scored. And here's the key: If we know, from team data, what an event (an out, a walk, a home run) is worth, then we can assign those same weights to an individual. That's what

I mean by disaggregation. I don't mean to deny the complications of the calculations or, even more, the difficulties of data management. (I think regression is the sort of thing you hear about toward the end of a demanding college undergraduate course in statistics or maybe in graduate school.) But the basic logic is pretty simple. The runs a team scores are the result of the aggregation of many separate events. To figure out the contribution of an individual player, you disaggregate. This is exactly what Palmer and Thorn did with a measure they called "linear weights." Here's the original formula, based on team data and then applied to individual batters.

> Runs=.47 x the number of singles + .78 X doubles + 1.09 X triples + 1.4 X home runs + .33 X (walks plus hit by pitchers) + .3 X stolen bases - .6 X caught stealing -.25 X outs - .5 X outs on base.

The formula is long but not all that hard to understand as long as you don't panic at the sight of numbers. You get runs by getting hits, more for a home run than a triple, more for a triple than a double, more for a double than a single. Stealing a base adds runs but getting caught stealing costs runs. Making an out, whether at bat or on the base paths, reduces the number of runs. Since Palmer and Thorn introduced their original formula, various people (including Palmer and Thorn themselves) have tinkered with it, specifying slightly different versions depending on available data. I do not trouble myself with those specifications. I am happy to have Baseball-Reference or Fangraphs figure them out for me. But I do keep in mind the underlying logic.

The third very general insight of baseball analytics involves equally complicated calculations but an even simpler logic. It is that context matters. In 1968, an extreme pitcher's year, the American League as a whole had a batting average of .230. In 1936, an extreme hitter's year, the American League as a whole had a batting average of .289. That means that a player who hit .275 would have been an above average hitter in 1968 but a below average hitter in 1936. We also know that some parks are easier to hit in than others. It is, I think, part of baseball's charm that fields are not standard sizes as they are in football or basketball. But it does add a layer of complication. If we look, for example, at 1978, one of my favorite baseball years, we see that the Red Sox outscored the Yankees 796 to 735. But if we look just at road games, the Yankees outscored the Red Sox 377 to 351. The notion, very general at the time, that the Red Sox had better hitters than the Yankees was an illusion created by Fenway Park. Yankee hitters, playing half their games in a park harder to hit in, did not have raw statistics (hits and runs and batting average) equal to the Red Sox. But, if you could put both teams in the same ballpark—make the context the same—the Yankee hitters were, in all likelihood, either just as good or even better than the Red Sox. Palmer and Thorn take the high road. They quote Shakespeare: "There is nothing either good or bad, but context makes it so." Exactly.

Palmer and Thorn developed a series of calculations to capture their "theory of relativity." (I have never been able to decide if the high culture references—Pythagoras, Shakespeare, Einstein—are meant seriously or tongue in

cheek. I hope it's the latter.) What they did was pretty simple. Take a statistic—batting average or earned run average. Adjust it for "park effects" (a little tricky but still not requiring fancy math.) Then divide the adjusted statistic by the league average. That gives you what they called, reasonably enough, "relative batting average." So, to reuse the example above, the .275 hitter in 1968 when the league average was .230 would have a relative batting average of 120 (.275/.230 and then multiplied by 100 for ease of reading). In contrast, the .275 batter in 1936 would have a relative batting average of 95 (.275/.289 and multiplied again by 100 still for ease of reading). It was all simple (except maybe for the park adjustments) but also pretty convincing.

I do, though, want to be clear about what Palmer and Thorn were doing with relative batting averages and relative earned run averages and relative anything else. The park adjustments do a reasonably good job of comparing players as if they were playing in some (altogether imaginary) neutral field. They do something different for comparisons over time. They do not measure how good a hitter was or a pitcher was so much as how *dominant* he was. They are not the same thing. If you look at any other sport, it's pretty obvious that athletes have gotten bigger, stronger and faster. It's most obvious in individual sports where athletes compete against the clock or tape measure (rather than against defenders who have also gotten bigger, stronger and faster). Roger Bannister ran the first four- minute mile in 1954. Since then, the record has been broken no less than eighteen times and currently stands at 3 minutes 43 seconds. Or watch a clip of a basketball game from

the 1950s or 1960s, with lumbering big men who wouldn't consider taking a shot more than a few feet from the basket. Then take a look at a contemporary NBA game with guards who are taller than centers were not that long ago and seven footers who are shooting from the three-point line. Or compare the heights and weights of the New York Giants' defensive line to their heights and weights even twenty years ago. The differences are overwhelming. Is there any reason to think baseball is any different? Baseball does not rely as much on height or strength or speed as other sports, but it does rely on them. Here's an example. In 1920, the year he joined that Yankees, Babe Ruth was 6'2" and weighed 215 pounds. There were only two other regulars in the American League who were as tall as Ruth and only one who was both as tall and as heavy. At one point in 2022 , the Yankees were rotating four players through their outfield. Aaron Hicks, at 6'1" and 205 pounds was the shrimp of the group. Joey Gallo was 6'5" and 250. Giancarlo Stanton was 6'6" and 245. Aaron Judge was 6'7" and 282. And this is not even to mention first baseman Anthony Rizzo at 6'3" and 240 or a half dozen pitchers 6'3" or taller. Bigger may not always be better but bigger, stronger, faster are still substantial advantages in baseball. So, when we compare relative batting averages or relative earned run averages over time, we are not comparing who's better but who's more dominant within a context.

A Dilution of Talent?

I hear the objections already. Maybe players really are bigger and stronger and faster but baseball—unlike basketball or football—depends more on skill than speed and strength.

Showing that players are bigger and faster and stronger doesn't prove anything. In fact—the objections go—old time players may have even been better than they are now because now talent has been diluted. This argument takes two forms.

Form one: Not as many kids are playing baseball now as used to. Basketball and football and, unAmerican as it may be, even soccer are drawing off kids who, fifty years ago, would have been swinging bats and shagging flies. Could be, but I doubt it. I doubt it, first, because I'm not sure that, at the highest levels, skills transfer all that easily from one sport to another. Think about Michael Jordan, the consensus pick for the greatest basketball player ever, struggling with a White Sox minor league team. Or think of Deion Sanders, a Hall of Fame defensive back in football, struggling for playing time with the Yankees, the Braves, the Reds and the Giants. Could baseball have lost some players to other sports? Sure, but it's unlikely the numbers are very high. I doubt it, second, because the rewards of a career in baseball are much higher than they used to be. In 1967, the minimum wage for a major leaguer was $6000. In the same year the median family income in the United States was $7200. Most players worked at something other than baseball during the off-season. (Richie Hebner, for example, got the nickname "digger" because he worked as a gravedigger in a bunch of cemeteries managed by his father.) Read through the biographies of players in the first half of the twentieth century. Many include stories about parents, worried about rewards that were not only modest but uncertain, encouraging their sons to become doctors or lawyers or take over the family farm or hardware store. The stories that we

read now are about the kids who did not get discouraged, but there must have been thousands if not millions who gave up their baseball dreams to be what they imagined were responsible adults. And today? The median family income is just under $80,000. The minimum salary—remember, that's *minimum--* salary in Major League Baseball is over $560,000. You think there are as many talented kids giving up their careers in baseball because they think a degree in business administration will pay off better? Doesn't seem likely to me.

That's the first form the dilution-of-talent argument takes. The second is that expansion has watered down talent. There used to be 16 teams, with 25 players each. That's a total of 400. Today there are 30 teams and 750 players. Isn't that dilution? The simple answer is no.

Think about it this way. In 1946, there were 400 major leaguers in a population of 141,000,000. That's one major leaguer for every 352,000 Americans. But Blacks, almost exactly 10% of the population, were not allowed in the major leagues. Subtract that 10% and we're down to one major leaguer for every 317,000 white Americans. Today, there are 750 major leaguers but 332,000,000 Americans, none of whom are barred from baseball by reasons of race. That's one major leaguer for every 440,000 Americans. That's the opposite of dilution. But let's take it one more step. In 1946, of the 400 major leaguers with the most at bats, 385 were born in the United States. (Of the other 15, seven were born in Canada, two in Cuba, and the rest from a variety of locations, including one from Puerto Rico which Baseball-Reference seems not to count as part of the US.) In 2021, of the 750 major leaguers

with the most at bats, 233 were born outside the United States—in the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Mexico, Japan, Korea, among others. I will not propose we add the population of all of Japan, Korea, and Latin America to the population base major league baseball draws on. But I will propose that we subtract the foreign-born players from the total in the major leagues to give us a more precise measure of how hard it is to make the majors. In 1946 it was one US born major leaguer for every white 317,000 Americans. In 2021, it was one for 630,000. It's harder to make the majors now than at any time in the past. That is the opposite of dilution.

CHAPTER TWO
UNDERSTANDING ANALYTICS

Here are the principles again. I think they're hard to argue with.

1. You win games by scoring more runs and giving up fewer runs than your opponents.
2. The number of runs a team scores or gives up is the aggregate result of the performance of individual players and can be disaggregated into the contribution of individual players.
3. Context matters.

Beyond those very general principles there are a lot of more specific claims I took away from James' *Abstracts* and from Palmer and Thorn's *Hidden Game*. They include a new emphasis on walks, a deemphasis on "small ball" (sacrifice bunts and stolen bases), a better awareness of how players' abilities develop (and decline) as they age, a skepticism about the importance of defense and about "clutch" performance. Some of these claims (about walks, for example, and small ball) have held up well and become the new conventional wisdom. Some of them (most notably about "clutch" performance) have been controversial and others (the deemphasis on fielding) turned out to be simply wrong, at least in the ways I understood them. Most of these are issues I'll deal with when—and if—they come up. But there are a few issues and measures that are so pervasive I should say something about them from the get-go.

OPS

Let's start with OPS, not because it is the best of baseball statistics but because it is probably the most familiar of the new measures. OPS stands for **O**n base average **P**lus **S**lugging average. OPS takes two fractions and adds them together. It is not an elegant statistic. It is, in fact, exactly the sort of statistic our fifth-grade teachers warned us about. On Base Average (OBA) takes the sum of hits, walks, and hit by pitchers and divides them all by the total of plate appearances for a hitter, a team or a league. It is a measure of how often a player gets on base. (2/5 or .400 is very good. ½ or .500 is sensational. Over the course of the American League's 120-year history, average has been about 1/3 or .333.) Slugging Average (SA) is the number of total bases (one for a single, two for a double, three for a triple, and four for a home run) divided by the total number of at bats. (3/5 or .600 is very good. ¾ or .750 is sensational. The average for the American League has been about 2/5 or .400.) OPS is simply the sum of OBA and SA. And this is where I hear my fifth-grade teacher screaming, "YOU CAN'T DO THAT." And why not? You can't do it because OBA and SA have different denominators, plate appearances for one, at bats for the other. They aren't the same. Plate appearances include walks, sacrifice flies, hit by pitcher. At bats include none of them. AND YOU CAN'T ADD FRACTIONS WITH DIFFERENT DENOMINATORS.

Well, there are probably a lot of things that my fifth-grade teacher told me not to do that I did anyway. Pete Palmer, who is much more sophisticated mathematically than I am, was well beyond fifth grade when he invented OPS. He knew what he

was doing. OPS is not elegant, but it works. OBA predicts runs scored at a team level better than does Batting Average. OBA plus SA predicts runs scored at a team level much better than either one alone. It is not the single best measure of a player's overall hitting but it's pretty close. If this were a math textbook, I would leave it out. But it isn't. If you see OPS listed on a webpage or a stadium scoreboard or in the graphics of a broadcast, it's a big step up from batting average. I use it a lot on the pages that follow because it's both reasonably meaningful and generally familiar. OPS+ is simply relative OPS, OPS divided by the league average adjusted for park effects and multiplied by 100. That is to say, it is the exact equivalent of relative batting average or relative anything else.

Fielding

The conventional quantitative measure of fielding is fielding average, the percentage of plays made cleanly, without error. What counts as an error is at the judgment of an official scorer. Usually, that judgment involves the *mis*handling of a ball the fielder reached. It usually does not involve a ball a fielder failed to reach. Once upon a time—or, a bit more specifically, in 1901, when the American League began play—teams averaged about two errors a game, about one in every 20 plays. These days, with better gloves and possibly better skills, teams average roughly one error every other game, about one in every seventy plays. Fielding percentage—or the inverse, error percentage, which is more dramatic—just doesn't tell us as much as it once did.

It's also not clear that fielding percentage ever told us very much. It's certainly the case now, and probably has been the

case over the course of American League history, that the number of batted balls that a fielder reaches varies more, often much more, than the percentage of batted balls he (or she) handles cleanly. The number of batted balls a player does reach is called range. We can figure range easily enough. How many putouts does a center fielder make per game? How many assists does a shortstop make per game? We know, for example, that in 2021 the Tampa Bay Rays center fielders, mostly Keven Kiermaier, recorded 408 putouts. Yankee center fielders, a rotating cast of ten different players over the course of the year, recorded only 351. That's a difference of 57 plays, much bigger than the trivial difference in the number of errors (4 for the Rays, 1 for the Yankees). We also know that Detroit Tiger shortstops accumulated 464 assists, the most in the league, and that the Yankee shortstops (mostly Glayber Torres, having an awful year in the field) had only 363, the least in the league. That difference of 101 assists is much larger than the difference of 8 errors (15 for Tiger shortstops, 23 for Yankees, also most in the league).

OK. So range is more important than fielding percentage. But I can already hear the objections. How do we know how many balls were hit to the shortstop—and how hard were they hit. Doesn't it matter if the batter is left handed or right handed—and doesn't that depend, at least in part, on whether the pitchers are right handed or left handed? And for center fielders, doesn't it depend on whether the pitchers are fly ball pitchers or ground ball pitchers and on the dimensions of the outfield, as well as the range of the left fielder and the right

fielder?   The short answer to two long questions is one word: yes.

And here is the basic difference between fielding statistics and hitting statistics. For hitters we know what a turn is. It's an at bat. We can figure what percent of the time a player gets on per 1000 at bats: That's called On Base Average. We can figure out batting average: All we have to do is take walks and a few other events out of the total at bats and figure hits as a percentage of the remaining at bats. But in fielding we can't do that because there aren't turns. On any particular at bat, any fielder can make a play but there's no fixed order to those plays, the equivalent of a batting order. With range factor, we know the numerator (the top number in a fraction) but not the denominator (the bottom number). That's a problem.

There is a fielding statistic that does identify both a numerator and a denominator. It's called DER, for Defensive Efficiency Rating. I like DER. It's simple. It's intuitive. It's more or less the defensive equivalent of batting average. (In fact, it's almost the exact inverse of BABIP, or batting average ion Balls in Play, which is batting average after you take strike outs and home runs, which are not balls in play.) DER doesn't do everything. It needs a park correction. It doesn't take into account how far or how hard a ball is hit. It doesn't take into account differences among pitchers.   But you could say all the same things about batting average. DER (again like batting average) isn't a perfect tool but it's a decent tool and a lot better than fielding percentage. It's simple and concrete, both of which I count as prime virtues. Of balls put in play, what percent are turned into outs?

There are, however, two problems with DER, one minor, one major. The minor problem is that it's hard to find. On Baseball Reference the only place I can find it is in annual league fielding statistics. It isn't among their sortable statistics. I can't find it all on Fangraphs. This doesn't mean it isn't there someplace I haven't looked. It does mean it's pretty obscure. That's the minor problem.

The major problem is that DER is a team statistic. Deciding who gets credit for a play made is pretty easy. That's why we count put outs and assists. That's the numerator. But the denominator is based on a team statistic. Absent fixed turns, deciding who gets the blame for a play not made is a lot harder. And that is the challenge of fielding statistics. Chances are not fixed (as for batters) but they can be estimated.

This is where it gets pretty wonky. Here's Sean Smith's explanation of Total Zone Rating, a system he devised and that is used on both Baseball-Reference and Fangraphs. It's based on box scores and used by both B-R and Fangraphs for seasons through 2001.

> For most games, I have information on which fielder makes each out, and the batted ball type. Without information on the hits, I have to make an estimate. I look at each batter's career rates of outs by position. For example, if 30% of a batter's outs are hit to shortstop, then every time that batter gets a hit the shortstop is charged 0.3 hits. Repeat for every position. I look at batting against righthanded and lefthanded pitching separately, as switch hitters will have very different ball in play distributions depending on which side of the plate they hit from. I sum the fractional hits for

every fielder, combine with plays made and errors, and get a totalzone. This is then park adjusted, and converted to runs.

I have not seen the detailed formulas used to calculate Total Zone Rating. They may be proprietary. But I do know that they have to be detailed and complicated. There have to be different formulas for each position. Within each position they have to vary on what kind of data is available for different years. I cannot even imagine the data management problems. Matching every fielding play to each batter's career rates of outs by position? Yikes. There are all sorts of adjustments, each of which requires thinking through. How do you evaluate first basemen, whose putouts are less a result of their own range than of the other infielders? How do you treat pop ups that either the second baseman or shortstop could have caught? How do you evaluate catchers, whose contribution is less plays made than pitch calling and what has come to be known as pitch framing? How do you handle shifts from box score data? Total Zone Rating may not require exactly a leap of faith, which I might not be willing to make, but it does require at least a long hop. Am I entirely confident in TZR? No way. Do I wish I understood in more detail all of the assumptions it is making? Probably, although I suspect my patience would wear thin. Do I think Total Zone Rating means more than either fielding percentage or uncorrected range factors? Absolutely.

There are also various confirmations around for TZR. There is consistency, among players, from year to year, which is what you would expect from a meaningful statistic, and also a fairly steady decline with age, which is also what you would

expect. The players who top the all-time list of runs saved (derived from TZR and then convertible to wins by the "Pythagorean Theorem") are players who were also, by reputation, great fielders: Brooks Robinson, Mark Belanger, Ozzie Smith, Andruw Jones, Adrian Beltre, Roberto Clemente, Andrelton Simmons, Willie Mays. That statistics and reputation align is reassuring. But it also makes it all the more notable when statistics and reputation do not align. When that happens, I do not want to claim that the stats are right and the reputation wrong. I do think, though, that red flags have to go up all over the field, that we have to look at the data more carefully, that we have to look at different types of data where we can. And that is just what I intend to do.

Since around 2003, both Baseball-Reference and Fangraphs have switched from box score based estimates to fielding statistics based on direct observations of batted balls, both using data from an organization called Baseball Information Solutions. Although B-R and Fangraphs use the same data, they process that data a little differently (something called Ultimate Zone Rating in Fangraphs, Defensive Runs Saved in B-R). The major difference, so far as I can tell, is that UZR/Fangraphs (which, I think , has included pitch framing data since 2008) tends to give more credit to contemporary catchers than does DRS/B-R.

I will use fielding data in the pages that follow. But I'll keep my fingers crossed behind my back. I take the fielding data more seriously when it is overwhelming. I'll take it more seriously when it is based on observation than on play-by-play descriptions (since 2002) and more seriously when it is based

on play-by-play descriptions than on box scores alone. (roughly 1950 to 2000). I will not insist that fielding data is meaningful to the tenth of a run or even to a run or maybe even ten. I will try to remember that comparing over time is iffy, since the ways fielding has been figured has changed over time. But I still think that some data is better than none. Without the data, you're likely to get nutty claims, both about one player compared to another and about the magnitude. With the data, we might not get it right but we're likely to come closer.

One Number to Rule Them All

Palmer and Thorn started it. In *Total Baseball*, they included a new statistic, a measure they called Total Player Rating. They had one version for position players and another for pitchers. I'll concentrate on the version for position players because it is both where the search for The One Number to Rule Them All has been most intense and where the complications of that search are most easily seen. Using their system of linear weights, Thorn and Palmer calculated how many runs above (or below) average each batter contributed to his team over the course of a season. They did the same for fielding runs, based primarily on how many plays the fielder made compared to the average player at his position. They did the same for base running and then added an adjustment for position played (so you're comparing shortstops to shortstops and first basemen to first basemen). Take the sum of all that and you get a total number of runs above (or below) average a player contributed over the course of a season or career. Then divide that sum by the number of additional runs a team needs (as predicted by the Pythagorean Theory) to add a win.

Usually, this number is around 10 but it will be slightly higher in a good hitting season (when runs are plentiful) and slightly lower in a good pitcher's season (when runs are at a premium and, thus, each run is more valuable). The direct descendent of Thorn and Palmer's TPR is Wins Above Average (WAA), which can be found on many websites (most easily Baseball-Reference). The exact calculations are a little different from website to website and all have been fine-tuned from Palmer and Thorn's original formulas, but the logic is exactly the same.

These days not a lot of people use TPR and not a lot more use WAA. The gold standard these days is WAR—Wins Above Replacement.   Baseball-Reference lists WAR in the first column of its summary stats for each player. Fangraphs puts it in the final column, as if to emphasize its summary character. ESPN updates it every day.   WAR has entered into MVP debates. It has helped establish Mike Trout's reputation as the best player in baseball (although Trout himself has also helped). It is cited on baseball broadcasts and on baseball talk shows.   WAR, though, is not much different from WAA. The difference—quite literally the only difference—is what is used as the baseline. WAA compares a player to an average major league player. WAR compares that same player to something called replacement value, the rough equivalent to a good minor league player. Take a look, if you want to, at any position player's line on Baseball-Reference on the chart they call "Player Value." It includes a column for batter's runs, a column for fielding runs, a couple of columns for base running runs, and a positional adjustment. It then adds them all up to get Runs Above Average then divides that total by the number of

runs needed to create an additional win. If that sounds familiar, it should. It is exactly Wins Above Average. But then Baseball-Reference (and Fangraphs and anyone else calculating WAR) takes one more step.   They add in something they call Replacement Runs, add that to Runs Above Average and then divide that new sum by the same magic number used to convert Runs Above Average to Wins Above Average. That's it. So what is a replacement run?   Let Fangraphs, which has an excellent glossary, speak for itself:

> So far, all of the components have been relative to league average. However, using average is not an ideal baseline because being an average player has value and because using Wins Above Average would not allow you to distinguish between a player who had one PA and a player who had 600 average PA. To this end, we compare players to replacement level, which you can think of as a freely available player such as a minor league free agent or very poor MLB bench player.

Let's unpack that. First, comparing a player to the major league average is too high a standard. Major league players are very good and even an average player can have value to his team. Second, the better comparison is to a "replacement level" player, the sort of player you can find in the high minors or pick up in a minor trade. A replacement player, according to both Fangraphs and Baseball-Reference is one who, if the entire team were made up of other replacement players, would generate a won/lost record of about .300. Third, figure out how many runs it would take (the Pythagorean Theorem again) to lift a team with a .300 record to average (which is to say .500).

Those are replacement runs. Over the course of a season for a full-time player, Runs above Replacement will be roughly a bit more than 22 runs higher than Runs Above Average and WAR will be roughly 2.25 "wins" higher than WAA. This all makes reasonable sense. A team of replacement players would win about 49 games (30%) in a 162 game schedule. A team has roughly 14 full-time slots if you count both position players and pitchers. Multiply 14 (the number of players) by 2.25 (the difference between replacement level and average) and you get 31.5. Add 31.5 to 49 (the number of games a replacement level team would win) and you get 80.5 wins, just about average. OK, that's pretty cool and extremely satisfying for those of us who like balancing their checkbooks. But I'm not quite convinced.

If WAR and WAA stand in a pretty much fixed relationship to each other, why bother with two arcane statistics when one arcane statistic would do as well? The answer is that the relationship isn't exactly fixed. Take a look at the chart below. It shows the top ten Yankee position players by WAR and games played, then divides WAR into Replacement Wins (what it would take to go from replacement level to average) and WAA.

Player	WAR	G	RepW	WAA
Babe Ruth	143.4	2084	34.1	109.3
Lou Gehrig	113.7	2164	34.8	78.9
Mickey Mantle	110.2	2401	30.9	79.3
Joe DiMaggio	79.2	1736	24.0	55.2
Derek Jeter	71.3	2747	41.4	29.9
Bill Dickey	56.5	1789	24.8	31.7
Yogi Berra	59.7	2116	25.5	34.2

Alex Rodriguez	54.0	1509	22.7	31.3
Willie Randolph	54.0	1694	23.4	30.6
Bernie Williams	49.6	2076	30.9	18.7

Babe Ruth is at the top of the list for both WAR and WAA. Mickey Mantle and Lou Gehrig flip between second and third but are very close on both lists. Joe DiMaggio is fourth in both WAR and WAA. None of that is surprising. But then look at Derek Jeter. He's 5th on the list of highest WAR but slips behind Yogi Berra, Bill Dickey, Willie Randolph, and Alex Rodriguez on the list of WAA. What's going on? Well, look at the column for Replacement Wins. It goes up and down more or less (not exactly) in relation to games played, at the rate of roughly 2.25 per 162 game season. That makes sense. Replacement Wins give a player credit for wins even if he is below average as long as he was above replacement level. Jeter played more games than anyone else on the list, more than any other Yankee ever, so he accumulated the most Replacement Wins. WAA also depends on games played, but much less directly than WAR. WAA also has a baseline, but that baseline begins at the ceiling for Replacement Wins (average) and has no ceiling of its own. WAR and WAA are, in effect, measuring slightly different things. WAR is putting more of a premium on just showing up. WAA is putting more of a premium on excellence. Which is better? It depends. It turns out there is no One Number to Rule Them All. If I'm trying to evaluate the entirety of a player's career, I would usually prefer WAR. Do I want to "penalize" Jeter for the last six years of his career, each of which he was (as measured) below average? Not really (although I do think Jeter could have retired a year earlier. He was well below

replacement level his last year.)   We don't start subtracting hits or home runs from a player's total as he ages. Why should be subtract from our summary measure of his value? We should, you might argue, give a player credit for playing even when he was no longer an above average player so long as he had some value to his team.

If, though, I'm trying to think about how you put together a winning team, I find it a lot easier to use Wins Above Average. For the Yankees, in particular, I'm not interested in what makes them an average team (those replacement level runs).   I'm interested in what makes them a contender—the runs *above* average. I also find wins above average easier to think with. If I tell you that Mickey Mantle in 1956 was 11.2 Wins Above Replacement, I have to stop and think about what that means. If I tell you that Mickey Mantle in 1956 was 9.3 Wins Above Average, I know immediately what it means: An average team in 1956 would win 77 games, half their 154-game total. Add Mickey Mantle and the win total projects up to 86.3 games (77 plus 9.3). Mickey Mantle, on his own, would make an average team good but not quite championship level. Most of the time WAR and WAA line up pretty closely with each other but WAA seems to me a little easier to understand. I use WAA more than I use WAR but this is not a matter of faith. I use them both, each as appropriate to the questions at hand.

WAR and WAA are similar in that they both aspire to reduce a player's contribution—hitting, fielding, running the bases—to a single number. They are also alike in that they count the same events with the same weights. They both attempt to take park effects into account and they both take

overall offensive or defensive contexts into account by limiting comparisons to averages within a single year and (before interleague play) a single league. But they are also alike in that both WAR and WAA *ignore* game context. There's nothing wrong with that. Most of the statistics we're familiar with do exactly that. In calculating batting average, a hit is a hit, no more, no less whether it happens with the score tied in the bottom of the ninth or the top of the sixth with the score 20 to nothing. This is also true for calculating on base average, slugging average, or earned run average. (Just about the only conventional statistic that does consider context is Runs Batted In but most analysts these days downplay RBI because there are huge differences in RBI opportunities.)

Win Probability Added (WPA) is different. You know the little box on the bottom left of the ESPN gamecast screen and on some broadcasts or cablecasts? It shows something called "win probability." It goes up or down with every play. WPA is the total of changes in win probability over the course of a game or a season. This is not a simple calculation. It involves, first, assigning a win probability to every score in every inning (2-1 in the first, 6-2 in the eighth). Second, it involves assigning a run value to every "base/out" situation (man on second, none out; man on third, two out). Third, it involves calculating how much an "event" (a double with a man on second and one out while trailing 4 to 1) changes the probability of winning. These probabilities are based on historical data and reported in Tom Tango, *The Book—Playing the Percentages in Baseball.* Tango's book is not an easy read. I'm very happy to have someone do that calculation and the bookkeeping that goes

with it for me. I can, however, follow the logic as can you. Here are some examples, all taken from Game 6 of the 1958 World Series, the first I watched:

- Score tied 0-0, top of the first inning, 2 out and nobody on: Yankees' chance of winning: 46% (just below 50% because there are already two out) Hank Bauer homers to make Yankees' chance of winning 57%. Bauer is credited with .11 WPA (.57-.46).
- Score tied 2-2, top of the ninth, man on first with one out. Yankees' chance of winning: 50%. Jerry Lumpe grounds into a double play. Yankees' chance of winning: 37%. Lumpe is credited with -.13 WPA (.37-.50).
- Score tied 2-2, top of the tenth, no one on, no one out. Yankees' chance of winning: 50%. Gil McDougald homers.   Yankees' chance of winning: 85%. McDougald is credited with .35 WPA (.85-.50).
- Yankees lead 3-2, top of the tenth, two out, men on first and third. Yankees' chance of winning 85%. Moose Skowron singles. Man on third scores. Man on first goes to second. Yankee's chance of winning: 93%. Skowron is credited with .08 WPA (.93-.85).

Where WAR and WAA consider hits and walks and home runs and strike outs independent of the game situation, WPA tries to measure what a player contributes within a game situation and thus to the probability of winning a particular game. McDougald's home run in the top of the tenth counts more than Bauer's in the top of the first. Skowron's RBI counts

less than McDougald's because the Yankees were already ahead. Lumpe hitting into a double play reduces the Yankee's chances of winning. Where WAR and WAA more or less intentionally ignore "leverage," WPA includes it. For WAR and WAA, each home run counts the same as every other home run, each out the same as every other out. For WPA, the value of each home run or of each out depends on the game situation. (For what it is worth, Bill James seems to prefer WPA type statistics to WAR type statistics on grounds that the point of hitting—or fielding or pitching—is to win actual games rather than hypothetical games.)

Does that make it a better measure? Not necessarily. If you believe that "clutch" is really just luck, you might want to look at WAR or WAA as a better measure of an underlying ability. WPA also has some of the problems of RBIs: It depends, in part, on opportunities. It also doesn't include fielding. It is not the One Number to Rule Them All any more than WAR or WAA. But if you want to see what a player has done in the context of a game or a season, it's pretty good. To simplify just a little, you might say that WAR and WAA measure how *good* a player is, WPA measures how *valuable* he has been.

Offense, Defense, Hitting, Pitching, and Fielding

Baseball is almost freakishly well balanced between offense and defense. By this I don't mean that baseball has found some magical level of scoring—4.8 or 5.3 runs per game per team or whatever—that represents a sweet spot in somebody's imagination. I mean something much more verifiable.

What I mean is that offense and defense each has about the same effect on winning. It doesn't have to be this way. Imagine you're playing a game of cornhole, where the point is to throw a sack through a hole in a board. Defense, preventing your opponent from scoring makes no difference in who wins, because there is no defense. Or imagine a league like this:

	W	L	RUNS	RUNS AGAINST
Team 1	22	10	150	100
Team 2	19	13	125	100
Team 3	16	16	100	100
Team 4	16	16	100	100
Team 5	13	19	75	100
Team 6	10	22	50	100

In this league, which is mathematically possible even if it isn't very likely, the won lost records depend entirely on the offense. The defense makes no difference because there's no difference in defense from team to team. Reverse the numbers for runs scored and runs against and you would get roughly the same standings, but they would depend entirely on defense. Offense would make no difference.

That's all hypothetical, of course. In practice—and with a lot of effort—I can find some American League seasons where there's more variation in scoring and some where there's more variation in runs given up. But it's usually pretty close. That's what I mean by balance. (I would be very interested to know if there's a similar balance in other sports. I have my guesses, but no data.)

Here's how this applies to the Yankees. The Yankees are supposed to be an offense first team.   They are the "Bronx Bombers."   Their stars have always been hitters. They're the team of Baba Ruth and Lou Gehrig and Joe DiMaggio and Mickey Mantle, sluggers all, plus Yogi and Derek and Aaron Judge. Pitchers? There's Mariano Rivera. Andy Pettitte and Ron Guidry and Red Ruffing and even Whitey Ford just aren't at the same level as DiMaggio and Mantle and probably not even Berra or Jeter.   But, as it turns out, offense has not consistently carried the team more than defense.

How do I know this and what do I mean? One way to look at it is to compare how many Wins Above Average the team accumulated on offense with how many Wins Above Average it accumulated on defense. By that standard in the team's 119-year history (through 2021) defense has outperformed the offense 60 times. The offense has outperformed the defense 59 times. That's close. For the Yankees' 49 first place teams, the numbers are a little different. There have been 30 teams led by the offense and 19 led by the defense.   That's a meaningful difference but hardly overwhelming.

Another way of looking at the balance is a little less precise but has the advantage of highlighting a couple of, well, peculiar teams. Over the same 119 years, the Yankees have had 63 teams—just over half—that were above average on both offense and defense, just 12 that were below average on both. This is very roughly what you would expect from a team as successful as the Yankees.

	OFFENSE ABOVE AVERAGE	OFFENSE BELOW AVERAGE
DEFENSE, ABOVE AVERAGE	63	25
DEFENSE, BELOW AVERAGE	19	12

If we limit ourselves to first place teams, the pattern is more striking. 41 of the 49 were above average on both offense and defense. Makes sense: That's how you finish first. Even less surprising, none of the first place teams were below average on both offense and defense. That makes sense, too: You don't finish first if you don't score and you can't keep the other team from scoring. The most interesting first place teams, at least to me, are the ones that were below average in *either* offense or defense. The three Yankee teams that were below average offensively but still finished first were the 1922 team (the season Babe Ruth was suspended for a big chunk of the year) and 1963 and 1964, when a group of excellent young pitchers made up for injuries and aging among the hitters. The first-place finishers that were below average on defense were the 1926 and 1928 teams, led by Ruth and Gehrig in their primes, and also the 2004, 2005 and 2019 teams

	OFFENSE ABOVE AVERAGE	OFFENSE BELOW AVERAGE
DEFENSE, ABOVE AVERAGE	41	3
DEFENSE, BELOW AVERAGE	5	0

And here's where it gets a little more complicated. Notice, if you haven't already, that I've been saying *offense* and *defense*, not hitting and pitching. That's because they aren't the same thing. Offense is hitting plus base running, which is to say, almost all hitting. Defense is more complicated. Some of it is pitching and some of it is fielding. It's not hard to find the years when the Yankees were good (or bad) on defense. Just compare how many runs they gave up compared to the league average, with some tweaks for ballpark effects and quality of opposition. Determining how much of the credit (or blame) should go to pitchers rather than fielders or fielders rather than pitchers is a lot trickier. The standard approach these days is to give pitchers credit for what have been called the "three true outcomes"—strike outs, walks and home runs. They are "true" in the sense that they are (mostly, almost entirely) independent of fielding. In contrast, ever since someone with the unlikely name of Voros McCracken discovered (invented?) something called DIPS (Defense Independent Pitching) the tendency has been to give fielders the entire credit for balls in play. DIPS, now more often called FIP for Fielding Independent Pitching, assumes that pitchers have little or no control over how balls are put in play. Another way of saying this is that the BABIP— batting average on balls in play—dependents entirely on fielders and not at all on pitchers. Now, this is not literally true. There are some pitchers who are more likely to induce ground balls and others who are likely to induce fly balls. There are probably even some pitchers who induce weakly hit balls. But a fairly substantial body of research has shown that McCracken was more right than wrong. We do have to divide credit for

defense between pitchers and fielders. We can't give the entire credit to both without double counting (which would undermine the double entry type of logic that is fundamental to all baseball statistics). What McCracken and his successors have shown, at very least, is that we will do far better giving credit to fielders than to pitchers for balls in play, if we understand that BABIP (or Defensive Efficiency Ratio, effectively the inverse of BABIP) is much more a fielding statistic than a pitching statistic.

So, I will use FIP (again, Fielding Independent Pitching, the acronyms are coming hot and heavy) and other statistics that assume what McCracken argued. Am I convinced that type of statistic is entirely right? No. Am I convinced that it gives us a more accurate measure of the relative importance of pitching and fielding than any alternative? Yes. And am I convinced that defense and pitching should be separated if we want to understand how defense as a whole works? Absolutely.

What does this mean in practice and what does it mean for understanding the Yankees in particular? Well, one thing it means is that there can be above average defensive teams where the pitching is actually below average, and the fielding is making the pitching appear better than it is. There are a fair number of teams like this in Yankee history. Among first place finishers, this includes the 1941, 1951, 1952, 1955, 1956, 1958, 1960, 1962 and 1976 teams. Remember: This is not to say those teams were bad at keeping other teams from scoring. They weren't. It's simply to say that their success at keeping the opposition from scoring (defense) had more to do with fielding than pitching.

Looking at FIP or DIPS or BABIP or DER also means that it's possible to find lousy defensive teams where the pitching was actually above average but the quality of the pitching was disguised by bad fielding. These teams include the Yankees of 1905, 1967, 1983, and 2013 none of which came close to finishing first. But it also includes the 2004, 2005 and 2020 teams, two first place teams and a playoff qualifier. I will come back, at various points, to what it means for evaluation of individual pitchers that they were playing in front of good fielders (who made them look better than they were) or bad fielders (who made them look worse than they were).

Distinguishing pitching from fielding also lets us revisit the distinction between teams led by offense and teams led by defense. If, instead of looking at offense and defense, we look at the contribution of position players (hitting, base running, and fielding) and pitchers, we get slightly different outcomes. Over the course of 119 seasons the Yankees have had 65 teams where the position players outperformed the pitchers. Among the 49 first place finishers, we now get 35 led by the position players and only 14 led by pitching. But that isn't the whole story. From 1921 through 1964—the Yankees' glory years, Yankee position players outperformed the pitchers in 38 of 44 years. Among the Yankees' 29 pennant winners in that stretch, only four were led by pitching (1922, 1937, along with 1963 and 1964, the last two years of the Great Run). Those truly were the "Bronx Bombers" especially if you stipulate that you mean fielding as well as hitting. Since 1996, the year of the first championship since 1978, it's been very different. Of 26 teams, 17 have been let by pitching. From 1996 through 2006, there

were ten first place finishers (every year but 1997). Nine out of those ten got more value from pitchers than position players. Who would have known? Not me.

Bronx Bombers?

From 1915, a few years before the coming of Babe Ruth, through 1961, the Yankees led the American League in home runs 33 times, including twelve years in a row from 1936 through 1947, all after Ruth retired. From 1962 through 2003, the Yankees led the league in home runs exactly once (strike shortened 1994.)   Since 2004, the Yankees have led the league in home runs 9 times.

Conclusion? Bronx Bombers is always alliterative. It is only sometimes descriptive.

Overrated, Underrated

The origin of this book was a list I was carrying around in my head of the most overrated and underrated players in Yankee history. The book has expanded since then, but that list remains the core.

Caught up in the spirit of radio talk shows, I was probably looking for an argument.   Could there be a better way to do it? To call a player overrated (or underrated) is to say you disagree with how somebody else has rated him. That's an argument. And it's impossible to avoid. Let's say, even, that "everybody" agrees a player (say Derek Jeter or Reggie Jackson) is overrated. Well, that is itself a rating and the very consensus means that he is *not* overrated. Ditto, in reverse, for a player "everybody" agrees is underrated.

The hard part in making up a list of overrated and underrated players is separating the rating from performance.

Much of the time, we take a player's election to the Hall of Fame or as MVP or to the all-star game as measure of how good a player is. Not here. Election to the Hall of Fame is a rating. So is selection as an MVP or an all-star. Sure, election to the Hall of Fame or MVP is related to performance. I do not think baseball writers or baseball fans are completely detached from reality. But writers and fans—and players and managers—make mistakes. These days, we have pretty good measures of how good players are *independent* of more subjective ratings. These measures are the tools of sabermetrics. I don't imagine that these tools—WAR (wins above replacement) or WAA (wins above average) or WPA (win probability added)—are perfect for all the reasons I've just discussed Baseball Reference's version of WAR isn't the same as the version on Fangraphs. Both are better at measuring hitting than fielding. They are even worse at measuring how good a teammate a player was, let alone whether that even matters. There's no simple answer to whether we want to take context into account the way WAR and WAA do (park and era) or the way WPA does (game situation). Neither can they help figure out what it means to call someone great: Does it mean for a season? Does it mean for a career? Does it mean what he actually did or what he might have done if circumstances had somehow been different (if Joe DiMaggio hadn't lost three years to WWII or if Yankee Stadium had a short wall in left field instead of right field, if Mantle hadn't hurt his knee)? WAR and WAA and WPA aren't perfect. They aren't even particularly close. There is no One Number to Rule Them All. But WAR, WAA, WPA and a bunch of other statistics, taken individually and together, are as

good as we are likely to get. They are measures of what a player has done that are at least independent of how that player is rated. For a starting point, that's more than good enough.

Getting a sense of how a player has been rated is actually harder than getting a sense of how good he was. Performance takes place on the field, where at least these days, just about everything a player does is measured carefully and recorded compulsively. Ratings are all over the place. They are in writers' votes for the Hall of Fame and MVP. They are in fan votes for all-star games. But they are also in the volume of cheers and boos when Mickey Mantle came up to bat and in the fans dressed up in Judge's robes when Aaron comes to bat. They are in the blather of talk shows, in the excitement of a ten-year-old finding a baseball card of her favorite player, in the stories parents tell their children. Most of this is not measurable. Some of it is. Baseball-Reference, which is generally intriguing, has a particularly intriguing set of tables that show, position by position, how well players have done in the MVP vote compared to how well they've done in WAR. This table isn't much use for years before 1931, when MVP voting took on its contemporary form. Neither does it take into account how MVP votes are shaped by team performance. But that's okay. It's still a very powerful tool and one I rely on. We also have Hall of Fame votes. We also have managerial decisions. If a manager keeps playing someone who isn't producing, that suggests the player is overrated, not by everyone but by someone very consequential. Ditto, if a manager sits a player who turns out to be a star, it suggests he was underrated. We have all sorts of other judgments: If

Connie Mack or Joe McCarthy or Branch Rickey or Casey Stengel or Joe Torre says a player is great, that's a rating and one that carries a lot of weight. There are also players' rating of each other and, for that matter, players' ratings of themselves: If Joe DiMaggio insisted (he did) on being introduced at old timers' games as baseball's "greatest living player," that's a rating too. I do not claim that there's anything precise about doping out how a player was rated. I don't imagine that you can reduce ratings to a single number on a single dimension, as WAR attempts to do for performance. I'm quite sure that somebody else could have done a better job of figuring out ratings than I have. Still, there's a lot of information out there about how players have been rated if you know where to look for it. The burden is on me to specify where the rating is coming from.

Below is a table, that shows, for prominent Yankees whose careers began after 1931, their "shares' of the vote for Most Valuable Player. A "share" of an MVP vote is the total of points a player received in each vote as a percentage of the total possible vote in that year. (For example, a player who wins the MVP with a unanimous vote wins one share. One who receives 150 points out of a possible 300 receives half a share.) The table compares MVP shares to WAR "shares," with the latter based on league leaders in WAR, such that "a player finishing 3rd in WAR receives a share similar to the MVP share of a typical 3rd place finisher in MVP voting." The fourth column shows the ratio of MVP shares to WAR shares. A number below 1 suggests the player was underrated. A number above 1 suggests he was overrated. The final column subtracts MVP

	MVP	WAR	RATIO	DIFFERENCE
Ricky Henderson	2.46	4.7	0.52	-2.24
Alex Rodriguez	5.23	7.1	0.74	-1.87
Mickey Mantle	5.79	7	0.83	-1.21
Charlie Keller	0.58	1.6	0.36	-1.02
Joe Gordon	1.57	2.4	0.65	-0.83
Graig Nettles	0.56	1.3	0.43	-0.74
Roy White	0.15	0.7	0.21	-0.55
Snuffy Stirnweiss	0.86	1.4	0.61	-0.54
Brett Gardner	0	0.4	0.00	-0.4
Robinson Cano	2.14	2.5	0.86	-0.36
Willie Randolph	0.04	0.3	0.13	-0.26
Hank Bauer	0.36	0.5	0.72	-0.14
Bobby Murcer	0.66	0.7	0.94	-0.04
Moose Skowron	0.18	0.2	0.90	-0.02
Curtis Granderson	0.69	0.7	0.99	-0.01
Aaron Judge	2.07	2	1.04	0.07
D. J. Lemahieu	0.99	0.8	1.24	0.19
Roger Maris	1.4	1.2	1.17	0.2
Tommy Henrich	0.7	0.5	1.40	0.2
Bernie Williams	0.51	0.3	1.70	0.21
Chris Chambliss	0.22	0	∞	0.22
Tom Tresh	0.35	0.1	3.50	0.25
Mark Teixera	0.86	0.6	1.43	0.26
Gil McDougald	0.95	0.5	1.90	0.45
Paul O'Neill	0.62	0.1	6.20	0.52
Jorge Posada	0.78	0.2	3.90	0.58
Jason Giambi	2.19	1.6	1.37	0.59
Mickey Rivers	0.72	0.1	7.20	0.62
Phil Rizzuto	1.89	1.2	1.58	0.69
Bobby Richardson	0.77	0	∞	0.77
ElstonHoward	1.5	0.4	3.75	1.1
Derek Jeter	2.77	1.6	1.73	1.17
Thurman Munson	1.5	0.3	5.00	1.2
Dave Winfield	2.2	0.9	2.44	1.3
Joe DiMaggio	5.45	4	1.36	1.45
Don Mattingly	2.22	0.7	3.17	1.52
Bill Dickey	2.02	0.4	5.05	1.62
Reggie Jackson	3.28	1.6	2.05	1.68
Yogi Berra	3.98	1.5	2.65	2.48

shares from WAR shares. A negative number suggests the player was underrated. A positive number suggests he was overrated. Note that the table includes records both with the Yankees and with other teams. This is particularly relevant for Henderson, Rodriguez, Giambi, and Jackson, all of whom won MVP awards with other teams.

The table is a good guide to my choices for the most overrated and most underrated players in Yankee history. Willie Randolph, Graig Nettles, Roy White, Charlie Keller, and Mickey Mantle are all on my list of underrated players. Yogi Berra, Bobby Richardson, Reggie Jackson, Dave Winfield and Joe DiMaggio are all on my list of overrated players. The missing spots either played before 1931 (Wally Pipp, underrated; Hal Chase and Joe Dugan, overrated), did not do well enough in either MVP votes or WAR to earn a spot in the table (Frankie Crosetti), or, for reasons I explain later, players whose value seems to me underrated by WAR (Elston Howard, Gil McDougald).

The two most notable omissions from the table are Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. I have a lot to say later about both players—it would be close to a capital offense to write a book about the Yankees without saying a lot about them--but not in the context of overrating or underrating. Ruth led his league in WAR ten times, more than anyone else, and his WAR share of 11.6 is also the highest ever, comfortable ahead of Barry Bonds and Willie Mays. Ruth won only one MVP but that's because there was no vote for MVP during Ruth's first two years with the Yankees. Ruth was a unanimous choice for MVP in 1923 but, by the rules then in effect, he was not eligible for the award

from 1924 through 1928. There was no MVP vote at all in the American League in 1929 or 1930. So, Ruth was not eligible again for the MVP until 1931 when he was already 36 years old. (He did the league in WAR that year but finished fifth in the MVP vote. By most measures, Ruth was the most dominant player ever and is widely recognized as the most dominant player ever. That's neither underrated or overrated.   Gehrig won two MVP awards, in 1927 and again in 1936. He was not eligible for the award in 1928 because he had won the previous year and there was no award in 1929 and 1930. It's unlikely Gehrig would have won the MVP award any of those years, but it is very likely he would have drawn significant support. (He finished second in the league in WAR in one of those years, third in a second year, and fifth in the third.) Despite missing out on three years of MVP voting, Gehrig's MVP share is second all-time among first basemen (5.45, behind Albert Pujols at 6.81). By WAR shares, Gehrig is first all-time among first baseman (6.5). Gehrig was not the best player ever, by any measure, but he was, by almost all measures, the best first baseman ever and is almost a unanimous choice for the best first baseman ever. Like Ruth, he was neither overrated nor underrated. He was just really good.

If it isn't already clear, let me make it explicit: To say a player is overrated doesn't mean he was a bad baseball player. On my list—really a lineup-- of overrated Yankees, I have no less than four Hall of Famers. I do not mean to claim that they weren't good. Two of them (Berra and DiMaggio) I think were genuinely great. I just mean that they weren't as good as some people claim. Ditto, in reverse, for the underrated: I certainly

don't mean they were all great players. They weren't but they were better than some people thought. That said, if there were a game between my all underrateds and my all overrrateds, I would go with the underrated.

PART II: THE FIRST DYNASTY

CHAPTER THREE
THE BEFORE TIME – 1903-1919

The American League began play in 1901, with teams in Chicago, Boston, Detroit, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Washington, Milwaukee, and Baltimore. In 1902, the Milwaukee team moved to St. Louis, where it stayed until 1954, when it moved to Baltimore. The original American League Baltimore Orioles—there had been an earlier National League team with the same name—won 68 and lost 65 in 1901. 1902 was a disaster. The team finished last but that wasn't the worst of it. The new American League was "at war" with the older National League. No shots were fired but the "war" did mean that players could "jump" from one league to another without the limitations that now characterize Major League Baseball. What that meant for the Orioles was that player-manager John McGraw and several key players jumped the team mid-season to play for the New York Giants (where McGraw stayed through 1932 as one of the most successful managers in major league history). Baltimore, under new manager Wilbert Robinson (also a future Hall of Fame manager, for his long tenure with the Brooklyn Dodgers) won only 24 of its last 81 games. The Orioles' final game of the season drew a total of 138 fans. No surprise: At the end of the season the franchise folded. Ban Johnson, the President of the American League, wanted a team in New York. He sold rights to the Orioles' franchise to a group of New Yorkers for the grand total of $18,000 dollars. For a long time, most baseball historians considered the 1901-

1902 Orioles part of the Yankee franchise (the same way the Brooklyn Dodgers are considered part of the Los Angeles Dodger franchise).   But there was much less continuity between the old Orioles and the new New York team than there has been in later franchise moves. Only 5 players from the 1902 Orioles carried over to the new New York team, originally called the Highlanders. In 2014, Baseball-Reference (at the urging of John Thorn of *Total Baseball*) declared that the New York team was a separate franchise from the 1901-1902 Orioles and that the Oriole records would not count as part of the Yankees franchise records. This, if you will forgive me, is not an issue I have strong feelings about. Since I rely on Baseball-Reference for most statistics, I'm happy to abide by their decision. The key issue for me is that the team that later became known as the Yankees started play in 1903.

The primary owners of the new team were Frank Farrell and Bill Devery.   Devery was a former Chief of Police in New York and often described as the most corrupt person ever to hold that office. Lincoln Steffens, the muckraking reformer, described him as a "disgrace."   Farrell was a saloon owner, casino operator, and bookmaker. He was generally considered the more reputable of the partners. It is almost inconceivable that either one would have been approved for ownership any other time in the last century. In 1903, in the still young American League, the standards were different and the options more limited. The team began play in Hilltop Park in Washington Heights, at the site of what later became the Columbia Medical school and a short walk from the future location of the Audubon Ballroom where Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965. Hilltop Park was built, of wood, in less

than two months and had seats for 16,00 but extra room for standees if the occasion warranted.

Ban Johnson didn't just want a team in New York. He wanted a good team. To this end he helped the new team, the Highlanders, sign Clark Griffith of the Chicago White Sox to manage and pitch. I have never seen any details of the deal that brought Griffith to New York, but it was clearly for the "good of the league" (as Johnson saw it) rather than fair competition or anything else. The team was stocked with the a few carry overs from the 1902 Orioles but also jumpers from the National League, lured to New York by Johson and Griffith working in tandem. The most prominent of these jumpers were Brooklyn's Willie Keeler, famous later for saying he "hit 'em where they ain't" but better known at the time for having twice led the NL in batting average, and pitchers Jack Chesboro and Jesse Tannehill and third baseman Wid Conroy, all from the Pirates.

At first, it seemed to work but it didn't last. The Highlanders were not an expansion team like the New York Mets who lost 120 games their first season. In 1903, the Highlanders finished fourth with a 72-62 record. In 1904 they were in first place as late as October 7, their 151st game (of 155) but lost the next three in a row to the eventual AL champion then known as the Boston Americans and wound up in second. In 1906 they were in first place as late as September 23, after winning three of four from the eventual champion Chicago White Sox, the famous "hitless wonder" team. The Highlanders/Yankees then promptly lost 7 of their next 10 and finished in second place, 3 ½ games behind those other Sox. And that was pretty much it for the highlights. More often than not, 10 of their first 16 years, they lost more games than they won. From 1907 through 1918, they never finished within even

ten games of first place and, in one particularly bad year, in 1912, they finished 55 games out of first.

The Yankees path to glory began in January 1915 when Devery and Farrell sold the team, now known as the Yankees, to Jacob Ruppert, a former congressman and a brewer, and Colonel Tillinghast L'Hommedieu Huston, an engineer who had made his fortune in Havana following the US annexation of Cuba after the Spanish-American war. Huston—I am not typing out his full name again--sold out his share of the team to Ruppert in 1923. Ruppert remained the owner of the Yankees until his death in 1939.

Ruppert and Huston spent much more liberally than Devery and Farrell had, buying players from whomever would sell. It took a while and their progress was slowed by World War I but in 1919, the first year after World War I, the year *before*, the Yankees purchased Babe Ruth from the Red Sox, they broke through.   That year the Yankees went 80-59, good for third 7 ½ games behind another famous White Sox team, the "Black Sox," notorious for throwing the World Series to the Cincinnati Reds. It was the closest the Yankees had come to first place since 1906.

Underrated pitcher: Jack Chesbro

Who Underrated Him: Baseball historians, because they're just about the only ones who give him any thought any more.

There are some records most Yankee fans know. Babe Ruth hit 60 home runs in 1927, which was the major league record until Roger Maris broke it with 61 in '61, which was the American League record until Aaron Judge broke it with 62 in 2022. Lou Gehrig played in 2130 consecutive games, a record until Cal Ripken broke it, and drove in 185 runs in 1931, still an American League record. And Joe DiMaggio hit in 56 straight

games in 1941, still a major league record. We might also know that Mariano Rivera holds the all-time record for saves, although the exact number (652) might be a bit more obscure than the others.

But Ruth and Maris and Judge and Gehrig and DiMaggio were all hitters. Rivera was a relief pitcher. Where are the starting pitchers?

Well, as it happens, a Yankee does hold what you would think would be the most honored of records for starting pitchers. In 1904 Jack Chesbro set the "modern" record for wins in a season with 42. Nobody has matched it since. For that matter nobody has even won thirty games in a season since Denny McClain for the Tigers more than 50 years ago.

And, yet, you don't hear a lot about Chesbro. He is in the Hall of Fame, but he was one of a group of ten elected by an Old Timers Committee in 1946 after finishing 50th in the writers' vote. That group of ten includes some of the most questionable selections ever for the Hall of Fame (most notably, Joe Tinker and Johnny Evers, elected largely because they scanned well in a poem about double plays). In his *Politics of Glory*, about the Hall of Fame, Bill James identifies Chesbro himself as one of those questionable selections.

Chesbro doesn't even rate very highly among Yankee pitchers. In his 2012 book on the *50 Greatest Players in New York Yankee History,* Robert Cohen has Chesbro as the 5th best pitcher in team history. That's by far the best anyone has him. A 2011 list on Bleacher Report lists him as the 22nd best Yankee pitcher. A 2020 article on This Great Game, a very entertaining website, leaves him off a list of the Yankees' top ten pitchers. A 2020 article on Empire Sports Media also leaves him off a list of the Yankees' top ten pitcher and then

goes on to leave him off a list of six more honorable mentions. Some other websites simply legislate Chesbro out of existence. A 2013 article on Pinstripe Alley simple announce that it doesn't include anyone who pitched before 1920. And a 2021 article on MLB.COM pushes it back even more, but still manages to disqualify Chesbro: "It is challenging to compare modern baseball to the turn-of-the-century game, so this list begins when the team adopted the Yankees nickname in 1913." It's almost as if Chesbro never existed.

If that doesn't convince you, do a Google search. I typed in "Jack Chesbro 41 wins" and got back 41,100 hits. That seems like a lot until you make some comparisons. "Ron Guidry 25 wins [his total in 1978) got 190,000 hits. "Joe DiMaggio 56 games" got 487,000. "Roger Maris 61 home runs" got 1,250,000 and "Babe Ruth 60 home runs" reached 1,500,000. Jack Chesbro isn't exactly forgotten. His name is still in the record books and I'm writing about him here. But he comes close.

How come? There are a lot of possible answers. Some are about why we don't remember Chesbro. Others are about why we shouldn't remember him. I find the first type more convincing than the second.

    1) It was a long time ago, 118 years. But Babe Ruth's home 60 runs were also a long time ago—95 years—and we still remember that. It's also the case that the absence of any challenges to Chesbro's record has also kept Chesbro off the sports pages. When was the last time Roger Maris was mentioned as often as in 2022 when Aaron Judge's chase of Maris' record served as a constant reminder that Maris had set a record? These are

explanations of why we don't remember Chase, not about whether we should.

2)   For all his wins in 1904, Chesbro's most famous game that year was a loss. The Yankees, still called the Highlanders, had been in a tight pennant race all year with Boston, still called the Americans.   The Americans arrived in New York on October 7, one half game ahead of the Highlanders. Chesbro pitched a complete game 3-2 win to put Highlanders ahead by half a game. The next day, was a doubleheader. The Americans swept both games to go back ahead by a game and ½. Two days later, the two teams returned to New York for another double header, the Highlanders needing to win both. Chesbro started the first game, his third start in four days. With the score tied 2-2 in the top of the ninth, Boston catcher Lou Criger got an infield hit and advanced to third on a sacrifice and ground out. Chesbro got two strikes on the next batter and here's what followed, according to an account by Jerrod Cotosman on the SABR website:

"What happened next would become as haunting to New Yorkers of a certain age as the ball going through Bill Buckner's legs would be to their future New England counterparts. Chesbro's pitch sailed and, in an awful bit of anticlimax, cleared [catcher] Kleinow's lunge and hit the front of the grandstand on the fly. Criger trotted home as the park fell silent save for the celebration of the [Boston] Rooters and their hired band. A stunned [manager] Griffith dropped to the ground in anguish in front of the New York bench. … [At the end of the inning,] Chesbro himself was distraught, sitting despondently on the bench and waiting for the end."

It was a bad loss. A little later, I have it in fifth place on my list of the worst Yankee losses ever. If Chesbro and the Yankees had won that game (and the next) to win the first pennant in team history, would we all have a better, more celebratory memory of Chesbro? Seems likely.

3)   Chesbro had a great year in 1904 but his whole career was not so great. This is essentially what Bill James argues in *The Politics of Glory.* It's true. Chesbro won 20 or more games every year from 1901 through 1906, except 1905 when he won 19. But his career was short. For his entire career, through 1902 with the Pirates, from 1903 with the Yankees, Chesbro won a total of 198 games, 121st highest all time. Just with the Yankees, Chesbro won 128 games, 12th highest in team history. None of this, of course, takes anything away from what Chesbro accomplished in 1904, any more than Roger Maris' injury shortened career with the Yankees takes away from what he accomplished in 1961.

4)   "Wins" is a deceptive statistic for pitchers. This, from the wisdom of contemporary analytics, is also true. That's why we have alternative statistics, like Earned Run Average and ERA+ not to mention WAR and WAA. By these standards Chesbro was still good, just not quite as good as he looks if we don't look beyond wins. Chesbro's ERA in 1904 was 1.82, fourth best in team history but 1904 was a pitcher's year. By ERA+ (in effect, relative ERA) Chesbro was at 148 (48% better than park and league adjusted ERA) and drops to 24th in team history. And what about WAR and WAA, intended to be summary measures? Well, Chesbro's WAA in 1904 was 6.6, fourth best in team history (just after single seasons from each

of Ron Guidry, Lefty Gomez, and Russ Ford—yes, Russ, not Whitey). Chesbro's WAR in 1904 was 10.4, second best in team history to Ford. If I had to pick a single best year by any Yankee starter, I would consider Guidry in 1978, Gomez in 1934 or 1937, even Russ Ford—about whom, more to follow—in 1910. But you could certainly make a case for Chesbro, even aside from his win total.

5)　Chesbro main pitch was a spitball and that cheapens his achievements. But so what? Spitballs were legal in 1904. What distinguished Chesbro was not so much his use of a legal pitch but his ability to master it.

6)　The game was so different in 1904, that it makes no sense to compare what Chesbro did then to what pitchers do now.　This is how Pinstripe Alley and MLB.COM justify leaving Chesbro off their lists of great Yankee pitchers.　This is, to my mind, both the most damning charge against Chesbro and also one that is clearly wrong.

The argument would go like this: The claim that Chesbro holds the record—the "modern record"—for wins in a season requires making a sharp but unwarranted distinction between baseball before and after 1901, the first year the American League began play. If you don't make this distinction, Chesbro's record is no big deal. Between 1876, the first year of play in the National League, and 1903, pitchers won 42 or more games in a season no less than 23 times, topped by "Old Hoss" Radbourn's 60 in 1884. By these standards. Chesbro's 41 wins were peanuts.

The problem with this argument is that there was a sharp break in the way baseball was played, not in 1901

but in 1893. In its origins, baseball assigned very different responsibilities to the pitcher than it does today.   The pitcher's job was not so much to get the batter out so much as to start a play in motion, much like the pitcher in a slow pitch softball game at a company picnic. In 1876 batters got four strikes; it took 9 balls for a base on balls; batters could call for high pitches or low pitches; and pitchers were required to throw underhand.   Pitchers got the right to throw sidearm in 1880 and the right to throw overhand in 1884. Four balls and three strikes –is there anything that feels so timeless?--did not become standard until 1889. And in 1893, the pitcher was moved back from 50 feet away from home plate to the current 60 feet six inches.

So, there may not have been a distinct break in the way baseball was played with the founding of the AL in 1901 but there *was* a distinct break, culminating in the move of the pitching slab in 1893.

And what happens if we look at Chesbro in the context of baseball since 1893 rather than since the beginning of baseball time? He looks good. The record for most wins in a season? It's Chesbro's 41, followed by Ed Walsh's 40 for the White Sox in 1908 and Christy Mathewson's 37 for the Giants the same year. The record for most games over .500? That would be Chesbro, too, +29, tied with Joe Wood for the Red Sox in 1912 and Walter Johnson in 1913.   Chesbro does not hold the records for most starts and most complete games in a season. Those records go to the NY Giants' Amos Rusie in 1893, with 52 and 50.   Chesbro is second in both categories, with 51 and 48. Chesbro pitched 454 innings in 1904, roughly one third of the team's total.

I am not arguing that the sheer volume of Chesbro's work in 1904 makes it the single best pitching season in Yankee history. I would still go with Guidry in 1978 or Gomez in 1934 or 1937. But I don't have to. Chesbro's season in 1904 was obviously very good but it is also notable for the volume alone. Even in 1904, not everyone—in fact, hardly anyone—was winning 41 games or completing 48. Did pitchers in 1904 pitch more innings than they do today? Sure, but what Chesbro did was extraordinary, even in that context.

A Note on Russ Ford

You might have noticed in my discussion of Chesbro, that the single season pitcher with the highest single season WAR (11.4) and WAA (8.2) was Russ Ford in 1910. You might also be wondering just who Russ Ford was.

Part of the answer is easy. He was, so far as I know, no relation whatsoever to Whitey Ford, one of the stars of Casey Stengel's Yankees and the Yankees all-time leader in wins. The rest is a little more complicated.

Ford was born in Canada but grew up in Minnesota. Ford started pitching in the minor leagues in 1905 as a 22-year-old. His minor record was good enough that the Yankees drafted him at the end of the 1908 season. Ford pitched one game for the Yankees in 1909, giving up four runs in three innings. He spent the rest of the year in the minors. Then, in 1910, as a 27-year-old rookie, Ford went 26-6 with a 1.65 Earned Run Average, still the best in Yankee history (by all of .01 runs). His WAR and WAA those years remains the highest ever for any rookie pitcher since 1893. The next year he went 22-11 with an ERA of 2.27. His WAR, 7.5, is still the eleventh highest among Yankee pitchers. The next two years, Ford was a combined

26-39 but for lousy teams. His ERA was just above 3 and his WAA was comfortably positive both years. The next year he jumped to the "outlaw" Federal League—"outlaw" means they did not accept the reserve clause in American and National League contracts—and was the one of the best pitchers in the league. The next year, with a sore arm, Ford was 5-9. He pitched two more years in the minors but never again in the majors.

The secret of Ford's success was the so-called emery ball. Ford had discovered the pitch while warming up with a scuffed up ball in 1908. Realizing that the ball moved wildly when scuffed on one side, Ford reproduced the effect by scuffing up balls with a piece of emery paper hidden in his glove. As best I can figure out, the emery ball seems to have existed in a kind of legal limbo before 1915. So Ford disguised what he was doing by acting as if it were a spit ball, which was legal. As usually happens, the secret leaked out and, by the end of 1914 Ford had several imitators. The pitch was banned, unambiguously, in the American League for 1915 and in the Federal League the year after. Presumably this ban contributed as much as his sore arm to Ford's decline.

What to make of Ford? It's hard to know how Ford was rated by his contemporaries. He did finish 18th in the MVP vote in 1911, worse than he deserved based on WAR, slightly better than he deserved based on the Yankees' sixth place finish. There was no MVP vote in 1910. It's also hard to know what to make of his emery ball. Even if it was legal, Ford felt he had to hide it. Two great years, as good as any in Yankee history, but they come with an asterisk.

Overrated First Base: Hal Chase

Who Overrated Him: A surprising number of his near contemporaries

Insofar as anybody still gives any thought to Hal Chase—which is more than you might imagine as he has been the subject of two serious full-scale biographies in the 21st century—it is to make three points.

1) Chase's reputation through roughly 1940 was incredibly high, based primarily on a perception of Chase as the greatest fielding first baseman ever.

2) Chase was, in fact, a mediocre player, perhaps a slightly above average hitter and a fielder whose skills, however impressive they seemed to contemporaries, left no statistical record.

3) Chase was a low life, a compulsive liar and a gambler who likely frequently accepted bribes to "lay down" and may have been involved in the famous fix of the 1919 World Series.

I have absolutely no reason to disagree with any of those points. I want, however, to ask a slightly different question: Why is there such a huge discrepancy between the reputation Chase once had and the reputation he has now? Let me review the three standard points first. Chase joined the Yankees—then known as the Highlanders—in 1905 and almost immediately became their leading attraction. It helped that he was a handsome red head, a man about town, and apparently often charming. Chase stayed with the Yankees through 1913 when, under suspicion of throwing games, he was traded to the White Sox, then jumped to Buffalo in the Federal League,

jumped back to the Cincinnati Reds, and ended his major league career in 1919 with the New York Giants.

From the moment Chase arrived in New York, everyone who saw him raved about his skills as a defensive first baseman. That reputation lasted well into his retirement. In the first vote for the Hall of Fame, Chase finished 25th. Remember that that was the very first vote and that everybody who had ever played baseball was eligible. The 24 players who finished ahead of Chase are all now in the Hall of Fame (as are a majority of the 25 additional players who finished behind Chase). I have read that both Walter Johnson and Cy Young picked Chase as their all-time first baseman although I have never seen their full lists. I have seen Ed Barrow's list. Barrow was what would now be called the Yankees' general manager from 1921 through 1946, arguably the most important executive in the Yankees long history. Here's what he said in an interview in the Daily News in 1939:

[O]n my All-Star, All-Time team I'd put Cobb, Speaker and Ruth in the outfield. Chase, Lajoie, Wagner, and Jimmy Collins in the infield. Matty, Johnson, Waddell, and McGinnity, pitchers. And Bill Dickey, catcher…I'd put Joe DiMaggio on that team as utility outfielder. I'd put Lou Gehrig as substitute first baseman and pinch hitter.

Most of those picks were pretty conventional, circa 1939. But Chase at first base? Barrow went on:

Chase on first base! Nobody near him. He could throw a ball through a knothole, covered the whole infield like a cat, and remember he used a glove that just covered his fingers and seldom had a palm. The 'peach baskets' first basemen use today would have been barred years back, Chase could

hit behind the runner, bunt, steal, fake a bunt at third and then bunt over the third baseman's head. He could do all the tricks.

I've also seen Babe Ruth's picks for his all-time team. They're in *The Babe Ruth Story*, which Ruth wrote in 1948 with what was likely considerable help from co-author Bob Considine. Ruth's choice at first base was the same as Barrow's, Hal Chase. "A lot of fans," Ruth wrote:

> will feel that I should pick Lou Gehrig over Chase. Or George Sisler over both of them. But I pick Chase. I saw him first in spring training before the start of World War I. I felt the sting of his tremendous ability in that angry Red-Sox-Giants exhibition tour in 1919. Hal had been in the big show for 15 years then, but he was so much better than anybody I ever saw on first base that—to me—it was no contest, and I still feel that way.

> We've got some nice first basemen in the game today, and maybe once a year you'll see one of them charge a would-be sacrifice—with a man on second, heading for third—and throw out the runner at third. Hal would do it dozens of times a year. He even did it in the third-base side of the pitcher.

> … Chase couldn't hit as far as Gehrig or as consistently as Sisler. But he was no punk at the plate. And he was one of the best base runners the game ever produced. I pick him primarily for his unbelievable fielding ability, however, and I still say that in any tight game—where tight fielding has as much importance as hitting—I'd rather have him on my team than any other first baseman in the game's history.

I don't want to overstate the case. I'm pretty sure that by 1939, a consensus had formed that Lou Gehrig was the greatest first baseman of all time with, as Ruth implied, Sisler

as a second choice. Still, that there should have been any sentiment for Chase is, in retrospect, astounding. Chase did have a couple of good years for Buffalo, in the Federal League, after he left the Yankees. But the Federal League was a so-called "outlaw league" that lasted only two years with a level of competition significantly below either the American or National Leagues. He also had a very good year with Cincinnati in 1916, leading the league in batting average. With the Yankees, where he made his reputation? He hit over .300 twice and stole a fair number of bases, but without much power (even by the standards of the day) and very few walks. His overall OPS+ (on base average plus slugging average, corrected for offensive context) with the Yankees was 101, meaning just 1% above average.   And what about Chase's much vaunted defense? Baseball-Reference gives him 34 runs *below* average for his time with the Yankees and 65 *below* average for his career. Those 34 runs below average are the tenth worst total in Yankee history—and that's before taking into consideration that Chase was playing first base, a hitter's position even in the 1900s. You don't believe the fielding runs above or below average? Fair enough. It's reasonable to be skeptical of fielding statistics, the more so the farther back we go. I'll keep trying to make sense of fielding statistics as we go along but, for now, consider this: Fred Tenney, a near contemporary of Chase's, a first baseman mostly for the National League Boston team, and the player whose fielding skills were said to most closely resemble Chase's, is credited by B-R with 91 fielding runs *above* average for his career. By 1939, the year Gehrig retired, the year Barrow picked his all-time team, Chase was 26th among all American League first basemen in WAR. By WAA, which puts more emphasis on high

levels of play and less on the length of play, Chase had racked up a negative number, placing him way out of even the top hundred first basemen.

As for Chase the low life, there isn't a lot of disagreement. In fact, the only disagreement seems to be how much to blame the defects of Chase's own character and how much to blame the tenor of the times. Bill James, who is sometimes given to moralizing, characterized Chase by his "evil, a smallness, lust and greed." Others have pointed out that gambling was endemic to early 20th century baseball, much as steroids were endemic a century later. This is not to say that everybody gambled, let alone threw games, but that some did and a lot more knew about it. It is worth remembering that one of the Yankees' original owners, Frank Farrell, was a bookmaker and casino operator. I do not have a strong position on this debate.

What I am interested in this: Why did so many of his contemporaries so overrate Chase? This is not a question about how later revelations of corruption undermined his reputation (as happened with steroid users like Bonds and Clemens and McGwire). When Ruth picked Chase as his all-time first baseman, he knew full well what Chase had done. "Chase," Ruth acknowledged, "left baseball under a cloud." Chase's corruption was well known by 1920 and probably much earlier. Ruth and Barrow and Walter Johnson and Cy Young and a significant number of Hall of Fame voters picked Chase knowing full well that he had probably thrown games. Rather, it's a question about fielding and how we evaluate fielding.

These days when we look at first base, we look for sluggers in the mold created by Lou Gehrig and Jimmie Foxx in the 1920s and 1930s. Some first basemen may be good

fielders (Don Mattingly or Keith Hernandez or Albert Pujols) but that's usually a bonus. We also live with players like Jason Giambi or Luke Voit, big, powerful hitters but slow and immobile in the field. First base is where you hide defensive liabilities, an offense first position, the last stop before designated hitter. We do not judge first basemen and shortstops on the same scale. It's in this context that the choice of Chase, a defense first player, as the best first baseman ever seems so bizarre, almost incomprehensible. But first base was not always so clearly an offense first position. In a game with more bunts, more stolen bases, and lower scores, defense at first base (and third) almost certainly mattered more than it does today.

In 1908, Chase's fourth year with the Yankees, teams averaged 1.3 sacrifice bunts per game, a play that usually involves the first baseman and requires a high level of fielding skill. Today, teams average roughly one sacrifice bunt every six games. Baseball-Reference and Fangraphs both understand this. Since fielding runs are figured against averages within a position and because some positions are more demanding than others, both websites apply a "credit" to WAR or WAA for playing a difficult position (currently 7 runs a season for a shortstop, prorated for games played) or a debit for playing an easier position (currently -7 runs for a left fielder). Although the details of these adjustments are murky—very murky and at least a bit arbitrary—the general pattern is straight forward. In 1901, the first year of the American League, the debit for first basemen was -3.5 runs per season. Now it is -9.5. That's the biggest downward adjustment of any position.

It's not just first base. Baseball, as I've already shown, is pretty evenly balanced between offense and defense. Teams that score the most runs are roughly as likely as to win

championships as teams that gave up the least.   But there's nothing inevitable about this.   Defense, as I've also already argued, involves two components—pitching and fielding.   But pitching and fielding don't stand in a fixed relationship to each other, either.   Sometimes, pitching is more important. Sometimes fielding is more important. Much of this is a result of changes in the ways the game is played. Consider this: In 1908 teams averaged 37 plate appearances per game. About 3 of those plate appearances ended in walks. About 4 ended in strike outs. There was one home run every seven games. That means that (roughly) 30 of 37 appearances involved a ball in play. In 2021 there were still about 37 plate appearances per game and about 3 still ended with a walk. But about 9 ended in a strike out and a bit more than one in a home run. That means that only 24 of 37 plate appearances involved a ball in play, a decline of 20% from a century ago. There are simply fewer fielding plays than there were a century ago, even before considering the decline in bunts. But it's not just a decline in the frequency of fielding plays that makes fielding less important now than it was in the past. It's also a decline in variation. Consider, for a moment, throws from the catcher to the pitcher. It's almost certainly the most common "play" in baseball. But nobody pays any attention to it. Why? Because there's almost no variation. Something like 99.99%--could be higher—of throws from catchers to pitchers succeed in the sense that the pitcher gets the ball and no runners advance in the course of what is an extraordinarily routine exchange. Compare that to a home run, an event that happens on average 2 or 3 times in a game but varies enormously (from team to team, player to player, game to game). Does anybody doubt that hitting home runs explains more about whether a team

wins or loses than a catcher's success in throwing the ball back to the pitcher?   But we can do more than speculate. We can look at what actually happens. More specifically, we can look at the correlation between fielding (or batting or pitching or just about anything else) and winning over different periods. (A correlation, if you don't already know, is a relationship, a measure—from -1 to 1—of how much two measures vary in common. At a team level, runs scored and runs batted in are very closely correlated because most runs are a result of a run batted in.   At a team level, runs given up has a negative correlation with games won: The more runs you give up, the likelier you are to lose. At a team level, Catcher's Interference, a rare event, has a weak relationship to just about everything else.)   What I did then, was to look at the relationship between "fielding runs"—runs prevented by fielders above or below average—with teams' won lost records. Here's what I found:

Relationship between Team Batting Runs, Team Fielding Runs, and Team Won-Lost Record by Era, American League (Correlation Coefficients)

	Batting.	Fielding
Deadball, 1901-1919	.66	.62
Live Ball, 1920-1945	.73	.55
Post-War, 1946-1968	.77	.68
Expansion, 1969-93	.68	.50
Wildcard, 1994-2021	.68	.26

Hitting matters across all eras. The correlation between batting runs and winning varies within a fairly narrow range. Not so with fielding: In the deadball era, fielding seems to have mattered almost as much as hitting. The importance of fielding

peaked in the post-war era. This, I happily admit, surprised me. It may be that this was a moment when patterns of roster construction varied more than at other moments, with some teams emphasizing defense and others emphasizing offense. It may be something else. In any case, for the last fifty years, the relationship between fielding and winning has been in great decline. For explanatory purposes you want to look not at the raw correlation coefficient but the square of the coefficient—trust me on this. That means that hitting is now explaining about half the variation in winning (.68 times .68 equals .46). Fielding, however, now explains only about 7% of the variation (.26 times .26 equals .07). The math is more complicated than I would like but the conclusion is straight forward: Fielding simply matters less now than it has in any other period of baseball history.

Now, none of this explains why observers seem to have badly misjudged the quality of Chase's fielding. But it does explain why observers did emphasize fielding more than we do today. It does explain how Jimmy Collins and Pie Traynor, better fielders than hitters, were consensus picks for the greatest third basemen of all-time until Mike Schmidt came along. It explains how Johnny Evers, a great fielding second baseman and a roughly average hitter, and Rabbit Maranville, a great fielding shortstop who was a well below average hitter, finished first and second in the 1914 vote for Most Valuable Player in the National League. I don't agree with any of these judgments, but they are no longer flat-out incomprehensible once we acknowledge the declining significance of fielding.

Until the last twenty or thirty years, the evaluation of defense depended almost entirely on the eye test: Does he look good? It's not a bad test but looking good is hardly the

whole story. (If it were, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie might still be married.) Neither Ruth nor Barrow nor anyone else had Baseball-Reference or Fangraphs to consult. In the absence of hard data it was easy to overrate both Chase in particular and fielding in general. That's one possibility. It's also likely that fielding really used to be more important than it is now.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE GLORY YEARS BEGIN: 1920-1923

By 1919, Babe Ruth, then with the Red Sox, had already become the biggest star in baseball. He had also already begun to try the patience of Red Sox management by his refusal to follow team rules, his bad training habits, quarrels over where and when he would play and his hold outs for higher salary. Plus, Harry Frazee, the owner of the Red Sox needed money. On New Year's Eve of 1920, he sold Ruth to the Yankees for $100,000, then the highest sum ever paid for a player. It was also, unambiguously, the single most important transaction in the history of major league baseball.

In 1920, now with Ruth, the Yankees finished in 3rd just as they had in 1919. But this time the Yankees went 95-59, much better than the year before and setting a (then) team record for both wins and won-lost percentage. They finished only three games behind first place Cleveland. With Ruth as their major attraction, they more than doubled their attendance from the year before and became the first team to draw over one million fans.

1921 was the breakthrough year. The race was close all year. The Yankees were never more than 4 games out of first or, until the last day of the season, more than 3 ½ games ahead.   The Yankees moved into first place on September 1, after a double header sweep of Washington, and stayed there the rest of the season. They won 24 of their last 33 and finished 4 ½ games ahead of second place Cleveland, their biggest margin of the year. In the World Series, the Yankees played John McGraw's Giants, with whom they were then sharing the Polo Grounds, in the last best of 9 series. The Yankees were

leading three games to two, when Ruth wrenched his knee. With Ruth appearing only one more time, for one at bat as a pinch hitter, the Giants swept the final three games. McGraw, of course, claimed it as a victory for old-fashioned inside baseball over the home run hitting Yankees.

In 1922, Ruth was suspended four different times, including the first 33 games of the season, for various infractions of league rules. With Ruth playing only 110 games all year (out of 154 team games) the Yankees somehow persevered. The race, this time with the St Louis Browns, was as close as the year before with the Yankees eventually winning by a single game. The World Series was a rematch with the Giants. This time Ruth wasn't injured but he stunk: two hits in 17 at bats, with one run scored and one driven in. The teams played to one ten inning tie. The Giants won the other four. In five games the Yankees scored the grand total of 11 runs.

1923 was easier. The Yankees went into first on May 5 and stayed there the rest of the season. They wound up leading the second place Tigers by 16 games. The World Series was yet another rematch with the Giants. This time, though, the Yankees, now playing home games at the newly opened Yankee Stadium, won 4 games to 2. Ruth was not the only a star for the Yankees, but he was the biggest star, getting on base 15 times and hitting three home runs in the six games.

Ruth the Revolutionary

Babe Ruth revolutionized baseball. Ruth did not invent the home run. Credit for that goes to Abner Doubleday or whoever else it was who invented baseball itself. But it is Ruth, more than anyone else, who made the home run a routine part of the game. I cannot think of—I'm not even sure I could

imagine—any other development with such far reaching implications for just about every other aspect of baseball strategy. Home runs led to the decline of sacrifice hits and stolen bases, to a growing emphasis on bases on balls and a greater tolerance for strike outs, for more pull hitting and eventually for the shifts that characterize the game today. Even changes in the way pitchers are used-- fewer complete games, specialist closers, specialist middle relievers and now even specialist "openers"--can be attributed to the rise of home runs both because of the increased pressure created by the possibility of a home run on any pitch and because of the increased number of pitches that come with freer swinging batters. To find anything roughly equivalent, you have to look beyond baseball—to Gus Darais' and Knute Rockne's forward passes for Notre Dame or Steph Curry's three-point shooting for the Golden State Warriors. Still, as important as the forward pass has been for football or the three pointer for basketball, both were the product of rule changes meant, altogether intentionally to change the games—to cut down on the violence in football, to open up the middle in basketball. Ruth, in contrast, wrought his revolution pretty much on his own, without any changes in the rules of the game.

The numbers are staggering. Through 1918, Ruth's first year as a semi regular, only eight players, stretching back to the beginning of the national league in 1876, had ever hit as many as twenty home runs in a single season. But four of those hitters had played for the 1884 Chicago White Stocking (the predecessors of today's Cubs). Baseball-Reference does not have home/road splits for 1884 but we do know that the White Stockings played that year in a ballpark that was all of 196 feet down the right field line, roughly 100 feet shorter down the line

than Yankee Stadium's famously short right field line. In any case, none of the four ever came close to hitting 20 home runs in a season again. Two other players hit more than 20 home runs in the years before the founding of the American League in 1901. Between 1901 and 1918, two more National Leaguers topped 20: Frank Schulte in 1911 for the Chicago team now called the Cubs and Gavvy Cravath for the Phillies in another hitter friendly park. Cravath hit 19 of his 24 home runs that year at home in Baker Bowl. Meanwhile the American league record for home runs was the grand total of 16, hit by one Socks Seybold for the Philadelphia Athletics. The lifetime record for most home runs in a career was 138, held by Roger Connors, who played 18 years in the 19th century, mostly for the New York Giants. The American League record was 70, shared by Detroit's Sam Crawford and Ruth's future teammate Frank "Home Run" Baker. Ruth would very soon shatter all of these records.

Ruth reached the major leagues in 1915 as a 19-year-old pitcher and occasional pinch hitter for the Red Sox. In 1918, Ruth was still pitching but he was also starting to play the outfield. That year he played in 95 games out of the team's 136. He led the league with 11 home runs. To put that in context, the entire American League that year hit only 96 home runs.   The following year, now a regular outfielder and occasional pitcher, Ruth hit 29 home runs, a major league record and almost double the previous American League record. His teammates hit a total of four. Ruth by himself hit more home runs than four of the seven other teams. In 1920, Ruth was purchased by the Yankees and almost doubled the record again with 54 home runs. It was also more than the total for *each* of the seven of the other teams.   A bit more than

halfway through the season Ruth took over the American League career record for home runs. He was 25 and had spent three years primarily as a pitcher. From 1918 through 1920, the entire American League hit 705 home runs. Ruth hit 94 of them, more than one eighth of the total. To put this in some perspective, in 2001 Barry Bonds set the now record of 73 home runs in a season. To have an equal proportion of his league's home runs as Ruth, he would have had to hit 187. (This is allowing for both the greater number of teams and the greater number of games per team.) In 1921, Ruth set an all-time seasonal record for the third consecutive year, with 59. He also became the all-time career leader in home runs with 162. He was 26.

The conventional explanations of what caused an offensive explosion in the 1920's invoke three considerations. One is that just before the 1920 season, the owners banned any pitch that involved putting a foreign substance on the ball—including spitballs and mudballs. A second is the death of a Cleveland shortstop in 1920, from a pitched ball that he seemed not to have seen, encouraged umpires to retire scuffed up balls more often and put fresher balls in play. The third explanation is that the ball itself got livelier, perhaps wound more tightly, perhaps made of slightly different materials. In explanations of this sort, Ruth tends to become simply the right man in the right place at the right time. The problem is that the timing doesn't quite add up. When Ruth hit 54 home runs in 1920, twice as many as anyone else had ever hit in a season, the ban on trick pitches had just gone into effect and most pitchers who relied on trick pitches were "grandfathered" in to continue using them. And the effects of cleaner baseballs couldn't have mattered because they didn't come until 1921. In

fact, the Ruthian revolution started much earlier than most acknowledge. 1918, the last year of World War I, was one of the weakest hitting years in the history of the American League. The league total of 96 home runs was its lowest ever. That is also the year in which Ruth, as a part time player, led the league with 11. All 11 of those home runs were hit in road games. Fenway Park, which has generally been a hitter's park since the 1930's, had very different dimensions then, with the fences at least twenty feet deeper all around, than they are now. In 1919, when Ruth set the single season home run record for the first time, he hit 20 on the road and only 9 on in Fenway. Once Ruth joined the Yankees, his home runs evened out—29 at home and 25 on the road. If we look just at road games, Ruth hit roughly one home run in every 18 plate appearances in 1918 and roughly 1 in 14 in *both* 1919 and 1920. What do I make of this? I put the Ruthian revolution, a new way of playing baseball, much earlier than most would, in 1918 rather than 1919 or 1920. This also means that I give more credit to Ruth himself. He was not simply a product of a moment. Sure, from 1918 through the 1920s scoring increased dramatically, and several players began hitting home runs in numbers unseen before Ruth. It was not simply that the ball was livelier, although it may well have been, or that balls were cleaner or that spitballs were banned. It makes just as much sense to see the new home run hitters as imitators, following a path that Ruth himself had cleared. Like Gus Dorais and Knute Rockne, like Steph Curry, Ruth has obvious athletic skills that were likely unmatched in his time. But this should not take away from a recognition of Ruth's creativity—again like Dorais and Rockne and like Curry—and his extraordinary ability to reimagine a game.

Domination

It is very hard for one player to dominate a baseball game, let alone a season, let alone a set of seasons. In any given game a single player may dominate by, for example, hitting two home runs and making a great fielding play or by pitching a shutout. But baseball isn't like basketball or football. In basketball, you can turn the ball over to Michael or Magic, to LeBron or Steph, and let a single super star carry you whenever a game gets close. In football, you can put the ball in Tom Brady's hands and let him pass the ball down the field while carefully managing the clock. Not so in baseball. These days you can't start your best pitcher more than every five days or so. And you can't bring your best hitter up to bat more than his allotted once in nine. Baseball is not as much a team sport as either basketball or football in the sense that baseball requires less coordination among players. But it is more of a team sport, certainly than basketball, in the sense that it requires an ensemble cast rather than a single star. The closest any single player has come to dominating not just a game or a season but three consecutive seasons was Babe Ruth, from 1921 through 1923. Many years ago, after Tom Gola led his LaSalle University basketball team—yes, LaSalle—first to an NIT championship and later an NCAA championship, the team was known collectively as "Gola and Garbage." I'm not suggesting that the 1921-1923 Yankees were exactly "Ruth and Rubbish," but they came close. Michael and the Jordanaires? Lebron and the Bronettes? How about Babe and the Babettes?

When I say that Ruth dominated three seasons as no one else had before or since, I mean three separate things that all came together at one time. I mean first that the player was great. I mean second that his team won: you can't dominate

and lose. And I mean third that the player in question did not get much help from his teammates.

How great was Ruth from 1921 to 1923? His Wins above Average and his Wins above Replacement in 1921 and 1923 were the two highest ever. From 1921 through 1923 Ruth scored more runs, hit more home runs, drove in more runs, had the highest On Base Average and the highest Slugging Average of any player in either league. In most cases, it wasn't close. Ruth's three year total of 26.4 WAA is *not* the highest ever. But it's close. Ruth himself topped it twice (once from 1919-1921, including one year with the Red Sox, and again from 1926-28). Barry Bonds topped it once, in his steroid fueled years from 2001-2003. Mickey Mantle came close (26.3 WAA from 1955-57). And that's it. The list of players who had even 21 WAA—an average of 7 a season-- across three consecutive seasons is very short and reads like a list of the greatest players ever (Ruth, Mays, Hornsby, Bonds, Williams, Cobb, Mantle, Gehrig, Morgan, Wagner, Trout, Pujols, and Yastrzemski). But none of these, except Mantle, did it while winning three consecutive pennants and only two more did it while winning even twice (Joe Morgan with the Cincinnati Reds and Lou Gehrig).   And none of them did it with as little support from the rest of the lineup as Ruth got. We often think of Ruth in conjunction with Lou Gehrig and the "murderers' row" of the mid 1920's to the early 1930's. But that was not the case earlier on. The second-best player on the Yankees from 1921-1923, as measure by WAA, was catcher Wally Schang with the grand total of 3.7.   Every other player, save one, on the list of 21+ WAA had at least one teammate with a higher WAA total than Schang's. Bonds had Jeff Kent. Mantle had Gil McDougald and Yogi Berra. Cobb had Sam Crawford. Even Mike Trout,

whose teams have famously made the post-season only once over the course of his career had Andrelton Simmons (12.1). The one exception is Rogers Hornsby whose leading teammate, in the years before their first National League championship, topped out with a total of 2.9 WAA. But Hornsby's teams did not win until Hornsby had better teammates and typically finished just above or just below .500.

Another way of looking at the same question is to look at those teams that won three consecutive pennants. The chart below shows those teams, the WAA for their best position player, and the WAA for their second-best player. Ruth's 26.4 WAA for 1921-1923 is the second highest total on the chart, behind Ruth's own 26.6 for 1926-1928. The WAA for teammate Wally Schang, still 3.7, isn't just the lowest on the list. It is less than half the total of any of the other second-best players. Babe and the Babettes.

Pit	1901		Wagner	15.9	Clarke	9.1
CHI	1906		Chance	10.3	Evers	8.7
Det	1907		Cobb	15.6	Crawford	9.5
NYG	1911		Doyle	7.9	Meyers	7.3
NYG	1921		Frisch	12.4	Bancroft	11.6
NYY	1921		Ruth	26.4	Schang	3.7
NYG	1922		Frisch	13.1	Youngs	7.5
NYY	1926		Ruth	26.6	Gehrig	20.4
Phi	1929		Simmons	16.2	Foxx	12.2

NYY	1936		Gehrig	15.4	DiMaggio	12.2
NYY	1937		DiMaggio	16	Dickey	11.1
NYY	1941		Keller	14.3	Gordon	13.5
StL	1942		Musial	17.6	Marion	8.2
NYY	1949		Berra	8.4	DiMaggio	8.2
NYY	1950		Berra	11.4	Rizzuto	9.9
NYY	1951		Berra	10.5	Mantle	8.9
NYY	1955		Mantle	26.2	McDougald	10.7
NYY	1956		Mantle	25.4	McDougald	8.6
NYY	1960		Mantle	17.3	Maris	12.1
NYY	1961		Mantle	15.1	Howard	9.6
NYY	1962		Mantle	9.7	Howard	9.3
Bal	1969		Blair	9.7	F Robinson	9.5
Oak	1972		Jackson	12.7	Bando	10
NYY	1976		Nettles	12.3	Randolph	9.7
Oak	1988		Henderson	11.9	Conseco	10
NYY	1998		Jeter	13.2	Williams	9.4
NYY	1999		Jeter	10.8	Williams	9.1

How the Team Was Built

In an otherwise pretty interesting book on *Management Wisdom from the New York Yankees' Dynasty* (written by and for management consultants), Lance and Dorothy Berger

argue that it is a "common (and misleading) myth that since the Yankee owners have always had deep pockets they could simply buy any superstars they wanted from their competitors." Taken literally, I suppose the Bergers are right. The Yankees have not always been able to purchase stars from other teams. At points the rules of baseball have made that impossible. There are certainly teams that have won without deep pockets—most recently the Tampa Bay Rays. And there are certainly teams with deep pockets that have not won— including, at times, the Yankees' crosstown rivals in Queens. But the spirit of the Bergers' claim, I think, is almost completely wrong. Why have the Yankees enjoyed a century of success, unparalleled anyplace else in sports? It's pretty simple. New York is the biggest market in the United States and, as a result, Yankee owners have had a lot of money to spend. That's not just the simplest explanation. It's also the best. Money is not the only thing that explains Yankee success. It also helps to know what to do with it and it also helps even to have a little luck. But make no mistake: Money might not buy you love but it does buy American League Pennants.

It is important, however, to understand how money works. Money is what might be thought of as a generalized resource, which is to say it can be used in a variety of ways. These days, since the mid-1970's, it is used in baseball to pay for free agents and to retain one's own players. Prior to the 1970's, when there was no free agency and when players were, in effect tied to one team for life by the infamous "reserve clause," money was a way to hire scouts, sign massive rosters of amateurs (high school students and occasional college

students) before other teams could get their hands on them, and then support and instruct them through an extensive network of minor league teams. All that cost money, too. Before there were "farm teams," started by the St Louis Cardinals and followed quickly by the Yankees in the 1930's, before there were television or even radio contracts, many teams were financially precarious, keeping themselves afloat by selling off stars. Make no mistake: the financial resources that came with being in New York have made a difference all along. In the 1920's the power of those resources was simply at its most transparent.

The first Yankee's champions were built on two fire sales, first by the Philadelphia Athletics and second (and more decisively) by the Boston Red Sox. By 1914, the Philadelphia Athletics had won four of the previous five AL championships but weren't making a lot of money. Connie Mack, the owner/manager, decided to sell off his stars. Eddie Collins, probably the best of the bunch, went to the White Sox for $50,000, a huge sum at the time. The Boston Red Sox purchased catcher Wally Schang and pitchers Herb Pennock and Joe Bush, all of whom would eventually wind up with the Yankees. And the Yankees themselves bought Home Run Baker and 23-year-old pitcher Bob Shawkey, both of whom would still be with the Yankees when they won their first championships. Meanwhile, after 1914, the Red Sox, with a combination of players purchased from the Athletics and home-grown stars of their own, succeeded the Athletics as the dominant team in the AL, winning pennants in 1915, 1916, and 1918. And then the Red Sox owner, Harry Frazee—by

conventional accounts, likely true—decided to cash in his stars to finance a Broadway production. From 1919 through 1923, the Yankees acquired, either by outright purchase or trades sweetened with cash considerations, three regulars from the 1918 Red Sox: catcher Schang, shortstop Everett Scott, and most famously, Babe Ruth. A little later, they purchased third baseman Joe Dugan, also from the Red Sox and center fielder Whitey Witt from the Athletics, still selling players off. The Yankees also purchased what was, in effect, an entire pitching staff, including Pennock and Bush, passed on by the Red Sox from the Athletics, plus Sam Jones, Waite Hoyt, and Carl Mays. Not a single one was yet 30 years old when he joined the Yankees. From 1921 through 1923, six different pitchers won more than fifteen games for the Yankees. All six came from either the Red Sox, the Athletics, or both. All six were either outright purchases or parts of trades that involved significant cash considerations.   Dylan was right: "Money doesn't talk, it swears."

Yankee Stadium

Through 1911, the Yankees/Highlanders played at Hilltop Park. In 1912, they became tenants of the New York Giants, playing their home games in the Polo Grounds, at the time the largest and most magnificent baseball park anywhere. After they acquired Babe Ruth, the Yankees threatened and surpassed the Giants for popularity in New York. The Giants' owners wanted the Yankees out. Jake Ruppert responded by building a stadium of his own, just across the river from the Polo Grounds, in the Bronx.

Most of the accounts I've read of Yankee Stadium stress its novelty—the first baseball park to be called a stadium, the first with three tiers of seating, the first with an electrical scoreboard that displayed not only the score and lineups but also the scores of other games around the league. All of this is true but it seems to me that Yankee Stadium was more the culmination of trends in ballpark construction than their beginning.

Nineteenth and some early twentieth century ballparks were modest. They were wooden structures (vulnerable to fires), often without fences enclosing the outfield, rarely with seats stretching beyond the first or third base line. The simplicity of these early ballparks helps explain how the Yankees were able to build Hilltop Park in a matter of months rather than the multi-year process ballpark construction now requires.

The great era of innovation began with the construction of Shibe Park in downtown Philadelphia in 1909, followed soon by Forbes Field in Pittsburgh. What made these parks different from their predecessors is that they were built from steel and concrete. They were bigger and more expensive than the old parks, with more seating capacity. Most importantly, they were built to last. Shibe Park and Forbes Field were followed by Fenway Park in Boston, Comiskey Park in Chicago, Ebbets Field in Brooklyn, Navin Field inn Detroit.

When Yankee Stadium opened in 1923, it was at the tail end of a great stadium building phase that was about to end. There would not be a new major league stadium until the opening of Memorial Stadium in Cleveland in 1932 and then

not another until the opening of County Stadium in Milwaukee in 1953.

None of this is meant to denigrate the significance of Yankee Stadium. Its seating capacity, around 58,000 when it opened (later expanded), could hold 20,000 more fans than the Polo Grounds. On opening day in 1923, the Yankees reported an attendance of 74,000 (including standing room and probably a bit of exaggeration), 30,000 more than had ever seen a single game before. Calling it a "stadium" was meant, self-consciously, to evoke the grandeur of the Roman Empire. The elaborate façade suggested that the stadium wasn't simply a place to play baseball. It was a place to celebrate baseball. As several urban historians have argued, the early twentieth baseball stadiums created a public space, a space for large numbers of people to gather, of a sort that had not existed before. Think about it for a moment: Where else can you go and be in the presence of 60,000 other people, all at once? The 1963 March on Washington or the 2017 Woman's March? Absolutely. Woodstock? Sure. The funeral of Queen Elizabeth? That too. But those are all rare events. In baseball it happens 162 times a year, year after year.

Little wonder, then, that baseball stadiums in general have been called "green cathedrals" (a term originally to compare the refraction of light through forest trees to the refraction of light through a stained-glass window). Little wonder, then, that Yankee Stadium in particular has been called the "Cathedral of Baseball." There is not, to be sure, a clear object of worship as there might be in a church or temple or mosque. But Yankee Stadium is a place where people congregate (a word with deep

religious significance) and commune (another term with deep religious significance).   It is a place where they express a common purpose and a sense of belonging in some larger collectivity.   Yankee Stadium is not alone in providing this experience, but it does it as well as anyplace and has been doing it for one hundred years.

A side note on Babe Ruth and Yankee Stadium: Yankee Stadium is not only "The House that Ruth Built." It is also the house built for Ruth. With a shorter right field than left field, Yankee stadium was built to give left-handed batters, like Ruth, an advantage. Ruth did hit the very first home run in Yankee Stadium, good for three runs in the bottom of the third. Beyond that, it's not clear it mattered much. From the opening of Yankee Stadium until the end of his Yankee career, Ruth hit 259 home runs at home with a 1.183 OPS. That's good but over the same time he hit 252 home runs with a 1.160 OPS on the road. That's not a big difference.

Underrated First Base: Wally Pipp

Who underrated him: the twists of fate.

If anybody remembers anything about Wally Pipp these days, it's one thing. Wasn't he the guy-who-got-a-headache-one-day-and let-Lou-Gehrig-into-the-lineup-and-never-got-his-job-back-because-Gehrig-was-so-good? Yes. He was that guy. He deserves to be remembered for more.

Let's start with the headache story. It's not exactly wrong but it's not exactly right either. Pipp had been the Yankees regular first baseman since 1915. He was not quite a star, but he was close. In 1925, Pipp started the Yankees' first 42 games. He was hitting .244, almost 40 points below his career

average. The Yankees were in seventh place at 15-26 (1 tie) on their way to what would turn out to be their worst season in half a century. Ruth, who had been sick, had yet to play a single game. In short, it was time for a shake up, headache or no headache. The way the story is told it sounds almost as if Gehrig just happened to be around, that manager Miller Huggins just looked around, happened to see Gehrig, and said "gee, why don't you give it a try." That's pretty far from the truth. Gehrig had been a star since high school. After high school he attended Columbia College (on a football scholarship) and, by his sophomore season, was a national sensation on the baseball team. When the Yankees signed him, in the spring of 1923, Gehrig was still only 19 years old. In 1923 and 1924, Gehrig appeared in only 23 games for the Yankees. In those 23 games, Gehrig hit .447. Gehrig spent most of 1923 and 1924 in Hartford, in the high minors. In 1923, he hit .304 with 24 home runs—in 59 games. In 1924, he hit .369 with 37 home runs in 134 games. In 1925, began the season with the Yankees, mostly sitting, starting a few games in right field. Before Pipp got his "headache," Gehrig had had a total of 24 at bats all season. Think the Yankees were looking for a way to get him in the lineup? Seems awfully likely.

None of this, though, is to take away from Pipp's accomplishments. He was the first Yankee to lead the league in home runs, with 12 in 1916 and 9 in 1917. (This was, of course, the dead ball era, before the Ruthian revolution. Still, if anybody ever asks you who held the Yankee record for most home runs—single season or career—before Ruth, the answer is Pipp.) From 1921 through 1923, the Yankees first

championship run, Pipp batted .310 with an average of over 100 RBI per year. It helped the RBI total that Pipp was usually hitting 4th, 5th or 6th, behind Babe Ruth, whose On Base Average for those three years was over .500. Pipp also saved his best year for 1922, the year Ruth missed a quarter of the season, when the Yankees needed him most. That year Pipp batted .329 and finished 8th in the vote for Most Valuable Player, the second highest finish on the pennant winning Yankees. Pitcher Joe Bush, who went 26-7, finished fourth. I do not want to exaggerate. For his nine years as a Yankee regular, Pipp was an above average hitter (OPS+, 107) but not a great hitter. A 107 OPS+ is Chris Chambliss range. But Pipp was also, both by contemporaneous accounts and by the modern numbers, a very good fielding first baseman. By Baseball-Reference's calculation, Pipp saved over 70 runs with his fielding. That is the highest total for any Yankee first baseman, ahead of Moose Skowron and Don Mattingly who are second and third. Among all Yankee first basemen, his career totals are not particularly impressive, but that's because he played half his career in the dead ball era. By Wins Above Average, Pipp is 6th all-time among Yankee first baseman. By WAR, he's third, behind just Gehrig and Mattingly. A great player? No. A good player who deserves to be remembered for something more than getting a headache? Absolutely.

A Note on Wally Schang

When I started this project, I was pretty sure I would list Wally Schang as my underrated catcher. I decided not to because the case for Schang rests not so much for his time with the Yankees as for his career. Through 1960, Schang is

fifth on the list of catchers by WAR (after just Yogi Berra, Bill Dickey, Mickey Cochrane, and Gabby Hartnett), the highest ranking of any player not in the Hall of Fame. Even today, he still ranks 13th and is still one of the highest ranked catchers not in the Hall of Fame. In fact, the closest Schang ever came to the Hall of Fame was when he drew 11 votes, about 4% of the total, and finished 48th in the voting. I also had it in mind that I would compare Schang with his almost exact contemporary Ray Schalk, whose record is far less impressive than Schang's, but is in the Hall of Fame. To prepare, I went back to look at the entry on Schang in the original Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract. And what did I find? A really excellent essay by Jim Bakker comparing Schang and Schalk. That's clearly where I got the idea. I do not say this to apologize. I am, in fact, moderately proud that I remembered something I first read more than 30 years ago. But it would be silly—not to mention plagiarism—for me to repeat Bakker's essay here. So, find the James book and read the Bakker essay.

Suffice it to say that Schang's five year stay with the Yankees was not as good as his stays with the A's, the Red Sox, or—after the Yankees gave up on him as washed up—the Browns. On the basis of what Schang did with the Yankees alone, he does not make it far to the top of the list of the team's best catchers—a distinguished list that starts with Berra and Dickey and continues with Elston Howard, Thurman Munson, and Jorge Posada. But even with the Yankees Schang was very good, one of the two best catchers in the league (as measured by WAR) in both 1921 and 1922. Like many underrated players, Schang knew how to take a walk. In both

years, he had an On Base Average well above .400. In both seasons, he was the third best position player on the team (after Ruth and Meusel in 1921, after Ruth and Wally Pipp in 1922). As I mentioned in my comment on Ruth, for the whole span of three first place finished from 1921-1923, Schang was the second-best player on the team after only Ruth.

Overrated Third Base: **Joe Dugan**

Who Overrated Him: The rest of the American League.

Joe Dugan played third base for the Yankees from 1922 through 1928. Over those seven years the Yankees won five AL championships and three World Series. The 1923 team, with Dugan batting second and playing third was the Yankees' first World Series winner. The 1927 team, also with Dugan at third but then batting seventh, is one of a small number of candidates for the greatest team ever. After the 1923 World Series, presumably in a fit of pique because he had just lost, John McGraw dismissed Babe Ruth as not the equal of his own Frankie Frisch but, in contrast, acknowledged Dugan as a "great ball player." Well, people say stupid things when they're upset.

Joe Dugan made his debut as a 20-year-old with the Philadelphia Athletics in 1917, three years after Connie Mack had sold off the stars of his great 1910-1914 teams. The Athletics finished last each of Dugan's five years. In January 1922 Dugan was traded first to the Washington Senators and then, later the same day, to the Boston Red Sox. Dugan apparently expected to be traded or sold to the Yankees as the Red Sox were themselves in the midst of a sell off. Dugan

expected to join the exodus. But it didn't happen, at least not right away.

1922 was a strange year for the Yankees. They had won the American League championship the year before, led by Babe Ruth. But Ruth and Bob Meusel had both been suspended before the year began, in violation of a league rule against off season barnstorming. Ruth would be suspended four more times over the course of the season and would miss 44 of the Yankees' 154 games. In part because of the huge influx of talent from the Red Sox and despite the early absence of Ruth and Meusel, the Yankees started the season well enough, leading the league by as many as 4 ½ games in early June but then faded and trailed the very surprising St Louis Browns (the ancestors of today's Baltimore Orioles) by 3 games toward the end of the month.

The Yankees had started the year with Frank Baker playing third base. Baker had been one of the league's great stars in the early 1910s, part of the "Million Dollar Infield" Connie Mack later sold off. Baker was a very good player with the Yankees from 1916-1919. But he sat out all of 1920 because his wife had died. Baker came back and had a decent year in 1921. By 1922, Baker was 36 and, possibly, showing his age. Baker started the Yankees' first 54 games, batting third or fourth and hitting .288, the same as his lifetime average with the Yankees, with as much power as usual. Then on June 10, he was hit in the back with a pitch and, according to the account in the New York Times, taken to the hospital He was expected to be out several days. According to Baseball-Reference he did play the next day, June 11 but then missed

the Yankees' next two games. He came back on June 14, played three games and went 3 for 12 with two doubles. The next day, according to the Times report of the game: "In an effort to cast of the jinx that has clung to the Yankees [they had lost five in a row] Miller Huggins switched his line-up, Hoffman going behind the bat, Miller to center and Mike McNally to third." I do not know whether Huggins replaced Baker because of the lingering effects of his injury or because of a decision to go with a younger player (or both). I do know that Baker never started another game in the majors although he did pinch hit in a dozen more games over the course of the season.

McNally, a 28-year-old utility fielder, ran for Baker when Baker was hit on June 10. Aside from Baker's three game comeback, McNally stayed in the Yankees' lineup until July 23. McNally started well. After the first game of a doubleheader on July 1, his batting average was .344. But it couldn't last. McNally was a career .239 hitter. After peaking on July 1, McNally hit .219 over his next 22 games. Huggins dropped him from second in the batting order to eighth. More importantly, over the 42 games since Baker had been hurt the Yankees had gone 18 and 23, dropping from 3 ½ games ahead of the Browns to 1 ½ behind. It was time to do something, and the Yankees did what it seems they have always done. They flexed their money and brought in reinforcements from a team out of the running. In particular, they got Joe Dugan (and a backup outfielder) from the seventh place Red Sox for $50,000 (then a significant sum) and three back up players of their own and a player to be named later. The three players the Yankees gave up wound up their careers with a combined WAR of -2.8.

Notice: That is negative 2.8. In effect, the Yankees simply bought Dugan.

No surprise: The rest of the league was furious. *The Times* titled one of its articles "Dugan Deal Causes Storm of Protest." *The Boston Herald* called the deal disgusting and claimed that Dugan was "the outstanding star left of all the great Boston players who once wore the red hose."   The president of the St. Louis Chamber of Commerce wrote a letter to the Commissioner of Baseball, complaining that allowing the trade put "more moderately financed clubs" (like the first place Browns) at an unfair disadvantage. Tris Speaker, the manager of the fifth place Cleveland team said, "It's a crime."   Kid Gleason, the manager of the third place White Sox complained that he had tried to trade for Dugan but had been turned down. *The Times*, in more restrained language, agreed: "The coming of Dugan is expected to add considerable strength to the infield of the Yankees. He has been one of the leading infielders of the American League for the past three or four years, and at present time is probably the best third baseman in the Johnson circuit." Lest there be any mistake, *The Times* added that while Dugan "is hardly a better fielder than McNally, [he] is a much stronger batter than the player he is about to replace." And Ban Johnson—the powerful president of the American League-- called the deal "regrettable." *The Times*, in yet another article, reported: "As a result of the Boston and New York deal, new legislation will probably be enacted, according to President Johnson, fixing July 1 as the latest date by which trades may be made, except by waiver." In short, the trade was a big deal. It involved, by some reports, the best third baseman in the

league and tipped the balance of a pennant race. It exposed the extent of competitive imbalance created by money. And it was of such significance that it led to the creation of a trade deadline (fixed at June 15 for over 60 years).

I don't doubt that there was competitive imbalance. It was possibly worse in the 1920s and 1930s than any other time. Neither do I doubt that finances were the basis of the imbalance. What I do doubt is that Joe Dugan—rather than Ruth and Schang and Scott and Pennock and Hoyt and Jones and Mays and Bush—was worth all the trouble. Did the acquisition of Dugan really make a difference in the 1922 pennant race? Was Dugan really the best third baseman in the American League? My answer to the first question is "probably not." My answer to the second question is "definitely not."

Let's start with the first question. When the Yankees acquired Dugan, they were 53-41, 1 ½ games out of first. After Dugan joined the team, they went 41-19 and ended the season in first, a game ahead of St. Louis. The case should be simple. All someone would have to do to show that Dugan was the difference would be to show that he was worth 1 game in the standings, saving the Yankees from a tie with the Browns, or two games for the outright win they had.   It's a very low bar— but Dugan doesn't clear it.   By Baseball Reference's calculation, Dugan, in his 60 games with the Yankees, was worth .8 Wins Above Replacement. That's (most of) the one win the Yankees needed to avoid a tie.   But Wins Above Replacement is a pretty abstract calculation, comparing a particular player to a hypothetical replacement player. That's fine, except that Dugan did not replace a hypothetical player.

He replaced a real one, Mike McNally. And McNally, in 52 games, produced .4 Wins Above Replacement. Project McNally out through the 60 games Dugan played and Dugan's contribution, beyond the player he actually replaced, was less than half a game. Let's take it one more step. By comparing Dugan directly to McNally, we replaced a hypothetical replacement with a real replacement but the value of the events (a double here, a strike out there) that go into figuring WAR are decontextualized. A single in the bottom of the seventh with two out in a 10-1 game counts as much as a single in the bottom of the ninth with the bases loaded in a 2-1 game. That's probably okay in figuring how good a player is. It's not as okay in figuring how *valuable* a player is. So, to the rescue, once again is Baseball Reference. If you look closely enough, you can find for each player, each season, and every game Winning Percentage Added. What this statistic does is pretty remarkable. It shows the change in the likelihood of winning a game (given the inning, given the score) of every batting event. Here, that single in the bottom of the seventh of a blow out doesn't count much. The bases loaded single in the bottom of the ninth counts a lot more. (Note that WPA credits batters and pitchers for events. It does not take fielding into consideration but, remember, the Yankees got Dugan for his hitting.)   By this standard, McNally (as a hitter) cost the Yankees six tenths (.6) of a game. But Dugan, as a hitter, cost the Yankees half (.5) of a game.   Put differently, that means that Dugan, as a replacement for McNally was worth all of one tenth of a game.

So, why did the Yankees come back with a 41-19 record during Dugan's tenure? One explanation is that other players

got hot. Through the Yankees' first 94 games, Ruth had played in only 54 with a batting average of .290, 15 home runs and 43 RBI.   Over the last 60 games of the season, Ruth played in 56, hitting .336 with 20 home runs and 53 RBI. Wally Pipp also got hot: Over the Yankees' last 60 games he hit an even .400 with 6 home runs and 55 RBI. Either Pipp or Ruth provides a better explanation of the Yankee comeback than does the acquisition of Dugan. Still, Ruth's and Pipp's hot hitting was balanced by slumps from outfielders Meusel and Witt, catcher Wally Schang, and shortstop Everett Scott. In fact, over their last 60 games, the Yankees scored 4.88 runs per game, compared to 4.95 before they got Dugan. That was not a big difference. The much bigger difference was pitching. Before acquiring Dugan, the Yankees gave up 4.24 runs per game. After, it dropped to 3.65. Do you want to argue that trades with Boston made the difference? That's easy. Ruth game from Boston as did four of the Yankees five leading pitchers, who were credited with 71 of the Yankees 94 victories (and with 20 more from Bob Shawkey, purchased from Philadelphia in 1915). Did Dugan make the difference? Well, in a pennant race decided by one game, any one of a thousand things could have made a difference. Is it possible that Dugan was one of those (roughly) thousand things? It's possible, but even that seems unlikely.

Thee second question—was Dugan the best third baseman in the American League?—is easier. The answer is no. Look at the eleven-year stretch when Dugan was a regular, first with the A's, briefly with the Red Sox, then with the Yankees.

		G	WAR	WAAA	RANK AMONG YANKEES	RANK AMONG AL 3B
1918	PHI	121	-0.9	-2.7		18
1919	PHI	103	-0.9	-2.2		17
1920	PHI	123	2.1	0.3		3
1921	PHI	119	1.7	-0.3		6
1922	BOS	84	0.6	-0.8		
1922	NYY	60	0.8	-0.2	15	
1922	Total					6
1923	NYY	146	2	-0.5	9	3
1924	NYY	148	1.9	-0.6	10	4
1925	NYY	102	1.1	-0.6	11	8
1926	NYY	123	0.9	-1	13	7
1927	NYY	112	0.5	-1.2	16	10
1928	NYY	94	0.5	-0.9	14	9

NOTE: From 1918 through 1920, Dugan played more games at short stop than at third. I have ranked him here in comparison to third basemen.

Let me leave aside that, during the years of Dugan played, third base was one of the weakest positions in baseball. Still, by the standard of WAR, Dugan was never better than the third best third baseman in the league, once with the A's, once with the Yankees. By 1927 and 1928, he wasn't even among the top 8 third basemen—in an eight-team league. By the same standard, he was never better than the ninth best player on the Yankees (including pitchers). If WAR is hard to interpret, look at Wins Above Average, which is much easier to interpret. Was

Dugan a star? In fact, in only one year, none with the Yankees, was he even an average player.

What about intangibles, if you believe such things matter? Well, Dugan had earned his nickname of "Jumpin' Joe" not by any athletic ability but his habit of "jumping" his team—which is to say leaving without permission. By some accounts, he had jumped the A's as many as 30 times. As a result, he was booed mercilessly in Philadelphia. Even Ban Johnson, at the same time that he deplored the Yankees' acquisition of Dugan added that Dugan was "an extremely temperamental player and may, in the end, prove a liability rather than an asset." His contribution to what we might now call the Yankees' "organizational culture," once he got to New York, seems to have been as a drinking companion for Babe Ruth. The Yankees have made a lot of great trades, signed a bunch of great free agents, made a lot of great trade deadline acquisitions. Dugan wasn't one of them

CHAPTER FIVE
THE GLORY YEARS CONTINUE: 1924-1928

In 1924, the New York Giants won their fourth consecutive pennant. The Yankees did not. The year was not a disaster. Ruth dropped off a little, but only from the ludicrously high standards he had set the year before. Second baseman Aaron Ward and center fielder Whitey Witt also dropped off from the year before but first baseman Wally Pipp and outfielder Bob Meusel had better years. The pitching wasn't quite as strong, but there were no dramatic declines. The Yankees were in a tight race all year, never in first place by more than three games, never in second by more than four. They ended the season with 89 wins, two games behind the Washington Senators, who won their first pennant (and World Series).

1925 was a disaster. Ruth got sick in Spring training. The contemporaneous story was that he got a "bellyache" from eating too many hot dogs. The suspicion was that he had a sexually transmitted disease.   He also might have been suffering gastrointestinal problems brought on by too much booze. No matter. What is clear is that Ruth collapsed in the Asheville, NC train station on the Yankees' way north. Whatever Ruth had, it was serious. Ruth did not play until the Yankees' 41st game on June 1. After the Yankees lost that game to the Senators, with Ruth going 0 for 2, their record was 15-26. It did not get any better. Ruth played in only 98 games all year and, when he did play, had, by far, his worst year as a Yankee (a .290 batting average with 25 home runs and 67 runs

batted in).   The pitching was close to league average and a few regulars had decent years, but the Yankees were particularly weak at second and short: Aaron Ward finished, by Baseball-Reference's count, 2.2 wins *below* average and 22 year old shortstop Peewee Wanninger finished 3.7 wins, also below average.   The Yankees finished in 7th place (of eight) with a record of 69 and 85. It was the last time they would finish below .500 or below fourth for almost 40 years.

The Yankees were a bit of a mystery going into the 1926 season. In its pre-season review, the *New York Times* reported that "You can assign the Yankees a place anywhere from first to seventh and build up a reasonably good argument for your prediction. They are that kind of team. They Yanks have more "ifs" and "buts" attached to them than any other team in the big leagues." The *Times* picked the Yankees to finish fourth but acknowledged that if they can "[k]eep Ruth out of the hospital and the team out of the doldrums" plus add a stronger shortstop and second baseman, they could do better.   The *Times* reported that the Philadelphia Athletics were the consensus choice to win the pennant.

As it turned out, Ruth was healthy. Lou Gehrig, who had taken over first base from Wally Pipp on June 2, 1925, was still only 22 years old at the start of the season. (Gehrig's famous 2130 consecutive games played streak actually began when Gehrig pinch hit the day before, the same day Ruth made his 1925 season debut.)   Center fielder Earle Combs had also become a starter in 1925. At shortstop the Yankees substituted 21-year-old Mark Koenig for Wanninger.   Koenig had been purchased the year before from the minor league St. Paul

Saints. And at second base the Yankees started 22-year-old rookie Tony Lazzeri, purchased during the off season from the minor league Salt Lake City Bees. The average age of Yankee position players in 1926 (weighted for at bats) was 27.1, the lowest in the league and the youngest of any of the Yankees' 55 first place teams.

The Yankees started fast. By June 13, they were 40-15, 10 games ahead of the second place Athletics. Koenig, Combs. Ruth, Gehrig, Meusel and Dugan were all hitting over .300. Lazzeri was hitting .280, but with flashes of power. Pat Collins, the catcher, was hitting .279 but with an On Base Average of .426. It wouldn't last. For the rest of the season the Yankees played barely above .500, going 51-48. It was enough to hold on. The Yankees finished the season three-and one-half games ahead of the second place Indians. The Yankees led the league in scoring, but their pitching was, again, roughly average. Their won-lost percentage of .591 was the lowest of any Yankee pennant winner before the beginning of divisional play. The Yankees lost a dramatic World Series, 4 games to 3, to Rogers Hornsby, Grover Alexander and the St. Louis Cardinals.

The Yankees were not the favorites to repeat in 1927. In its season preview, the *Times* reported that only 9 of the 43 writers they polled, picked the Yankees for first. But 29 (including 11 of 15 New York writers) picked the Athletics. They were very wrong. Babe Ruth hit 60 home runs. Gehrig progressed from star to super star. The Yankees scored the most runs in the league, by a margin of more than 100 runs over the second-place team. The Yankees gave up the fewest

runs in the league, by a margin of more than 100 runs over the second-place team. The Yankees outscored their opponents by an extraordinary 2.4 runs a game. There wasn't much of a pennant race. The Yankees never trailed. They were last in a tie for first in April, 14 games into the season. By late June, after a three-game sweep of the Athletics, they led the league by ten games. They finished the season at 110-44, 18 ½ games ahead of the Athletics. There wasn't much of a World Series, either. The Yankees swept the Pittsburgh Pirates, 4 games to none, outscoring the Pirates 23 to 10. Many sensible people consider the 1927 Yankees the greatest baseball team, ever. I'll have more to say about this below.

1928 started out like 1927, except even more so. By mid-June, the Yankees were 39-8, already ten games ahead of the Athletics. Except for their rotating catchers, all of the Yankee regulars (and most of their irregulars) were hitting over .300. From mid-June on, the Yankees did not exactly collapse. They went 48-39, a decent pace but enough of a slowdown to let the Athletics back in the race. It was a team effort: the Yankees started scoring fewer runs and giving up more. The Athletics even took over first place for one day in September, but the Yankees rallied, winning 14 of their last 20 to finish 2 ½ games ahead of Philadelphia. In the World Series, the Yankees reasserted their dominance, sweeping the St Louis Cardinals in four games.

The Best Team Ever?

I'm pretty sure that up until the mid-1990's the 1927 Yankees were an almost unanimous choice as the best team ever.

In the twenty or thirty years since, those Yankees haven't done anything to change their performance of nearly a century ago. But people who write about baseball have changed. They've become more skeptical of received wisdom, more systematic in their use of data. These days the 1927 Yankees are still one of the candidates for the best team ever, but so are the 1939 Yankees and the 1998 Yankees, as are the 1907 Chicago Cubs, the 1970 Baltimore Orioles and the 1975 Cincinnati Reds and maybe a few more. On the face of it, it should be an easy decision. The point of playing a game is to win, no? So, isn't the team that wins the most games—which is to say the highest percentage of games—obviously the best? Altogether, only 40 teams have won two thirds of their games. They're all shown in the chart below.

Tm	Year	G	W	L	W-L%	Rdiff	RS	RA	pythW-L%	GA	POST	WS
CHC	1906	155	116	36	0.763	323	704	381	0.755	20	2-4	LC
PIT	1902	142	103	36	0.741	335	775	440	0.738	27.5	None	LC
PIT	1909	154	111	42	0.725	253	701	448	0.694	6.5	4-3	W
CLE	1954	156	111	43	0.721	242	746	504	0.672	8	0-4	LC
LAD	2020	60	43	17	0.717	136	349	213	0.712	4	11-9	LC
SEA	2001	162	116	46	0.716	300	927	627	0.672	14	4-6	DC
NYY	1927	155	110	44	0.714	376	975	599	0.709	19	4-0	W
PHIA	1931	153	107	45	0.704	232	858	626	0.64	13.5	3-4	LC
CHC	1907	155	107	45	0.704	184	574	390	0.67	17	4-0	W
NYY	1998	162	114	48	0.704	309	965	656	0.67	22	11-2	W
NYY	1939	152	106	45	0.702	411	967	556	0.734	17	4-0	W
NYY	1932	156	107	47	0.695	278	1002	724	0.644	13	4-0	W
CLE	1995	144	100	44	0.694	233	840	607	0.644	14	9-6	LC

PHIA	1929	151	104	46	0.693	286	901	615	0.668	18	4-1	W
NYG	1904	158	106	47	0.693	270	744	474	0.695	13	None	LC
BOS	1912	154	105	47	0.691	255	799	544	0.669	14	4-3	W
STL	1942	156	106	48	0.688	275	755	480	0.696	2	4-1	W
CIN	1919	140	96	44	0.686	176	577	401	0.661	9	5-3	W
NYG	1905	155	105	48	0.686	275	780	505	0.689	9	4-1	W
BRO	1953	155	105	49	0.682	266	955	689	0.645	13	3-4	LC
STL	1943	157	105	49	0.682	204	679	475	0.658	18	1-4	LC
NYG	1912	154	103	48	0.682	252	823	571	0.661	10	3-4	LC
STL	1944	157	105	49	0.682	282	772	490	0.697	14.5	4-2	W
PHIA	1910	155	102	48	0.68	232	674	442	0.684	14.5	4-1	W
CHC	1909	155	104	49	0.68	245	635	390	0.709	-6.5	None	2nd
BOS	1946	156	104	50	0.675	198	792	594	0.629	12	3-4	LC
CHC	1910	154	104	50	0.675	214	711	497	0.658	13	1-4	LC
BRO	1942	155	104	50	0.675	230	742	512	0.664	-2	None	2nd
NYY	1961	163	109	53	0.673	215	827	612	0.634	8	4-1	W
BAL	1969	162	109	53	0.673	262	779	517	0.679	12	4-4	LC
BOS	1915	155	101	50	0.669	170	669	499	0.631	2.5	4-1	W
PHIA	1911	152	101	50	0.669	259	861	602	0.658	13.5	4-2	W
NYY	1954	155	103	51	0.669	242	805	563	0.658	-8	None	2nd
NYY	1942	154	103	51	0.669	294	801	507	0.698	9	1-4	LC
TBD	2020	60	40	20	0.667	60	289	229	0.605	6	14-7	LC
NYM	1986	162	108	54	0.667	205	783	578	0.635	12	8-5	W
BOS	2018	162	108	54	0.667	229	876	647	0.635	5	11-3	W
BAL	1970	162	108	54	0.667	218	792	574	0.643	10	7-1	W
CIN	1975	162	108	54	0.667	254	840	586	0.659	15.5	7-3	W
NYY	1936	155	102	51	0.667	334	1065	731	0.666	19.5	4-2	W

At the top of the chart are the 1906 Chicago Cubs, who won 116 games and lost only 36, a winning percentage of .763. (The 1927 Yankees are 7th.) But nobody ever picks the Cubs as the best ever. Why? It's an easy answer. They lost the World Series to the other Chicago team, the so called "hitless wonders," four games to two. So, here is the first complication. How do you count the post season?

Analytic types have generally had a hard time dealing with the post season, especially for individual players. (Billy Beane, as quoted in *Moneyball*: "My shit doesn't work in the post season.") It makes sense. Most players, even great players often play in the World Series only once or twice over the course of their entire careers, and then for only four to seven games at a shot. These are exactly the small sample sizes the analytic types are (rightly) skeptical of. But it also doesn't make sense to disregard the post season altogether. Sure, four or five or six or seven games make up a much smaller sample size than the 154 or 162 games of a typical full season. But those few games are the most important games of the season. If anything, each post season game should count more than each regular season game. The tough question is how much more. Baseball historians have generally taken the post season more seriously when writing about teams than when writing about individuals. The number most closely associated with the Yankees as a franchise? It's 27, for the number of World Series they've won. The 1927 Yankees are known for their 110 wins, a regular season total. But the 1998 Yankees are most clearly associated with the number 125, a win total that combines both regular season and post season wins. (It may also be the case that the post season is harder to ignore as it has gotten longer and involved more teams in the age of divisional play.)

In a very careful article on the Baseball Almanac website, Roger Weber goes through some complicated calculations to come up with an estimate that a 15-game playoff should count as the equivalent of 138.5 regular season games. Having done this, though, he immediately backs off: "The result," he announces, "seems a little high for my purposes." So, he comes up with another formula that counts the regular season roughly twice as heavily as the post season. It all winds up seeming just a little arbitrary. Other historians deal with the post season by simply eliminating teams that did not win the World Series. Notice that of the six teams with better won/lost records than the 1927 Yankees, only one (the 1909 Pirates) also won the World Series. One, the 1902 Pirates led the National League in a year before there was a World Series. Three more lost in the World Series and one (the 2001 Mariners) lost to the Yankees in the League Championship series. Is it possible that some team that lost the World Series or didn't even get there was better in some way than a team that won the Series? Sure. Still, it would seem very strange to call a team that did not win the Series the single best team ever. In any case, the 1927 Yankees swept the Series, 4 games to none. Even if you only count each post season games as worth the same as a regular season game, the Yankees move up the list. With the post season included, the Yankee's winning percentage goes up to .722, better than any team other than the 1906 Cubs (who lost the World Series) and the 1902 Pirates who had no World Series to play in. However you count the post season, it only adds to the Yankees' glory. But there are more complications.

Here's the next one: The amount of competitive balance varies from year to year. Take a look at the list of 40 teams which won two thirds or more of their games. Twelve came in the eleven years from 1902 to 1912. There were none from 2002 through

2017. From 1955 through 1968, there was only one (the 1961 Yankees). More teams—70—have lost two thirds of their games than have won two thirds. It's easier to tank than to win. But those big losers follow the same pattern as the big winners. Seventeen –almost a quarter--came in the first twelve years of the century, the same twelve years that the saw the biggest concentration of big winners. *And remember*: That concentration of big winners and big losers came when there were only 8 teams in each league, not the fifteen there are now. There are some signs big losers are coming back. There have been six in the last four years, perhaps following the very successful example of the Houston Astros, tearing down a team to build it back by stockpiling draft choices. No matter. From 1901 through 1919, 11% of teams either won or lost two-thirds of their games. Since divisional play began in 1994, there have been 832 team years. Only 17 teams—roughly 2%--have won or lost more than two thirds of their games. Don't let any whining radio talk show hosts convince you otherwise. Since expansion, both the American and National leagues have been more competitive than in the 60 years before, even with the struggles many expansion teams (most notable, the 120 loss 1962 Mets) have gone through.

	From	To	TMYrs	2/3+	1/3-	Total	%
Dead Ball	1901	1919	322	14	22	36	0.112
Live Ball	1920	1945	416	11	21	32	0.077
Post-War	1946	1960	240	4	6	10	0.042
Expansion	1961	1974	302	3	7	10	0.033
Free Agency	1975	1993	192	2	2	4	0.021
Wild Card	1994	2021	832	6	10	16	0.019

Rob Neyer and Eddie Epstein in their excellent book on *Baseball Dynasties* tried to deal with the varying levels of competition by assigning teams what they call "standard deviation" scores. In effect, they are calculating how many more runs a team scores than other teams and how many fewer runs it gives up, compared to the *average of variation* among all teams. It's a clever idea. And, for what it's worth, the 1998 Yankees come out first, followed by the 1906 Cubs, the 1962 Giants and the 1927 Yankees. The 1939 Yankees are ninth and the 1937 Yankees are 17th. The system, of course, as Neyer and Epstein know full well, does not include the post season. (Oops: There go the Cubs and the Giants.) But I think the problems with their methods go deeper than that. What Neyer and Epstein are doing, in effect, is asking how dominant a team is given—controlling or holding constant for—the general level of dominance. I'm not sure that's what I'm interested in. I'm interested in how dominant a team is. Period. (Asking how dominant a team is given a level of dominance is roughly the same as asking about racism in the United States, holding constant for race. It doesn't make sense.) If free agency—as many feared, incorrectly as it turned out—had created massive imbalances and the possibility of super teams, I'm still interested in how concentrated the talent got. Sure, I'm also interested in how the rules of the game—about purchases, trades, farm systems, free agency, and all the rest—shaped that concentration of talent. But that doesn't make me any less interested in the concentration of talent itself. I don't mean to neglect "standard deviation" scores or equivalents altogether.

But I do approach them with caution. As for 1927, the league was moderately imbalanced, but nobody was as bad as the Yankees were good. The Boston Red Sox, in the worst downcycle of their history after selling off their stars to the Yankees, lost a mere 103 games compared to the Yankees 110 wins. When the Yankees won 110 games in 1927, no other team in either league had won two-thirds of their games since Cincinnati in 1919 and no American League team since the 1915 Red Sox, more than a decade earlier.

I would be happy to stop there but, for better or worse, there's one more complication that takes at least two forms. This complication is flukiness. Consider the famous "infinite monkey theorem." The theorem, source unknown, states simply that a single monkey sitting at a single typewriter for an infinite span of time would eventually produce all the works of Shakespeare. There is, I gather, a substantial scholarly debate over whether this is actually true—which shows only that baseball is not the only source of deeply felt debate over deeply inconsequential issues. For my purposes, it is enough to imagine that the monkey would even produce the sentence, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet."   Would we then consider the monkey a brilliant author, especially if the rest of the page looked something like "&f#Dm>;OPmsg?" I doubt it. We would call it a fluke. Well, ditto with great teams. We want to know if a team was "really" great or if its great record were somehow a fluke. One version of this is to ask whether a team sustains its success over more than one year. Another version is to ask whether a team's record reflects the ratio of runs scored to runs given up in an expected way.

I'll deal with multi-year champions later (while writing about the 1936-1939 Yankees who won four World Series in a row and the 1949-1953 Yankees who did that one better, winning five in a row). For now, let me simply note that the 1926-1928 Yankees did win three pennants in a row. The 1927 version of the Yankees was dominant as was the 1928 version for about half the season. The 1926 version, however, won only 91 games and had the lowest winning percentage of any American League pennant winner since 1908.

As for outscoring opponents, the 1927 Yankees did that better than any major league team ever. The so-called "Pythagorean Theorem" states that team's record will tend to equal the number of runs squared divided by the sum of runs squared and runs given up squared. Good or bad relief pitching can disrupt the theorem a little. For the most part, though, if a team does better than its Pythagorean record, it is either good luck or clutch—which, in practice are hard to distinguish. If a team does worse than its Pythagorean record, it's either bad luck or choking, which are also hard to distinguish. Most baseball analysts assume that "Pythagorean Won/Lost" is a better predictor of future success than is actual won lost. In short, the "Pythagorean Won/Lost" record is (one) way to eliminate flukes. By this standard the 1906 Chicago Cubs and the 1902 Pittsburgh Pirates are still on top—and still haven't won the World Series. The team with the third best Pythagorean record is the 1939 Yankees, followed by the 2020 Dodgers (who played only 60 games in the COVID shortened season). The 1927 Yankees are fifth.

So, taken all together what do we get? Which was the best team ever? After running through all the possibilities, the fairest answer might be deeply unsatisfying; It depends on what you mean by best. The second-best answer, though, still seems to me the 1927 Yankees.   Take everything into consideration: won-lost percentage in the regular season, post season play, the competitive context, the underlying ratio of runs scored to runs against and even continuity from season to season—with no way of assigning weights to these different criteria--the 1927 Yankees come out on top.

Ruth and Gehrig

Were Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig the best teammates ever? I'll manage to make the question more complicated but the answer is pretty simple. Yes. I do not, of course, mean to ask whether they got along. By almost every account, they started out as friends and grew apart. I do not mean to ask whether they coordinated their efforts, the way a double play combination would or a pitcher and a catcher. Ruth was a right fielder and left fielder. Gehrig was a first baseman. Ruth did bat 3rd and Gehrig did bat 4th (in 1927 without a single exception) but they were not playing a lot of hit and run or stealing many bases, strategies that would have required joint efforts. My question is much simpler. Have there ever been any other two players this good on a single team? There are, roughly two sorts of ways to answer this question. You could take WAA or WAR or whatever other measure you want for two players on the same team and add them together. That's what I do in the chart below. But that can distort the question so that you get one extraordinary player and one who is not. Who, for

example, holds the Major League record for most home runs by brothers? The answer is the Aaron's—Hank with 755 and his younger brother Tommie with 13. It might make for a good trivia question but it misses the spirit of the question which suggests that you mean a combination in which both players are weighted equally. The best way to handle that is to set a minimum—most home runs by brothers where each has hit at least 100—or, a bit more elegantly, multiply the totals by each other. (By that standard it's the Boyers, Ken (282) and Clete (162), narrowly edging Joe and Vince DiMaggio.) But in thinking about Ruth and Gehrig all this is largely beside the point. They are so clearly the best combination that it doesn't matter if you add or multiply or do something more complicated that I haven't thought of and don't know how to do.   In the long history of baseball, Ruth's WAA in 1927 was the fifth best, ever (behind two of his own earlier seasons, one Rogers Hornsby season and Carl Yastzemski's 1967).   Lou Gehrig's was the eleventh best ever (behind another Ruth season, two from Barry Bonds, and one each from Mickey Mantle and Hans Wagner). That's the fifth and eleventh best seasons ever, not just in the same year, but on the same team in the same year by two men batting back-to-back. Below is the short list of teammates who have combined for 14 or more WAA in a single year. Mantle and Maris do not appear on the list. Neither do Mantle and Berra or Mays and McCovey or Aaron and Mathews or Joe Morgan and Johnnie Bench or Ted Williams and anyone or Ty Cobb and anyone or Mike Trout and anyone. (In August 2024, there is some chance Judge and Soto will join the list by season's end) There are eight slots on the list, four

occupied by Ruth and Gehrig. Only one of the totals is above 15. That one is Ruth and Gehrig in 1927—at 20, one-third higher than any other total. Wow.

Team	Year	Player 1	WAA	Player 2	WAA	Total WAA
CLE	1906	Turner	7	Lajoie	7.6	14.6
NYY	1927	Ruth	10.7	Gehrig	9.3	20
NYY	1928	Ruth	7.6	Gehrig	6.9	14.5
NYY	1930	Ruth	7.8	Gehrig	7.1	14.9
NYY	1931	Ruth	8.2	Gehrig	6.1	14.3
SEA	1996	Griffey	7.6	Arod	7.2	14.8
SF	2001	Bonds	9.9	Aurilia	4.7	14.6
SF	2002	Bonds	9.9	Kent	5.1	15

Lineup Construction

By current standards the 1927 Yankees put together an odd lineup order. Overall, the team had a nice balance between left-handed hitters and right-handed hitters. Ruth, Gehrig, and Combs were all lefties. Lazzeri, Meusel, Dugan and the catcher (Collins or Bengough) were righties. And shortstop Mark Koenig switch hit. What was odd, by current standards, is that the lefties were all concentrated at the top of the lineup and the righties at the bottom. The lineup, which was remarkably stable, typically went Combs (L), Koenig (S), Ruth (L), Gehrig (L), Meusel (R), Lazzeri (R), Dugan (R), Catcher (R).   It probably mattered less than it would have over the last

half century or so. Relief pitchers were less common and the LOOGY (the left-handed one out only guy) wasn't yet a glimmer in Tony LaRussa's eye and Graeme Lloyd wouldn't be born for another four decades. But the Yankees were vulnerable to lefties, at least more vulnerable than they were to righties. In games started by right handed pitchers, the Yankees had an OPS of 891. In games started by lefties, it was .830. That's roughly the same as the difference between a team of Reggie Jacksons (Yankee OPS .897) or Roger Maris's (.872) and a team of Curtis Grandersons (.829) 0r Gene Woodlings (.822). Ruth was no worse against lefties than righties—a slightly lower batting average but an even higher rate of home runs. But both Gehrig and Combs fell off significantly against lefties—from a staggering 1.308 OPS against righties to a 1.050 OPS against lefties for Gehrig and from .965 to .805 for Combs. (If you want the more conventional stats for Gehrig against righties, they're a .396 BA, a .497 OBA, an .811 Slugging Average with 35 home runs and 130 RBI in 402 at bats, the equivalent of about 2/3rds of a season.) As it happens, Tony Lazzeri, one of the Yankees two big right handed hitters, also hit better against righties than lefties in 1927, a one year aberration. Opposing teams seemed to know that the Yankees were vulnerable to lefties and started lefties against them 47 times, more than against any other team in the league. Did it matter? The Yankees record against right handers (starters and relievers) was 79-29 (.731). Against lefties (also starters and relievers) it was 31-15 (.674). So, it mattered a little but when you're as good as the 1927 Yankees,

the subtleties just don't matter much and even your vulnerabilities are strengths.

One Year Wonders

Baseball has had its share of one-year wonders. Norm Cash hit .361 with 41 homeruns and 132 RBI for the Detroit Tigers in 1961. In no other year did he hit higher than .286 or more than 39 home runs or drive in more than 88. Brady Anderson, hit 50 home runs as a 32-year-old centerfielder for the Orioles in 1996. He had never hit more than 21 in any year before that. One-year wonders are probably more common among pitchers, who are subject to sore arms, than among position players. The most famous is Mark "The Bird" Fidrych who was a national sensation for the Tigers in 1976, in part for his personality: He talked both to himself and to the ball while he was pitching. But Fidrych, as a 21-year-old, was also a sensational pitcher. He won 19 and lost 9, while leading the league in both Earned Run Average and complete games. The next year he strained his arm and only won 10 more games over the rest of his career. The Yankees have had a few players who approached one-year wonders. Birdie Cree—the avian theme is coincidental--hit .348 for the team still known as the Highlanders in 1911 and never approached that level again. But 1911 was a hitter's year and, once "relativized," was not much out of line with what Cree did in another couple of seasons. Bobby Bonds—Barry's father—played one year for the Yankees (1975) and hit .270 with 32 home runs, a pile of walks and a pile of stolen bases before he was traded to the California Angels.   But Bonds had had several even better years with the Giants before joining the Yankees and would

have a couple of comparable years after leaving. The purest version of a one-year wonder in the Yankees' long and glorious history was a pitcher, Wilcy Moore.

Moore was a fluke in more ways than one. Through 1925 Moore had been a moderately successful pitcher in the minor leagues, playing for, among several other teams, the Ardmore Snappers and the Okmulgee Drillers in the Class C Western Association. In 1925, while playing for the Greenville (SC) Spinners in the Sally (Class B, South Atlantic) League, he hurt his arm. To relieve the strain, Moore started throwing sidearm. He promptly went 30 and 4. He was 29 years old. The Yankees signed him on the basis of an article Ed Barrow, the Yankees' business manager, had seen in *The Sporting News.*

As a 30-year-old rookie, Moore went 19-7. He also led the league in Earned Run Average (2.28) and saves (13). Over the course of their history, the Yankees have had 104 rookie pitchers who won 5 or more games. Three of them were older than Moore during their rookie season. Two of those were Cuban refugees (Orlando Hernandez and Jose Contreras) who had long careers in Cuba before defecting. The third was one George McConnell who went 8-12 as a 34-year-old rookie in 1912. McConnell, though, had been a first baseman in the minor leagues before switching to pitching in 1908 while Playing for the A league Buffalo Bisons. Just by virtue of his age, Moore was a fluke. There's more.

In 1927, relief pitcher was not the well-defined position it is now. Today, complete games have almost completely disappeared. In 1927, starters completed roughly 45% of the games they started. When relief pitchers did come in, they

were often starters filling in between their starts. Although a few teams had experimented with relief specialists, the only established star relief specialist was Firpo Marberry of the Washington Senators. Marberry had set major league records for saves each of the previous three years (15, 16, and 22). Nobody else had ever saved more than 13. Moore was a swingman, starting 12 games and relieving in 38. As a starter, Moore was excellent—a 6-4 record with a 2.61 Earned Run Average (in a year when the league average was 4.14). As a reliever, he was even better—13-3 with an ERA of 1.81 and 12 saves. In 119 innings as a reliever, the equivalent of 13 games, Moore gave up one and only one home run. In the entire history of baseball, only two pitchers have won more games while saving at least twelve. And only two pitchers have saved more games while winning at least 19.

And that was pretty much it. Moore pitched only 60 or so innings in both 1928 and 1929, almost all in relief but with an ERA that was worse league average. In 1930, he was back in the minor leagues before playing three more years in the majors for the Yankees and the Red Sox. Moore's 6.6 WAR in 1927 is the 19th highest for a pitcher in Yankee history. Only 14 different Yankees had more. On the Yankee career list, Moore is 101st. Of his career total of 9.3 pitching WAR, he accumulated 71% in a single year. Only 24 pitchers have accumulated 6 or more WAR for the Yankees in a single season (a total of 35 seasons if counting the pitchers who have done it more than once). None of the others have come close to Moore's concentration of value in a single year. Chien-Ming Wang is second, with 6 WAR (in 2006) out of a career total of

12.8 (47%). Among position players, the Yankee leader, if that's what it is, is Snuffy Stirnweiss, a star during World War II, at 31%.

The grammar and usage police insist that the word "unique" should not be modified. You're either unique or you're not. Okay, I try to be law abiding most of time. I accept that I can't say that Wilcy Moore is the "most unique" player in Yankee history. But I can say that he was unique in several ways and I'm pretty sure that he is the clearest example of a one-year wonder in Yankee history.

A Very Short Note on Pat Collins Pat Collins replaced Schang in 1926 and was also the lead catcher on the great 1927 team. The Yankees' famous Murderer's Row consisted of Ruth, Gehrig, Earl Combs, Tony Lazzeri and Bob Meusel. Nobody ever mentions Collins. But Collins, like Schang, could hit a little and could take a walk. In 1926, his OPS was actually higher than either Meusel's and Comb's and, in 1927, a little behind them. His lifetime OBA as a Yankee is .413 in 264 games, behind only Ruth, Gehrig, and Mantle. A great player? Not by a long shot but someone who deserves better than oblivion.

CHAPTER SIX
THE BEST OF TEAMS, THE WORST OF TEAMS:
1929-1935

From 1929 through 1935, the Yankees has the best record in the major leagues. They won 15 more games than the Chicago Cubs, who were next best, and 37 more games than the Philadelphia Athletics, who were next best in the American League. The 1930 and 1931 teams were two of the three highest scoring teams in American League history. The 1932 team was the seventh highest. All three teams scored more than 1000 runs. Only four other teams have done that, ever (the 1936 Yankees, the 1950 Red Sox, the 1930 Cardinals, and the 1999 Cleveland Indians, who needed 162 games to do it). The 1930s were, of course, a high offense context. If we use OPS+ instead, a statistic that takes context into account, the Red Sox team and the Cardinals team and the Indians team all disappear from the leaders list. The 1931 team is still second (behind the 1927 Yankees) and the 1930 team is fourth. The 1932 team drops to 10th (I'm not counting three teams from the COVID shortened 2020 season) but the 1933 team rises to 9th. And remember that those rankings are out of 2594 team seasons.

Composite Standings								
American League, 1929-1935								
Tm	**G**	**W**	**L**	**W-L%**	**Rdiff**	**RS**	**RA**	**pythW-L%**
NYY	1074	649	419	0.608	1391	6617	5226	0.606
PHI	1066	612	448	0.577	736	6040	5304	0.559
WAS	1079	582	489	0.543	462	5707	5245	0.539
CLE	1075	569	501	0.532	179	5581	5402	0.515
DET	1077	551	521	0.514	268	5758	5490	0.522
STL	1078	456	613	0.427	-915	5002	5917	0.424
BOS	1072	432	636	0.404	-951	4646	5597	0.416
CHI	1071	420	644	0.395	-1170	4852	6022	0.402

The 1929-1935 Yankees still had Lou Gehrig and Tony Lazzeri for all seven years. They had Ruth and Earle Combs through 1934. Future Hall of Fame catcher Bill Dickey became a starter in 1929 and 21-year-old Ben Chapman joined the team in 1930, first as a third baseman, later as an outfielder. 1930 the Yankees also added two future Hall of Fame pitchers, 21-year-old Lefty Gomez and 25-year-old Red Ruffing, acquired in yet another cash sweetened deal with the Red Sox. In short, the team was loaded.

And yet, 1929 through 1935 was the Yankees least successful stretch in the course of their almost half century domination of the American League. From 1929-1935, the Yankees finished first only once (1932). The Athletics won three times (1929-1931) and the Tigers won twice (1934-1935). Over in the National League, the Cubs won three times (1929, 1932, and 1935) as did the Cardinals (1930, 1931, 1934). The

Cubs, famously, did not win any World Series but the Cardinals did twice as did the Athletics.

What was going on? Part of the answer is simple. Through 1933, the pitching, while not terrible, was mediocre, just a little bit above league average. By 1934, when the pitching started to get better, Ruth was on his last spindly legs as a Yankee and the scoring fell well below the Hank Greenberg/Charlie Gehringer Tigers. The rest of the answer is a bit more complicated. It has to do with luck—something analytics can identify but not explain because what we mean by "luck" is precisely that which we cannot explain. From 1929 through 1935, the Yankees scored 6617 runs while giving up 5226. By the Pythagorean Theorem (revised version) that projects to a won-lost percentage of .606. The Yankees' actual winning percentage was .608. That's very close. But the overall accuracy of the Pythagorean Theorem masks big swings from year to year. In 1931, the Yankees scored 1067 runs (the most ever) and gave up 760. By the Pythagorean Theorem that projects to a record of 100-53. The actual Yankees finished at 94-59, 6 games below their projection. Of the roughly 150 American League teams that have won more than 60% of their games, only 3 (1909 Philadelphia, 1948 Cleveland, 2018 Houston) have had a bigger negative margin between projected won lost record and actual won lost record. The very next year, the 1932 Yankees scored 1002 runs and gave up 724. The Pythagorean projection for that ratio is 99-55. The actual 1932 team finished 107-47, eight games better than their projection. That is the eighth highest *positive* margin for any of the same roughly 150 teams that won 60% of their

games. That, I'm pretty sure, was simply luck. If you want to argue that what I'm calling luck is really "clutch" or "character," feel free. But then how do you explain that two teams with very similar personnel should have such bad results one year and such good results the other. Would you really want to argue that the 1931 team lacked character and the 1932 team suddenly got character only to see it all pretty much even out in 1933? Sometimes you roll three sevens in a row. Sometimes you roll three snake eyes in a row. That's luck.

CHAPTER SEVEN
THE OTHER GREATEST TEAM EVER: 1936-1939

In the Spring of 1936, the *Times* skipped its usual practice of polling a panel of "experts" about the upcoming baseball season. Ralph Drebinger in his season preview wrote that any "attempt to forecast the exact order or finish in a pennant race is little short of pure guesswork." That, of course, did not stop him from trying. Drebinger was enthusiastic about a 21-year-old rookie. "It seems to be almost universally accepted that the magical Joe DiMaggio, hailed as one of the greatest youngsters to emerge from the minors in years and years, will fulfill expectations." He was not so enthusiastic about the Yankees as a whole. Drebinger's pick for first place was the Detroit Tigers, who had won the previous two years and seemed, if anything, stronger. His pick for second was the Red Sox who after years of frantic selling under owner Harry Frazee, had begun a process of frantic buying under new owner Tom Yawkey. The Red Sox had acquired Jimmy Foxx and Left Grove from the Athletics, Heinie Manush and Joe Cronin from the Washington Senators—each a future Hall of Famer still in his prime—along with all-stars Doc Cramer, also from the Athletics, and pitcher Wes Ferrell from Cleveland. As for the Yankees, they chose to stand pat on their 1935 lineup (except for DiMaggio), "in the hope that, with better luck, it will come through where it failed before. …But the majority feel," Drebinger continued, that the Yankee's "conservatism this Winter has not enhanced the Yankees chances against the

combined threats of Detroit and Boston."   Drebinger was right about DiMaggio. He was dead wrong about the Yankees.

I can see some reasonable disagreement about whether the 1927 Yankees were the greatest single season ever. I cannot, however, see any reasonable disagreement about the 1936-1939 Yankees as the greatest multi season run any team has ever enjoyed. Only 19 teams have won three or more league championships in a row. (Nine of those are Yankee teams.)   Only six teams have won four or more league championships in a row (the 1921-1924 New York Giants and the Yankees, five different times, starting in 1949, 1955, 1960 and 1998 as well as 1936). The only team other than the Yankees to win three World Series in a row was the Oakland A's (1988-1990). The Yankees have done it three times (1949-1953. 1998-2000, as well as 1936-1939). But it's not just that the Yankees won. It's how they won. The Yankees from 1936-1939 won 67% of their games, an average of 102.3 a year. (The next best 3 year stretch in Yankee history was 1926-28, winning an average 100.7 games.) From 1936 through 1939, the Yankees led the league in runs scored each year. They also gave up the fewest runs in the league each year. They outscored their opponents by slightly more than two runs a game. Not impressed? Only four other team have outscored their opponents by two runs or more in a single season (the 1902 Pirates and the 1906 Cubs, the two teams with the best won-lost records in the last 120 years, plus the 1927 Yankees and the ill-fated 1931 Yankees.) The 1936-1939 Yankees did it in 1936, 1937 and 1939 as well as for the four seasons as a whole. I would describe the pennant races, but there really

weren't any.   The latest they were out of first place, in any season, was July 13. Their margins of victory over the second-place teams (the Tigers in 1936 and 1937, the Red Sox in 1938 and 1939) were 19 ½ games, 13, 9 ½, and 17. The World Series? The beat the Giants in 1936, 4 games to 2, and again in 1937, 4 games to 1. In 1938 and 1939 they swept the Cubs and then the Reds.   Their composite won/lost record in the World Series was 16-3, even better than their regular season record. They outscored their opponents—the best team in the National League--by 51 runs, an average of 2.6 a game.

The table below compares the 1936-1939 Yankees with the other teams that won at least three World Series in a row or four league championships in a row or four league championships in five years. The numbers are all annual averages.   LC stands for League Championships won. WS stands for World Series won. GA is the average annual games ahead of the team with the second-best cumulative record. PT stands for projected won/lost based on runs scored and runs against (the Pythagorean Theorem).

	From	Through	Years	LC	WS	W	L	%	GA	R	RA	PT
CUBS	1906	1910	5	4	2	106.0	47.0	0.693	10.4	650	424	0.686
ATHLETICS	1910	1914	5	4	3	97.6	54.0	0.644	11.1	771	565	0.639
GIANTS	1921	1924	4	4	2	93.8	59.5	0.612	5.9	851	654	0.618
YANKEES	**1936**	**1939**	**4**	**4**	**4**	**102.3**	**50.3**	**0.670**	**18.8**	**994**	**670**	**0.675**
CARDS	1942	1946	5	4	3	101.8	52.8	0.659	15.5	735	514	0.658
YANKEES	1949	1953	5	5	5	97.4	56.0	0.635	5.9	814	611	0.628
DODGERS	1952	1956	5	4	1	96.8	56.8	0.630	12.5	817	657	0.599
YANKEES	1955	1958	4	4	2	95.8	58.3	0.622	8.8	775	578	0.631
YANKEES	1960	1964	5	5	2	101.0	59.2	0.630	11.1	767	609	0.604
ATHLETICS	1988	1990	3	3	3	102.0	60.0	0.630	14.7	748	589	0.608
YANKEES	1998	2001	4	4	3	98.5	62.8	0.611	7.1	885	729	0.588

LINEUP DEPTH

Since 1901, 25 different teams have had four or more batters with 100 or more RBI. The 1936 Yankees are the only team to have had five (Gehrig, DiMaggio, Dickey, Lazzeri and Selkirk). Of course, it helped that 1936 was the highest scoring year in the history of the American League.   Since 1901, only 28 teams have had four or more position players who accumulated 3 or more Wins Above Average in a season. The 1972 A's and the 1976 Yankees had five. The 1939 Yankees were the only team with six (Dickey, DiMaggio, Gordon, Keller, Rolfe, Selkirk). WAA is just a little harder to understand than RBI. But it is independent of offensive context and a more important measure. It is the more impressive accomplishment.

HOW THE TEAM WAS CONSTRUCTED

Before the 1930's, there were three ways to acquire players. You could trade for them or purchase them from another major league team. This is how the Yankees built their great teams of the 1920's and early 1930's, with a great deal of help from the Red Sox. You could purchase them from a minor league team at a time when the minors were far more independent than they are today. This is how the Yankees had acquired Earle Combs and Bob Meusel. It is also how the Red Sox had acquired Babe Ruth in the first place. Or you could sign an amateur directly, out of high school or out of college or even a semi-pro league. This is how the Yankees had acquired Lou Gehrig out of Columbia. Signing an amateur then was similar to what is now the primary way teams acquire young players, with two important exceptions. One is that there was no amateur draft. Teams could sign anyone they wanted to. (The first draft, introduced as a way to increase competitive

balance, was in 1965.) The other was that teams were limited to keeping control over no more than 15 minor league players—and sometimes not even that—and for no more than two years without promoting them to the majors.

Prior to the 1930's, various major league teams had arrangements of various sorts with minor league teams, but there were no "farm systems" of the sort there are today, with major league teams owning minor league teams directly. That changed only when Branch Rickey, then the business manager of the St, Louis Cardinals, began acquiring minor league teams as a way to compete more cost efficiently against wealthier teams (like the Yankees).   But it changed even more dramatically when the Commissioner of Baseball ruled, in 1931, that players on a fully owned minor league team would *not* count against the maximum 15 minor league players under the control of the major league team. That changed just about everything in player acquisition.

The Cardinals had a head start in building a farm system. By 1940, they had no less than 30 minor league affiliates. (These days, teams typically have 7 or 8 affiliates.) The Yankees followed suit. In 1932, they had five affiliates. By 1939, they had sixteen affiliates including two (Newark and Kansas City) at the highest levels of the minor leagues. The Cardinals had started the farm system as a way to compete cost effectively. It paid off: The Cardinals were the dominant team in the National League for almost twenty years because of their farm system. The Yankees, however, had money to spend. They used it not just to acquire teams and support them but also to hire the largest, most aggressive scouting staff in the majors.

By 1936, the results were starting to show up. Some of the 1936-1939 Yankees, were acquired the old- fashioned ways. Gehrig had been signed as an amateur and optioned to Hartford. Bill Dickey, Tony Lazzeri, Frank Crosetti, Joe DiMaggio, and Lefty Gomez all came straight to the Yankees after the Yankees purchased their contracts from minor league teams. Some came in trades: pitchers Red Ruffing (purchased from the Red Sox) and Monte Pearson from Cleveland and Bump Hadley from Washington, both in less one-sided deals. The new route was from the Yankees minor league affiliates, most importantly Newark. Joe Gordon, Red Rolfe, Charlie Keller were all signed out of college and played for Newark before their promotions to the Yankees. Pitcher Johnny Murphy and Marius Russo were also signed as amateurs and played at Newark. Henrich, Selkirk, and Dahlgren all came to the Yankees from other teams while still in the minors and then played for Newark. Not surprisingly, the 1937-38 Newark Bears are often nominated as one of the greatest minor league teams ever. Their combined record for those two years was 213-91. That's good.

1936-1939 was an inflection point in how the Yankees made themselves great. Prior to the 1930's, the effect of wealth was direct. The Yankees simply bought players from other teams, majors and minors, at higher prices than anyone else was willing or able to pay. After the coming of free agency in the 1970s, the Yankees were also able simply to outbid other teams for players (Catfish Hunter, Reggie Jackson, Dave Winfield, Roger Clemens, Mike Mussina, Gerrit Cole) or pay players more than anyone else could or would to retain players (Jeter, Rodriguez, Stanton, Judge). In the long stretch from 1931 through 1964, the period of the Yankees greatest

domination, they could not so directly outspend other teams. The Yankees dominated not through purchases but through a long line of players promoted through their farm system (Rizzuto, Berra, Mantle, Ford as well as Gordon and Keller) or used in trades. But make no mistake: the ability of the Yankees to build a farm system also cost money. This is the period about which the comic Joe E. Lewis said that "rooting for the Yankees is like rooting for U.S, Steel." Of course, U.S. Steel hit a bad patch at about the same time as the Yankees. But where U.S. Steel faced foreign competition and rising labor costs, the Yankees got to hold onto New York City. And that let them come back in a way U.S. Steel never could.

Overrated Center Field: Joe DiMaggio

Who overrated him: MVP voters, several generations of writers, himself, possibly even the advertising agencies who lined up lucrative deals to do commercials for Mr. Coffee

Where *have* you gone Joe DiMaggio?

My impression—which is to say that it's more than a guess but not something I would insist on-- is that Joe DiMaggio's reputation has slipped a little over the past couple of decades. It is still very high.

Some of this is a result of analytics. One of the remarkable characteristics of DiMaggio as a hitter was how little he struck out. Of the 150+ hitters with 300 or more home runs, he struck out the least (369 times). He struck out 1.02 times for every home run, by far the least of any of those 300+ home run hitters. Yogi Berra is next, at 1.16. In 1941, the season of his 56-game hitting streak, DiMaggio hit 30 home runs and struck out the grand total of thirteen times. At the time he retired, this was seen as a prime virtue. As it turns out, it wasn't. Whatever advantages there are in making contact and moving

runners over is more or less evened out by an increased tendency to hit into double plays. More importantly, reducing the number of strike outs also reduces the number of walks. DiMaggio walked some but not much, an average of 74 per 162 games (Ted Williams, 143 per 162; Ruth, 133; Mantle, 117; Gehrig, 113). *Not* walking much is even one off the reasons DiMaggio was able to put together his 56-game hitting streak. Over the course of a season, he got 40 to 70 more at bats than Gehrig, Mantle, Ruth, and Williams. In the old days a lot of people thought that walking was, well, what a wuss would do. Williams, who did walk a lot, was criticized for walking too much, a selfish player who stubbornly refused to swing at bad pitches, protecting his batting average at a cost to his team. Oops. It turns out they had it backwards—the selfish player turns out to be the guy who swings at bad pitches, racking up RBIs, but upping the risk of making outs. As the appreciation of walks has gone up the appreciation of DiMaggio has gone down. I also suspect that the analytic efforts to quantify the value of defense have also hurt DiMaggio's reputation. It's not that DiMaggio was a bad fielder. He was very good. But in the absence of quantification, it's easy to exaggerate how great DiMaggio's defense was and to exaggerate how many runs he actually saved. But I think there's something else going on besides analytics. My impression—again, without hard data—is that a player's reputation peaks very roughly 20 to 40 years after his retirement. That's long enough for fans to have forgotten the inevitable disappointments. (Yes, fans booed DiMaggio in the late 30's, mostly for his holdouts, just as they booed Mantle in the late 50's for his strikeouts.) More importantly, it's enough time for the ten-year-olds who worshipped their heroes uncritically to turn into 30- to 50-year-

olds who are now reminiscing to their kids, voting in polls, or even writing books or making movies.   Then, after forty years the memories fade. When I first started paying attention to baseball, around 1960, the great debate was still whether Babe Ruth or Ty Cobb (retired 1928) was the better player. Today, Cobb is no longer part of those debates. Ruth's reputation has held up better but these days every now and then someone will claim Willie Mays was the greatest ever, something that would have been treated as heresy immediately after Mays' retirement. I mention all this because it's hard to recapture the extraordinary esteem in which DiMaggio was once held.

In 1969, in honor of the centennial of professional baseball, Major League Baseball conducted a major poll of various greats over the previous century. The exact methods of that poll remain vague but the results were clear. DiMaggio was picked as the greatest center fielder ever. He was one of four "finalists" (with Cobb, Honus Wagner and the winner, Ruth) for the title of greatest player ever. He was also the pick (over Ted Williams and Stan Musial among many others, including Mays and Mantle) as the greatest living player. DiMaggio, ever attentive to his image, insisted on being announced with that title for the rest of his life.

In 1987 a poll of current and past players picked DiMaggio as the greatest center fielder ever. In 1998, the *Sporting News* picked DiMaggio as the second greatest center fielder (behind Mays) and the 11th greatest player overall.   In 1999, the members of SABR (the Society of American Baseball Research), no less, picked DiMaggio as the greatest center fielder of all time, the sixth greatest player ever. The same year—everybody was rushing to get in on the end of the century stuff before a predicted glitch crashed all the world's

computers on New Year's Eve—MLB picked another all-century team. DiMaggio was their second pick in center, after Mays, before Cobb, Mantle and Ken Griffey. In 2000, the Associated Press picked a Player of the Century. DiMaggio was 6th. By 2013, when *Sports Illustrated* picked its all-time team, DiMaggio had begun to slip, although not by much. *SI* had DiMaggio as the third best center fielder. And in 2022, when ESPN released its list of the hundred best players, DiMaggio had slipped to fifth among center fielders, after Mays, Mantle, Ken Griffey and Mike Trout, and 16th overall. Even with the 21st century "reputational decline," that's still all pretty impressive.

How good was DiMaggio? Good. Very good. Just not as good as everyone seems to think. Start with WAR. DiMaggio is 37th all time since 1901. He does a little better in WAA—28th all time. But this, someone will argue, isn't fair: DiMaggio spent three years in the army during World War II (mostly playing baseball, some of it in Hawaii, none of it in combat). Okay. In the two years before and the two years after he was in the army (two of them MVP years), DiMaggio averaged 6.4 WAR and 4.5 WAA. Add those in for each of the missing three years and DiMaggio moves up to 21st in WAR and 18th in WAA. Oh, did I forget to mention that's only among position players? Add in pitchers and DiMaggio drops to 29th in WAR and 22nd in WAA. But even this, someone might argue, isn't fair. Even aside from the years he missed for World War II, DiMaggio had a short career (13 years), quitting at age 36, too proud to let anyone see him play when he could no longer perform at his highest level. The right question, that someone might argue, is how good DiMaggio was at his peak. Okay, again. That's reasonable. Jay Jaffe (on Baseball-Reference, where else)

has calculated WAR totals for the seven best years of a player's career. DiMaggio is 35th among position players, 7th among center fielders. You want to go to single seasons? 39 players have had a single season WAR of 9.5 or above or a single season WAA of 7.5 (about half of them more than once). DiMaggio isn't one of them. He topped out at 9.4 and 7.4 (in 1941).

There's another argument that's frequently made for DiMaggio. That is that DiMaggio, as right-handed power hitter, was deeply disadvantaged by a Yankee Stadium that favors left-handed hitters. DiMaggio did, in fact, hit much better on the road than at home. On the road, he hit .334/.406/.611 (BA/OBA/SA) with 213 home runs and 818 RBI. At home, he hit .316/.391/.547 with 148 HR and 721 RBI. I calculated home/road ratios for the 130 Yankees with the most at bats by dividing road OPS by home OPS. For DiMaggio, that ratio is .923. There are about a dozen Yankees with lower ratios, all right-handed hitters. But take a look at the chart below, which shows road and home records for the eight right-handed batters with the most home runs as Yankees. Winfield, Skowron and Howard (as well as DiMaggio) all hit better on the road than at home. But Rodriguez, Jeter, Lazzeri and, most notably, Judge all hit better at home. There's no question but that DiMaggio was hurt by Yankee Stadium but that, as they say, is on him. He gets no extra credit from me for failing to figure out how to adapt as well as Rodriguez or Judge did. (Stats for Judge are through August 18, 2024.)

| | Road | | | | | Home | | | | |
	Total HR	HR	RBI	BA	OBA	SA	HR	RBI	BA	OBA
DiMaggio	361	213	818	0.334	0.406	0.611	148	721	0.316	0.391
Rodriguez	351	169	518	0.277	0.375	0.505	182	578	0.290	0.381
Judge	300	150	342	0.277	0.392	0.583	151	341	0.300	0.418
Jeter	260	122	645	0.306	0.370	0.431	138	666	0.313	0.384
Winfiled	207	115	418	0.293	0.357	0.509	90	400	0.287	0.356
Lazzeri	169	89	638	0.294	0.382	0.465	80	529	0.291	0.379
Skowron	165	105	399	0.298	0.346	0.526	60	273	0.290	0.346
Howard	161	108	408	0.283	0.321	0.457	53	324	0.274	0.329

MVP votes show a similar pattern—a very good player, one of the best around, who still somehow managed to be overvalued. He did not win the MVP in 1937 when he was arguably the best position player in the American League for the best team in the league, leading the league in home runs and WAR among position players, second in RBI. The award went to Charlie Gehringer of the Tigers, who wasn't far behind DiMaggio in WAR and was probably the beneficiary of a kind of career award effect that goes into a lot of MVP votes. (DiMaggio and Mantle and Jeter were all slightly undervalued in MVP votes when they were young. They were all overvalued when they were older. My guess is that this is a very general pattern.) In 1939, DiMaggio did win the MVP. He was again the best position player in the league by WAR and led in batting average. That Bob Feller, with a WAR of 9.7 (to DiMaggio's 8.3) did not win probably had more to do with a bias against pitchers than an overvaluation of DiMaggio. In 1940, DiMaggio finished third for the third place Yankees. That was about right. Then it starts to get weird. In 1941 DiMaggio had his best season, including the 56-game hitting streak that probably got

more attention than any other individual accomplishment since Ruth's 60 home runs and possibly topped even that. 1941 is also the year that Ted Williams hit .406. In retrospect, Williams' achievement seems more impressive than it seemed at the time. Williams was the first player in just over a decade to hit over .400 but nobody knew then that it would also be the last the last time ever. Nobody had ever hit in 56 consecutive games before (or since). Williams finished with a WAR of 10.4, one of the highest ever. DiMaggio had 9.4 WAR, his best single season but, of course, nobody had even heard of WAR at the time. DiMaggio's Yankees finished first, 17 games ahead of Williams' second place Red Sox. My feeling is that Williams probably deserved the award, but I can see very reasonable arguments for DiMaggio. I cannot say the same about 1947. DiMaggio won again that year, by one vote over Williams (after one voter famously left Williams off his ballot altogether). DiMaggio hit .315 with 20 home runs and 97 RBI. His WAR was 4.7, the lowest of his career to that date. Williams won the Triple Crown—a .343 batting average with 32 home runs and 114 RBI. His WAR (9.5) was more than twice as high as DiMaggio's. DiMaggio was no doubt helped by the Yankees first place finish while Williams was hurt by the Red Sox 3rd place finish after having won the pennant the year before. Still, DiMaggio didn't even lead the Yankees in WAR. That honor went to right fielder Tommy Henrich (5.1) and a reasonable case could also have been made for reliever Joe Page. (Page's WAR was 3.9 but WAR systematically underestimates the contribution of relief pitchers because it doesn't take into consideration that relief pitchers pitch in the most critical game situations). The 1947 vote was nuts.

One final thought: DiMaggio was seen as a winner. He was a winner. The Yankees finished first in 10 of DiMaggio's 13 years. They won the World Series 9 of those 10 years. The Yankees won 64.1% of the games DiMaggio started. That is certainly one of the very best records ever. But three Yankees, all teammates, did even better (Henrich, 64.3%; Red Rolfe, also 64.3%, and Joe Gordon, 64.1%). Ten other Yankees finished at 63% or better for their Yankee years. That list includes Gene Woodling, Andy Carey, Frank Crosetti, and George Selkirk. Nobody ever nominated any of them for greatest living player. And the World Series? In 53 World Series games, DiMaggio hit .271 with eight home runs and 30 RBI—not terrible but definitely pedestrian. DiMaggio's Yankees did win a lot and some of that had to do with DiMaggio. But it had much more to do with great teammates than with some inner quality of "winnerness."

I'll have more to say about the myth of DiMaggio later, in my discussion of Derek Jeter, who was also the subject of much myth making. For now, let me acknowledge one last time that DiMaggio was a great ball player. If there were a Mount Rushmore for the Yankees--which is to say four faces only—I would put DiMaggio up there with Ruth and Gehrig and Mantle. But he was never the greatest living baseball player. He was probably never the greatest center fielder ever. He is not the 16th greatest player ever (and most rankings have him higher than that). That's overrated.

What Goes Around Comes Around: Ben Chapman for Jake Powell

Ben Chapman was a very good player in his six plus seasons with the Yankees. He joined the Yankees as a 21-year-old rookie third baseman in 1930. He was switched to the

outfield the next year and took over in center from Earl Combs in 1934. He led the league in stolen bases three straight years. He hit over .300 four of his six years with the Yankees and narrowly missed the other two. His lifetime batting average with the Yankees was .305, 11th best of the 110 players who appeared in 500 or more games for the Yankees. His OPS, .830, is tied with Yogi Berra and Don Mattingly for 28th best in Yankee history, although, in fairness, I should note that both Berra and Mattingly played in much less hitter-friendly environments. Still, Chapman's OPS+ of 119, which adjusts for context, is 36th best of the same 110 players, just ahead of Mark Teixeira, Thurman Munson, and Derek Jeter. He is 37th all-time among Yankee players in WAR, but in fewer games than all but three players ahead of him. He is 31st in WAA, which depends less on his length of tenure with the team.

It's an impressive resume. But if Chapman is remembered at all today it is as the Philadelphia manager whose race-baiting of Jackie Robinson was so vicious as to require an intervention from the Commissioner of Baseball. (In the movie *42*, about Jackie Robinson, Chapman is played by Alan Tudyk, likely better known as the Resident Alien on Bravo's comedy/drama of the same name and as a regular on the cult classic, *Firefly*.) This is not a matter of Chapman's name being dishonored because of one unfortunate incident. Quite the reverse: Chapman's race baiting was the culmination of a career of fights and racism. He sparked a brawl when he spiked Buddy Myers, the Senator's Jewish second baseman, for two consecutive days. (Three fans were arrested and Chapman and Myers were both suspended briefly. Chapman, of course, insisted that he was just playing baseball.) Several

accounts report that he also baited the Yankees' Jewish fans with epithets and NAZI salutes. In 1934, 15,000 fans signed a petition asking the Yankees to get rid of him for his anti-Semitism.

In 1936, when Chapman got off to a slow start (and DiMaggio had taken over another outfield slot), the Yankees did trade him, to the Senators no less. Although neither manager Joe McCarthy nor General Manager Ed Barrow ever acknowledged trading away Chapman because they thought him a troublemaker, it seems likely a major reason. McCarthy often openly acknowledged disliking Southern players: "They're all moonshiners. … They seem to resent any kind of rules or discipline." (Chapman was from Alabama.) And Jake Powell, the player the Yankees got back from the Senators had not been the equal of Chapman as a ball player before the trade and would not be after. But, before we give the Yankees credit for putting principles ahead of winning, we should look a bit more closely at Powell.

Powell was not a "hothead" the way Chapman was. But he was just as much a racist. In a pre-game radio interview in 1938, the host asked Powell what he did in the off-season. Powell said that he worked as a policeman in Dayton, Ohio (which may not have been true). Powell explained his favorite part of the job: "What I like to do is go around beating those N…..s on the head." Commissioner Landis, himself a Southerner, presiding over a league without any players of color but aware that Blacks were paying customers, suspended Powell for ten days. McCarthy, who kept Powell on the roster through 1940 despite little playing time, responded by telling his players not to give radio interviews. That was America in the 1930s.

Overrated Pitcher: Charles "Red" Ruffing

Who overrated him: Hall of Fame Voters, MVP Voters, Manager Joe McCarthy, and just about anyone else who doesn't look carefully at pitching statistics

It's easy to be overrated if you pitch for the Yankees. The first thing we look at when we evaluate pitchers is "wins." But, as most people who dwell on baseball statistics these days acknowledge, pitching wins are deceptive. Because wins depend as much on scoring as preventing the other team from scoring, wins are a team accomplishment rather than an individual pitching accomplishment. Playing for the Yankees, who have outscored every other team in the majors by at least 4000 runs over the last century (the Red Sox are second), is a big advantage. So, shouldn't we look at Earned Run Average, which tries to measure pitching, net even of fielders' errors? Yes. It's better but ERA, despite its exclusion of runs scored because of errors, does not do a very good job of distinguishing pitching from fielding. From 1920 to 1990, the Yankees generally had very good and often excellent fielding teams. (Since 1990 the story is very different: more on that to come.) And that kept Earned Run Averages lower than they would have been on less nimble teams.

The inflation of wins and the deflation of Earned Run Average applies to a lot of pitchers—just about every pitcher who played for the Yankees between 1920 and 1990. That said, it applies to Red Ruffing both more clearly and more powerfully than to any other Yankee pitcher.

In 1930, every team needed pitching. It was the best hitting year in major league history. But the Yankees needed pitching more than most. In the American League only Cleveland was giving up more runs. So, the Yankees went with

what was then a tried and true strategy. They made a one-sided deal with the Red Sox, sweetened with a purchase price. The player the Yankees got back was Ruffing.

With the Red Sox, Ruffing had won 39 games and lost 96. In both 1928 and 1929 he had lost 20 games. In 1930, he had lost his first three decisions. His Earned Run Average was 4.61 and his ERA+ was 92 (where 100 is average and higher is better). Once he got to the Yankees, the results were very different. He went 15-5 the rest of 1930. From 1936 through 1939, he won 20 or more games each year. He played for the Yankees through 1946, winning 231 and losing 124. His Earned Run Average was 3.47 and his ERA+, a very good 119. When Ruffing retired his 231 wins was a Yankee record and it's still second all-time, not far behind Whitey Ford at 236.

There was no Cy Young award around when Ruffing was pitching but he finished 8th, 4th and 5th in the MVP votes from 1937 through 1939. Joe McCarthy picked him to pitch the opening game of the World Series in 1932, 1936, 1938, 1939, 1941 and 1942. Ruffing was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1967.

Yankee magic? The pinstripes transform ball players the way a metal suit turns Tony Stark into Iron Man? Here's what an unsigned article in *The Sporting News* had to say about Ruffing in the early part of the 1931 season:

Long known as the champion losing pitcher of the American League while with the Boston Red Sox, Charley Ruffing shook himself loose from the jinx last season when he was traded to the New York Yankees, and has started out in 1931 as if he never intended to renew acquaintances with Old Man Hoodoo again. Although credited with

everything a winning pitcher should possess, Ruffing, for whatever reason, had always found victories eluding him.

Until Charley joined the Yankees last year and won 15 …, he had never succeeded in making his victories exceed his losses. He seemed doomed to continue that record, but the change into a New York Yankee uniform apparently broke the charm, for he started to win for the Yankees as soon as the transfer was made.

"Old Man Hoodoo?" If you insist, but my guess is it had more to do with playing in front of Ruth and Gehrig and Lazzeri and Dickey and DiMaggio and Keller and Gordon for a decade and a half.

Let's look at the record. From 1925 through 1929, Ruffing's main years with the team, the Red Sox managed a winning percentage of .338, the worst in the majors. They scored 3.9 runs per game, also the worst in the majors. From 1930 through 1942, Ruffing's main years with the Yankees, the Yankees' winning percentage was .635, by far the best in the majors, and they scored an average of 6.1 runs per game, also the best in the majors. Imagine a pitcher giving up 5 runs a game. Playing in front of a team that scored 6 per game, he would win (by the Pythagorean Theorem) about 60% of his games. Playing in front of a team that scored under four per game, he would win a bit under 40%. Fancy that.

But what about ERA? Remember Ruffing went from a 4.61 ERA with the Red Sox to a 3.47 ERA with the Yankees. That has nothing at all to do with the Yankees' better hitting. But it does have a lot to do with their fielding. For Ruffing's five years with the Red Sox, his team had a "defensive efficiency" of .676. That means that the Red Sox successfully fielded 67.6% of balls in play (not including strike outs, walks or home

runs). A slightly different way of saying that is that hitters had a BABIP (batting average on balls in play) of .324 (1-.676) against the Red Sox, who were a below average fielding team each of Ruffing's five years. In contrast, the Yankees' "defensive efficiency" was above average every year but one from 1930 through 1942. The average was an even .700. That means that hitters had a BABIP of .300 against the Yankees, 024 points lower than against the Red Sox. Baseball Reference calculates a statistic they call Fielding Independent Pitching (FIP) which assumes variation in BABIP depends entirely on fielders and not at all on pitchers. That may not be entirely true but it's certainly partially true. In any case, Ruffing's FIP with the Red Sox was 3.77. With the Yankees, it was … 3.77. And that is how Yankee pitchers get to be overrated.

CHAPTER EIGHT
EARLY WAR YEARS: 1940-1943

No surprise: The Yankees were overwhelming favorites to win their fifth straight championship in 1940. *The Sporting News* polled 256 "experts." 200 picked the Yankees. *The Times* reported that the Yankees were 7-20 favorites according to the New York's betting commissioner, the shortest odds for any team in at least thirty years. One of the few who got it right was Connie Mack, the 78-year-old manager/owner of the Philadelphia Athletics: He picked the Yankees for third, warning that no team could go on winning forever.

The Yankees got off to a terrible start in 1940. On May 23, they were 11-17, in last place. Frankie Crosetti was hitting .136. Red Rolfe was hitting .200. Bill Dickey was hitting .179. DiMaggio was hitting better but he had missed the team's first fifteen games with an injury (just as he had missed time at the beginning of the season 3 of his previous 4 years). Lefty Gomez had pitched the Yankees' opener but left the game with shoulder stiffness and had not pitched again. It got better from there. The Yankees went 77 and 49 the rest of the season but they never rose higher than second place. They ended the season in third, just as Connie Mack had predicted, one game behind Cleveland, two games behind Detroit.

The failure of 1940 was a team effort. The Yankees scored 150 fewer runs than they had scored in 1939. They gave up 115 more. Some writers ascribed the Yankees' decline to the emotional fallout from Gehrig's illness. Others attributed it to age. Neither of these explanations seems quite right to me. Neither the 1939 nor the 1940 Yankees were particularly old teams. The position players were just about league average;

the pitchers were just a little older. Of all the players who fell off, only three seem even plausibly related to age. Bill Dickey, the Hall of Fame bound catcher who hit .302 with 24 HR and 102 RBI in 1939 fell off to .247, 9, 54 in 1940. That alone was worth roughly four games in the standings (5.4 WAR in 1939, 1,2 in 1940). Dickey had been Gehrig's roommate and closest friend on the team, but he was also 33 in the 1940 season. That's an age where most catchers decline (if not before). Among the pitchers, there were two 35-year-old pitchers, Red Ruffing, whose WAR dropped from 5.0 to 3.0 and Bump Hadley, who dropped from 2.5 to *minus* 1.6. Lefty Gomez, who had been one of the Yankees best pitchers for a decade, was only 31 in 1940. His sore arm, not his age, limited him to nine ineffective games all year as his WAR dropped from 3.0 to -.5.

More important than aging, which is a normal part of the game (not to mention life), was a fall off from established regulars. Red Rolfe, the third baseman had had a career year in 1939, batting .329 with 14 home runs, a league leading 139 runs and 213 hits. In 1940, Rolfe was sick, probably with tonsillitis, and dropped off to .250 with 4 home runs. While batting second, his OBP dropped from .404 to .311. Rolfe's dramatic fall off cost the Yankees roughly 5 games in the standings (1928 WAR, 6.7; 1940, 1.7). Selkirk had also had the best year of his career in 1939, at age 31. In 1940 his WAR dropped 3.4 from 5.8 the year before. Neither Rolfe nor Selkirk was by any means old. The much simpler explanation is that it is 1939 that was out of whack with their careers and that 1940 was simply a return to something closer to normal. Frank Crosetti (and about him, much more below), who was only 29 in 1940, effectively stopped hitting. His WAR dropped from 2.3 to -.1, which is to say, replacement level. Among them, Gomez,

Selkirk, Rolfe and Crosetti—none older than 32—accounted for a drop off of 13 games from 1939 to 1940. That'll do it.

In 1940 the Yankees also failed to bring in new blood. The previous four years they had introduced DiMaggio, then Henrich, then Gordon, then Keller in addition to pitchers Marius Russo and Atley Donald. In contrast, in 1940 the only significant additions were Merv Breuer, a highly touted pitcher who quickly turned into a major disappointment, and Tiny Bonham, a pleasant surprise but someone who pitched under 100 innings for the entire year. That would change in 1941.

In 1941 the Yankees rebounded. They replaced Crosetti with Rizzuto at shortstop, experimented with Jerry Priddy at second and Joe Gordon at first. They promoted Henrich over Selkirk and backed up Dickey with Buddy Rosar at catcher. They started a little slowly, but Joe DiMaggio started his famous 56 game hitting streak on May 15 and the Yankees went 41-13 (two ties) as DiMaggio set his record. The day DiMaggio's streak ended, the Yankees led Cleveland by 7 games. They cruised through the rest of the season and finished 17 games ahead of second place Boston. In the World Series, the first of seven with the Brooklyn Dodgers, they actually lost a game (game 2) for the first time since 1937 but won the series four games to one.

1942 was more of the same until the World Series. DiMaggio, going through a divorce, had an off year, at least by his standards. Gordon, Keller, and Rizzuto all had very good years. Tiny (6'2" 215 pounds…baseball humor) Bonham won 21 games in his third season with the Yankees and rookie Hank Borowy won 15. Spud Chandler, 34 years old but in just his 5th full season in the majors won, 16. Gordon was elected MVP by a margin of 21 votes over Ted Williams, who had just led the

league in runs, home runs, RBI, batting average, on base average, slugging average and OPS. In the World Series, the Yankees' streak of eight straight World Series wins, dating back to 1927, came to an end. The Yankees won the first game of the series, 7-4, then lost four straight mostly low scoring games to the Cardinals. Writing in the New York Times, John Drebinger called it the "most amazing upset in series history since 1914" and declared it an "end to one of the most remarkable world series dynasties baseball has ever known." It was a bit hyperbolic, especially as Drebinger's story shared the front page with reports of the ongoing battle at Guadalcanal and of the Russians holding off the NAZIs at Stalingrad.

World War II had not affected baseball greatly in 1942. Hank Greenberg, the Tigers star, one of the first great Jewish stars, had been drafted and discharged in 1941 and then reenlisted just after Pearl Harbor. Bob Feller, the Cleveland pitcher, almost certainly the best pitcher in baseball at the time, also volunteered right after Pearl Harbor.   The Yankees, however, were affected hardly at all. By 1943 the situation was very different. Henrich joined the Coast Guard. Rizzuto was in the Navy. DiMaggio was in the Army Air Force. Red Ruffing was in the service, too. More would follow in 1944. Despite these absences, the Yankees won their third straight pennant in 1943. They did so, in part, because other teams also lost players. But the Yankees' ability to win in 1943 (and to contend in 1944 and 1945) was also tribute to the strength of their farm system. No Henrich or DiMaggio? Promote Johnny Lindell and Bud Metheney from Newark. Need an infield replacement? Promote Bob Johnson to play third and Snuffy Stirnweiss to play second. These players were not the equivalent of Henrich and Rizzuto, let alone DiMaggio. But they were good enough,

especially in the less competitive context of World War II baseball. Two (Stirnweiss and Lindell) became stars, at least while other players were gone. In any case, the Yankees won easily in 1943. They never trailed by more than a game, took over first place for good in late May, and finished 13 ½ games ahead of the second place Senators. Late blooming 35-year-old Spud Chandler led the league in wins (20), winning percentage (.833) and earned run average (1.64) and became the only Yankee pitcher voted MVP. The Yankees also got their revenge on the Cardinals in the World Series, 4 games to 1, with Chandler giving up only one earned run across two complete games.

Overrated Shortstop: Frank Crosetti

Who Overrated Him: Joe McCarthy

Joe McCarthy, who managed the Yankees from 1931 through 1946, is one of three contenders for the title of Greatest Manager of All Time. (The other two are John McGraw and Casey Stengel.) Until Dave Roberts, the current manager of the Dodgers passed him, McCarthy held the record for the highest winning percentage of any manager in the American or National Leagues at .615. Unless Roberts can sustain winning more than one hundred games a year for the remainder of his career, McCarthy is likely to get the record back. Over 24 years (including stints with the Cubs and Red Sox), McCarthy finished 792 games over .500, the second highest total ever after John McGraw, who finished 815 games over. Of course, it took McGraw almost 5000 games (4790) to do that. McCarthy did it in under 3500 games. Third place belongs to Bobby Cox (503 games over .500) who managed almost as long as McGraw. McCarthy won 9 pennants, just behind McGraw, again, and Stengel, who won ten each. McCarthy

won 7 World Series, tied with Stengel for the most ever. With the Yankees alone, McCarthy's record was even more impressive—a .627 winning percentage (the equivalent of more than 101 wins a year in a 162-game season), 8 pennants, 7 World Series wins. His won lost record in the World Series with the Yankees was 29-9. That's a .763 winning percentage. In the World Series. Against the best teams in the National League.

McCarthy was famous for his attention to detail. Sometimes, though, this attention seems to have kept McCarthy from seeing the big picture. One famous example comes from 1940, the only year from 1936 through 1943 the Yankees did *not* win the pennant. The Yankees had started very slowly. They were under .500 (50-51) as late as August 8, in fifth place, 11 ½ games behind the Tigers. The Yankees then went on a great run, winning 26 of 32 games. After a 3 to 1 win over Bob Feller and the Cleveland Indians in the first game of a double header, the Yankees had pulled even with Cleveland and was just a half game behind Detroit pending the outcome of the second game. In the second game the Yankees were ahead 2 to 0 going into the bottom of the third. With one out Babe Dahlgren dropped a throw from Frank Crosetti, the first of two errors in the inning, opening the way to a five-run inning and an eventual 5-3 Indians win. That was the closest the Yankees got to first the entire season. According to Marty Appel, in *Pinstripe Empire,* quoting Frank Drebinger of the *New York Times,* McCarthy continued to blame the Yankee's loss, of the game and the pennant, on Dahlgren. Dahlgren, McCarthy thought, had short arms. He always felt that "the error [Dahlgren] made in Cleveland that opened the floodgates cost him the pennant. He always believed that if

Dahlgren catches that throw from Crosetti, the Yankees win the game, go into first, and stay there." That is attention to detail. But it ignores an awful lot.

When a team loses a pennant by two games, as the Yankees did in 1940, there are lots of explanations. Dahlgren's failure to make a play may have been among them. But there are a lot of more obvious explanations, some of which I've already discussed. Dickey's decline, Rolfe's illness, Gomez' injury may not have been McCarthy's fault. But one other consideration clearly was. And that, at last, brings us back to Frank Crosetti, the shortstop who threw the ill-fated ball that Dahlgren dropped.

Crosetti is a much-revered figure in Yankee history. He played for 16 seasons and then coached third base for another two decades. Crosetti became the Yankees' starting shortstop in 1932, McCarthy's second year as Yankee manager. By 1939, he had played on five world champions. By all accounts he was an excellent fielder, which the numbers bear out. By a Baseball-Reference measure, Crosetti led the entire America League in 1939, all positions, in Defensive Wins Above Replacement. The problem for Crosetti was his bat. Crosetti's top batting average was .288 in 1936, a year in which the league as a whole batted .289. His lifetime average was .245 and his lifetime OBP was .341, all in some of the best offensive contexts in the history of baseball. Now, there's nothing wrong with carrying, even starting, a good fielding, weak hitting shortstop. It is how McCarthy used him that is startling. From 1936 to 1939, Crosetti batted leadoff almost every game. He led the majors in plate appearances in both 1938 and 1939. Crosetti did score over 100 runs each of those years but that's what happens when you have Gehrig, DiMaggio, Bill Dickey,

Charlie Keller, Joe Gordon, George Selkirk, Tommy Heinrich, and Red Rolfe batting behind you in one of the greatest offensive lineups ever assembled. Over those four years, all World Championships, the Yankees had nine players who appeared in 275 or more games. (This does not include Keller, whose first season was 1939.) Among those nine players, Crosetti finished last in each of batting average, on base percentage, and slugging average. By 1939, Crosetti's batting average had dropped to .233, his On Base Percentage to .315, his slugging average to .332—all well below league standards. In 1940, McCarthy began the year with Crosetti batting first again. After 19 games, the Yankees were 6-13, having just lost seven in a row. Crosetti was hitting .151 with a slugging average of .178. You don't need fancy analysis to make sense of those number. They stunk. McCarthy sat Crosetti for a week, replacing him with Billy Knickerbocker, a long term back up, whose hitting was only marginally better than Crosetti's and whose fielding was, presumably, much worse. McCarthy reinserted Crosetti in the lineup in the team's 26th game—and kept him batting leadoff through game 97. By that time Crosetti had pulled his batting average all the way up to .198 with a slugging average of .295. (League averages for the year were .271 and .407 and that's including pitchers.) Finally—finally— in the team's 98th game (in a 154-game schedule), McCarthy made Joe Gordon his leadoff hitter and dropped Crosetti to eighth. It is probably mostly coincidental that the Yankees, who were 45-43 with Crosetti as their primary leadoff batter, went 39-19 for the rest of the season. Did moving Crosetti down in the lineup make the difference between a team winning half its games and a team winning two-thirds? It is very unlikely. Better health is a much likelier explanation. Could moving

Crosetti down earlier added a win or two, in effect the difference between the Yankees and the first place Tigers? That seems much more plausible. But there's more.

You can't replace something, even a sub .200 batter, with nothing. McCarthy tried replacing him with a veteran backup (Knickerbocker). That didn't work. But there was someone else. In 1941, the Yankees handed their shortstop job to Phil Rizzuto. Rizzuto started slowly in 1941 and, after a much-hyped debut, was hitting under .250 when he was benched for a couple of weeks at the end of May, the beginning of June. When Rizzuto's replacement—one Frank Crosetti—hit no better than he had the year before, Rizzuto went back in the lineup. He hit over .330 the rest of the year and ended up at .307 for the year, all the while providing defense equal or better to Crosetti's. There was no rookie of the year award in 1941. If there had been one, Rizzuto likely would have won easily. Could Rizzuto have replaced Crosetti the year before? I don't see why not. In 1938, his second year in professional baseball, Rizzuto, at the age of 20, had hit .336 for Norfolk in the Piedmont League. The next year, playing for the Kansas City Royals (then a Yankee minor league affiliate) he hit .316. And in 1940, still with Kansas City, he hit .347 as a 22-year-old. *The Sporting News* named him the minor league player of the year. According to Alan Levy, in his biography of McCarthy, McCarthy had even gone out of his way to stop in Kansas City on a day off before a trip to St. Louis. He looked at Rizzuto… and decided he wasn't ready. That, I think, was a big mistake. Jimmie Dykes famously called McCarthy a "push button manager." I can think of a lot worse insults and it seems to me roughly true. But McCarthy seems to have been much better at pushing the "on" button than the "off" button. Loyalty Is

generally a prime virtue. Carried too far, it can interfere with good judgment. Did the Yankees lose the pennant in 1940 because Dahlgren's arms were too short? Yeah, sure, if you insist. But there are still a lot of better explanations, including McCarthy's insistence on playing Crosetti.

Underrated Corner Outfield: Charlie Keller

Who Underrated Him: just about everybody

The Yankees have had three great outfielders: Ruth, DiMaggio, Mantle before Aaron Judge. Those three lead all Yankee outfielders in home runs, runs, RBI as well as in OPS and OPS+ and WAR and WAA while Judge is quickly rising on all those lists. Who's next, at least by WAA? Maybe it's Reggie or Winfield or Earle Combs. They're all in the Hall of Fame. Maybe it's Roger Maris, who set the American League record for most home runs in a season or Rickey Henderson who holds the Yankee record for stolen bases. Maybe it's Bernie Williams who played more games in center for the Yankees than anyone else, including Mantle and DiMaggio. Maybe it's Paul O'Neill, The Warrior, or Old Reliable, Tommy Henrich. No. No. No. No. The answer—I bet you guessed from the title of the section—is Charlie Keller.

Keller's career with the Yankees was shortened at the beginning, at the end, and in the middle. Keller attended the University of Maryland. Although the Yankees signed him after his junior year, Keller stayed at Maryland for another year, until graduation. Once he finished college, Keller was assigned to the Newark Bears, one of many candidates for the title of greatest minor league team ever. His first year, Keller hit .353. He was named the Minor League Player of the Year. That honor notwithstanding, Keller returned to Newark in 1938. This time he hit .365 with 22 home runs. Could Keller have been

called up earlier? Probably, but the Yankees were loaded with talent and didn't really need him. Even when Keller did make it to the Yankees, in 1939, he played sporadically until the beginning of August. (Once he was made a regular, Keller hit .356 with 9 home runs and 52 RBI over the Yankees' last 59 games.) The middle of Keller's career came during World War II. Although Keller lost less time to military service than many of his contemporaries, he did lose all of 1944 and about two-thirds of 1945. Unlike some of his peers, he did not spend his time in the military playing ball. Keller came back to the Yankees in August of 1945 and played at roughly his pre-war level as he did again in 1946. He started well in 1947, hitting just .240 through June 5 but with an OBA over .400 and leading the league in home runs, runs scored and RBI. That day Keller felt what must have been excruciating pain. It turned out to be a slipped disk and Keller appeared only two more times in 1947, both times as a pinch hitter. He was 30 years old. Over the next two seasons, Keller played a total of 143 games for the Yankees, many as a pinch hitter, but his power was gone. He played two more years for Detroit, almost exclusively as a pinch hitter. He came back to the Yankees for one game in 1952. He struck out. And that was it. In all, before his injury Keller played five full seasons for the Yankees, two-thirds of another, and a third each of two more.   In all, Keller played in 1066 games for the Yankees, good for 13th among all Yankee outfielders, just behind Paul O'Neill and Dave Winfield, just ahead of Hideki Matsui and Roger Maris.

Keller didn't play much but, when he did play, he was terrific. In 1939, his rookie year, he finished fifth in the league in batting, fourth in OBA, 9th in OPS. From 1940 through 1943 and again in 1946, Keller finished in the top ten (and usually

the top 5) every year in OBA, OPS and WAR. In 1940, he finished third on the Yankees in WAR (behind DiMaggio and Joe Gordon). He finished second each year from 1941 to 1943, behind just DiMaggio one year, behind Joe Gordon (but ahead of DiMaggio) the second year, behind just pitcher Spud Chandler the third year. In 1946, with everyone back from the war, he led the team.

In 1941, DiMaggio was the MVP. In 1942, it was Gordon. In 1943, it was Chandler. How did Keller do? The chart below shows Keller's rank in league WAR and in the MVP vote for his five full years. Bear in mind that the Yankees finished first three of those five years.

	WAR	MVP
1940	9	no votes
1941	6	5
1942	3	14
1943	4	13
1946	8	15

It's not hard to explain why Keller was underrated. He was surrounded by stars and overshadowed, in particular, by DiMaggio even though in two of the five seasons they played together Keller was, at least arguably, the more valuable player. Like a lot of underrated players, a lot of Keller's value lay in his willingness to take a walk: He led the league twice (including once ahead of Ted Williams) and finished second twice (both times to Williams). Keller's lifetime OBA was .410, 5th all time among Yankees who appeared in 200 or more games, behind just Ruth, Gehrig, Mantle and Pat Collins (who earned an honorable mention from me as an underrated catcher). These days most analytic types think OBA is a more

important statistic than either Batting Average or Slugging Average. In the 1940's, nobody was paying attention. But that doesn't take away from what Keller achieved. It's what gets him underrated.

THE BEST OUTFIELD EVER

Here's Buster Olney's list of the five greatest outfields ever:

1961 Yankees (Maris, Mantle, Berra)
1995 Indians (Belle, Lofton, Ramirez)
1927 Yankees (Ruth, Combs, Meusel)
1922 Tigers (Cobb, Veach, Heilmann)
1963 Giants (McCovey, Mays, Alou)

If you look around hard enough, you can find some other candidates: an earlier version of the Tigers' outfield (Cobb, Veach, and Crawford instead of Heilmann), the Red Sox in the late 70's with Lynn, Rice and Evans or the 1990 Pirates with Bonds, Bonilla and Van Slyke. The notable omission from these lists is the 1941 Yankees, with DiMaggio in center, Henrich in right, and Keller in left. (Full disclosure: In his *New Historical Abstract*, Bill James does have the 1941 Yankees as his third best single season outfield.)

I tried calculating the best outfield a bunch of different ways.

1) Baseball-reference lists wins above average by position for every team and for every year. It also has a total for the outfield. By this standard, the 1927 Yankees are first with 15.5 Wins Above Average. The 1980 A's (Henderson, Armas, Murphy) are second at 14.9. The 1941 Yankees are third at 14.8. There are only 50 teams (since 1901, AL and NL) with an outfield WAA above 10.

There are only 12 with an outfield WAA above 12, the three teams I've already mentioned plus the 1963 Giants, the 1971 Pirates, the 1990 A's, the 1961 Tigers, the 2018 Red Sox and the 1931, 1939, 1940, and 1961 Yankees. But B-R does something that would be controversial if anyone were paying attention. It prorates players' WAA by the proportion of games played in the outfield. So, to take an example, B-R includes the total WAA for both Mantle and Maris in 1961 because they never played anywhere beside the outfield. But it only takes 87/102 of Berra's WAA since Berra played 87 games in the outfield and 15 at catcher. It also counts all of Hector Lopez WAA for the 72 games he played, all in the outfield and parts of the WAA for Bob Cerv and Johnny Blanchard, both of whom played some but not all of their games in the outfield. That seems fine to me for some purposes, but you might object that what you want to know isn't the total for all outfielders but the total for the three regulars. Okay, if that's what you want, here you go …

    2)   It turns out that the results aren't much different. The 1927 Yankees are still first (16.4). The 1941 Yankees are second (15.5) and the 1980 A's are third (15.4). The 1963 Giants (Mays, McCovey, Alou) are fourth at 14.7 and the 1961 Yankees (helped by the exclusion of Hector Lopez and his negative WAA) are fifth. If I counted J D Martinez as part of the 2018 Red Sox outfield that team would also be high on the list, but Martinez was mostly a DH and I counted Jackie Bradley instead. You still might want to object—that the point isn't just the total but a balanced contribution. (This is the same issue I raised in thinking about most home runs by two brothers.) Okay

again. That calls for multiplication rather than addition but once I have the numbers on a spreadsheet, I can multiply as easily as I can add.

3)   When I multiply WAAs, the 1927 Yankees drop to a virtual tie for third with the 1963 Giants and the 1939 Yankees. No team with Babe Ruth in his prime is going to be balanced. The 1980 A's are first. The 1941 Yankees are second. So far, there isn't a clear best but there is a clear top three

4)   And still you might not be satisfied. You might want to argue that you want to know about multiple years, not just one. I had imagined that this is where the DiMaggio, Keller, Henrich outfield might slide. They had only three years (1941, 1942, 1946) as the regular outfield. Ruth, Combs, and Meusel were all regulars every year from 1925 (Combs' first year) through 1929 (Meusel's last). Cobb, Veach and Crawford were the Tigers' outfield from 1913 through 1916 and then Cobb, Veach and Heilmann were the outfield from 1917-1923. But think again about the DiMaggio, Keller, Henrich outfield. First, they lost three years together to World War II (1943-45). Second, although George Selkirk played more games in 1939 and 1940 than Henrich, Henrich played just under one hundred games in each year. Make it the DiMaggio, Keller, Henrich and Selkirk outfield and the Yankees had four consecutive years of an outfield WAA above 10. No other team has had more than two years on a row. In addition to the 1941 team (3rd highest outfield WAA by B-R), the 1939 team had the fourth highest total ever. The 1940 team is 12th and the 1942 team is 15th.

So, what was the greatest outfield ever? You could make a case for the 1927 Yankees. You could make a case for the 1980 A's, who have not gotten the respect they deserve. (In fact, the A's outfield was on its way to an even higher total in 1981 but was interrupted by a strike.) You could even make a case for one of the Tiger outfields if you really wanted to.   But you could also make a case for the 1941 Yankees and it might be the strongest case of all.

CHAPTER NINE
WORLD WAR II AND BEYOND: 1944-1948

By 1944, Dickey, Keller, Gordon, and Johnson (himself a war time promotion) joined DiMaggio, Henrich, and Rizzuto in the military. The only regular left from the 1942 American League champions was Frank Crosetti, who had an occupational deferment because he worked in a shipyard during the off-season. But Crosetti was no longer a starter, even with war weakened lineups. In fact, although every team lost players to the military, the Yankees were the only team in the AL in both 1944 and 1945 who did not have a single regular left from 1941. The pitching staff kept Borowy, Bonham, and Donald but Russo, Johnny Murphy and Chandler all joined Ruffing in the military. Snuffy Stirnweiss--4F because of an ulcer—emerged as the Yankees' best player but he was nowhere near enough. In 1944 the St. Louis Browns (now the Baltimore Orioles) won their only pennant. In 1945, the Tigers won. The Yankees finished third, then fourth, winning 83 games, then 81.

In 1946, with almost everyone back from the war and ticket sales setting records, the Yankees were favorites. It didn't happen. The Red Sox won 104 games. The Yankees finished third, seventeen games back. Joe McCarthy, the Yankees' manager since 1931, quit 45 games into the season, partly for reasons of health (gallbladder) and partly because he did not get along with the team's new president (Larry McPhail).

In 1947, the Yankees did win. They led the league in runs scored, gave up the fewest, and finished a dozen games ahead of the second place Tigers. They beat the Dodgers in the World Series, 4 games to 3. The most notable thing about the team

was a 19-game winning streak, the longest in Yankee history. But they were already in first place when they started the streak (second game of a double header on June 29) and the streak simply widened the lead. The second most notable thing about the team was that it was old, especially the hitters. Henrich was 34. DiMaggio was 32. First baseman George McQuinn, signed by the Yankees as a free agent after he had been released by the Athletics, was 37. Catcher Aaron Robinson was 32 and wartime stars Lindell and Stirnweiss were 30 and 28. Rizzuto was 29. Billy Johnson, the third baseman, was also 28. The team's average age, weighted by plate appearances, was 30.0, more than a year higher than any previous Yankee pennant winner and higher than any subsequent winner until 1981, when the Yankees were building around late career free agents.

1948 was one of the best pennant races in American League history. As late as September 24, the Yankees, Red Sox, and Indians were all tied for first at 91-56. The Yankees lost 4 of their last 7, including 3 of 4 to the Red Sox and wound up third as the Indians beat the Red Sox in a playoff game.

Were the War Time Stars Any Good?

Take a look at the list of the top single seasons by WAR for Yankee second basemen.

Player	WAR	Season
Snuffy Stirnweiss	8.9	1945
Snuffy Stirnweiss	8.6	1944
Robinson Cano	8.4	2012
Robinson Cano	8.1	2010
Tony Lazzeri	7.8	1929
Joe Gordon	7.7	1942

Robinson Cano	6.7	2007
Robinson Cano	6.6	2013
Willie Randolph	6.6	1980
Joe Gordon	6.5	1943

It's an impressive list. It includes two Hall of Famers (Lazzeri and Gordon) and a third (Cano) who would be a strong candidate for the Hall of Fame if he had not been implicated in steroid use. It also includes Willie Randolph who, I'll argue later, was probably the most valuable second baseman in Yankee history. But the top two spots go to George "Snuffy" Stirnweiss. In fact, Stirnweiss' 8.9 WAR in 1945 is the eighth best WAR by a second baseman in American League history, after two Nap Lajoie seasons and five by Eddie Collins. Stirnweiss' 8.6 WAR in 1944 is the 13th highest among American League second basemen.   The last time an American League second baseman had a better season than Stirnweiss in 1945 (as measured by WAR) was 1913. That's a long time ago.

In both 1944 and 1945, Stirnweiss led the league in hits, runs, triples, and stolen bases. In 1945, he also led the league in batting average, slugging average, OPS and OPS+. In 1945, he led the league in both offensive WAR and defensive WAR. He is also the only Yankee second baseman ever to have led the league in WAR, which he did in both 1944 and 1945. So, why haven't you ever heard about Stirnweiss or, if you have, why haven't you heard more?   Why did he never get so much as a single vote for the Hall of Fame?

The answer is simple: Stirnweiss was a paper tiger (or empty suit or a man of straw). Stirnweiss was, in short, a wartime replacement player, somebody who got his chance

only when the "real" players were off at war, when the talent was thin. (Stirnweiss himself was rejected for military service, probably because of a severe stomach ulcer.)   The record seems to support this view. In 1941 and 1942, before many players had been drafted, Stirnweiss was still in the minors, where his speed and defense were impressive, but he was a below average hitter. In 1943, before the wholesale calls to military service had stripped away the majority of major leaguers, 24-year-old Stirnweiss was with the Yankees all year and batted an unimpressive .219. Then, in 1944 and 1945, with most former major leaguers in the military (where most, not all, continued to play baseball, just for the amusement of the troops rather than for paying customers), Stirnweiss starred. As soon as the "real" players came back, in 1946, Stirnweiss returned to mediocrity.   He played three more years as a Yankee regular, but not at the levels he reached in 1944 and 1945. He never again hit higher than .261 and he was out of the majors by 1952, still only 33 years old.

It's a plausible story but I'm not sure it's true. Here's a list of the top 15 players in the majors (by WAR) for 1944 and 1945 along with what they did in 1946, the first post-war year. AGE is the player's age in 1946. Stirnweiss is at the top of the list for war time stars.

	1944-45		1946		
	WAR	**G**	**WAR**	**G**	**AGE**
Snuffy Stirnweiss	17.4	306	2.9	129	27
Tommy Holmes	13.4	309	4.8	149	29

Augie Galan	12.2	303	3.5	99	34
Lou Boudreau	11.8	247	4	140	28
Vern Stephens	11	294	2.8	115	25
Dixie Walker	10.9	301	4.1	150	35
Phil Cavarretta	9.8	284	5	139	29
Mel Ott	9.7	255	-0.9	31	37
Roy Cullenbine	9.4	308	5	113	32
Bob Johnson	9.1	287	0	0	40
Johnny Hopp	8.9	263	4.4	129	29
Jim Russell	8.6	298	2.5	146	27
Whitey Kurowski	8.5	282	5	142	28
Stan Hack	8.5	248	2.7	92	36
Nick Etten	8.4	306	0.2	108	32
Annual Average	5.3	143.0	3.1	112.1	31.2

There is a big drop off from the war year to 1946. The average annual WAR for 1944-45 was 5.3. In 1946 it was 3.1 for the same set of players. That's a big drop, 42%. But notice a few things about the list. One is that there are some pretty good players on the list. Mel Ott, Bob Johnson and Stan Hack,

the three oldest players on the list, had all been stars before the war. Boudreau, a future MVP, Stephens, and Kurowski would all be stars after the war. Second, although only three of the players (Cavaretta, Cullenbine, Kurowski) had higher WARs in 1946 than they had averaged in 1944-45, only one of the players (Ott) fell below replacement level. The others may not have been stars after the war, but they were almost all solid major leaguers. Third, Stirnweiss' drop off is one of the largest in percentage terms and the very largest in absolute terms (from 17.4 or an average of 8.7 to 2.9). That suggests that just looking at Stirnweiss, war time and post war, significantly overestimates the effects of talent differences at the two times. Fourth, much of the drop off in WAR is a result of the wartime 15 appearing in fewer games in 1946 than they had averaged in 1944 and 1945. That there was a drop off in games played is hardly surprising: with all the players returning from military service, there were a lot more players to go around the same number of positions. Adjust for the number of games played and the drop off in WAR from the war years to 1946 is only 25% rather than 42%. But even this is likely an overestimate of the drop off.

Any time you take the top fifteen players from a two-year span and compare what they did in those year to the next year, there's going to be a drop off. The best do not repeat. (This is regression to the mean, about which much more later, in my discussion of free agency.) How much of the decline does this normal attrition count for? Take a look at two other sets of years, 1934-1936 and 1954-1956.

	1934-35		1936		
	WAR	**G**	**WAR**	**G**	**AGE**
Lou Gehrig	18.4	303	9.7	155	33
Charlie Gehringer	17.4	304	7.9	154	33
Arky Vaughan	17	286	8.1	156	24
Jimmie Foxx	16.4	297	5.6	155	28
Mel Ott	14.4	305	7.8	150	27
Hank Greenberg	13.8	305	0.5	12	25
Ripper Collins	11.5	304	2.9	103	32
Bill Terry	11.3	298	1.2	79	37
Buddy Myer	11.1	290	1.3	51	32
Billy Rogell	11	304	2.2	146	31
Wally Berger	10.8	300	4.3	138	30
Earl Averill	10.7	294	6.9	152	34
Billy Herman	10.4	267	7.2	153	26
Paul Waner	10	285	7.2	148	33
Mickey Cochrane	9.7	244	1	44	33
	6.5	146.2	4.9	119.7	30.5

	1954-55		1956		
	WAR	**G**	**WAR**	**G**	**AGE**
Willie Mays	19.6	303	7.6	152	25
Duke Snider	16.7	297	7.6	151	29
Mickey Mantle	16.4	293	11.2	150	24
Eddie Mathews	15.1	279	5.7	151	24
Ted Williams	14.5	215	6.1	136	37
Richie Ashburn	13.4	293	5.6	154	29
Ted Kluszewski	13	302	3.1	138	31
Stan Musial	12.7	307	5.5	156	35
Minnie Minoso	11.8	292	6.2	152	30
Gil Hodges	10.6	304	3.5	153	32
Ernie Banks	10.6	308	5.3	139	25
Nellie Fox	10.3	309	1.9	154	28
Pee Wee Reese	10.3	286	2.6	147	37
Yogi Berra	9.8	298	6.2	140	31
Al Kaline	9.5	290	6.5	153	21
	6.5	145.9	5.6	148.4	29.2

Adjust again for games played and the drop off from 1934-35 to 1936 is 7%. The drop off from 1954-55 to 1956 is 15%. That's "normal" attrition, which is to say attrition that cannot be attributed to the dilution of talent during wartime. Estimate "normal" attrition, conservatively, to be about 10%. Subtract that from the 25% drop off from the war years to 1946 and you're left with a 15% drop off that you can attribute directly to the return of players from the military. Also notice that the top 15 in both 1934-35 and 1954-55 are significantly younger than the top 15 in 1944-45. (The 1944-45 group is older because of the war. The 1954-55 group includes an unusual number of young stars: Mays. Mantle, Mathews, Banks, Kaline.) Older players fall off faster than young players. Take the age differences into account and the drop off you can attribute to dilution of talent (now net of normal attrition and normal aging effects) drops down a bit more, somewhere between 10 and 15%.

Do not misunderstand me. I am not arguing that the great years Stirnweiss had in 1944 and 1945 are the equivalent of what Gordon and Lazzeri and Cano and Randolph did in their best years. There was, unambiguously, a large dilution of talent during World War II, especially in 1944 and 1945. But I am suggesting that the difference was not as big as it first appears. Stirnweiss was nowhere near as good before the war or after the war as he was in 1944 and 1945. Much of this, though, had to do with normal variations in player performance, as much, if not more, as with talent dilution. Does Stirnweiss deserve full credit for his war years? No. Does he deserve partial credit? Yes, and that's more than he's gotten.

Underrated Pitcher: Spurgeon "Spud" Chandler

Who Underrated Him: I did. I would say who else underrated him but I've read hardly anything about Chandler, which might be the point.

A quick quiz:

Who holds the all-time record for highest winning percentage (100 or more decisions)?

Who holds the Yankee record for the lowest Earned Run Average in a season?

Who is the only Yankee pitcher to have won a league MVP?

And two bonus questions:

Ron Guidry holds the Yankee Record for the highest ERA+ in a season. Who's second?

Whitey Ford holds the Yankee record among starters—that leaves out Mariano Rivera—for career ERA+. Who's second?

Yep. Spurgeon—great name, no?—"Spud" Chandler is the answer to each and every question. In 1942, Chandler was 16-5, with an ERA of 2.38 and an ERA+ of 145. The next year, he was 20-4. He led the league in wins and winning percentage. He also led the league in ERA at 1.64 (the Yankee record) and in ERA+ at 198 (second best in Yankee history). He won the MVP in 1943, decisively beating Chicago shortstop Luke Appling, who had led the league in batting average, and Detroit's Rudy York, who led the league in home runs and RBI. Chandler spent most of 1944 and 1945 in the military but returned in 1946 to go 20-8 with an ERA of 2.10 (ERA+ of 164). In 1947, his last year in the majors, he led the league in ERA (2.46, ERA+ of 144). He retired with a record of 109 wins and

43 losses, a winning percentage of .717. (Whitey Ford is second at .690.)

And what does he get for this? I looked up Chandler in Bill James' 998-page *New Historical Baseball Abstract.* There are profiles of 900 players in the Abstract. Chandler isn't one of them. There are six passing mentions to Chandler. On one, James places Chandler as the fourth pitcher on his 1940s all-star team. Two more place Chandler on lists of baseball players who were also good football players. (Chandler attended the University of Georgia on a football scholarship.) Two more quote him on other players. (On meeting Yogi Berra: "My God, they finally found one uglier than Keller." I am not rating Chandler on tact.) And here's the kicker: In a discussion of Minnesota Twins shortstop Zoilo Versalles, the 1965 American League MVP, James makes a list of the *least* distinguished careers of MVP winners. Chandler is fourth on that list.

What's the problem? Well, it was a weird career. Because he went to college and then was slowed down by a series of injuries, Chandler didn't make it to the Yankees until 1937, when he was already 29. For his first five years he was in and out of the starting rotation, both because of yet more injuries and because the rotation was already crowded. For those five years, Chandler went 42-20 but only averaged about 15 starts per year. Chandler's breakout year was 1942—a 16-5 record with a 2.38 ERA and a selection to the all-star team. Chandler was 34. The next year was his MVP year, followed by two years in the military. In 1946, in his second twenty-win season, Chandler was 38. In 1947, aged 39, he was 9-5 when yet another sore arm ended his career. At first glance, Chandler looks like another wartime wonder, someone who didn't get his chance until he was in his thirties and then only

because the war had so seriously diluted the talent. The problem with this account is that it just doesn't match the facts. What held Chandler back was not a lack of talent but injuries. When he had his breakout year in 1942, very few players had gone off to war. In 1943, when he had his MVP year, a lot more stars had been enlisted or drafted but there were still plenty of pre-war stars around. In 1944 and 1945, when the talent had thinned out, Chandler was himself in the military. And in 1946 and 1947, everyone was back and Chandler continued to star. He deserves more credit than he gets.

Joe Gordon for Allie Reynolds

You don't see a lot of trades like this one.

Joe Gordon had been the best second baseman in the American League before World War II. Bobby Doerr of the Red Sox was his closest competitor but Gordon was a better fielder and hit for more power. (When he retired, in 1950, Gordon was second all-time in home runs among second basemen.) If there had been a rookie of the year award in 1938, he would have won it. In 1942, Gordon was the Most Valuable Player in the league. He probably didn't deserve it. Ted Williams won the Triple Crown that year but Gordon was the second-best player in the league and the Yankees won the pennant. Gordon spent 1944 and 1945 in the military. When he came back in 1946, he had the worst year of his career. He lost some playing time to Snuffy Stirnweiss, the war time star, and he did not get along with Lee MacPhail, one of the Yankees' new owners.

Meanwhile, Reynolds, two years younger than Gordon, had been a regular in the Cleveland rotation since 1943. He was exempt from the draft as a married man with a child and because of injuries he had sustained playing college football. Reynolds gave up a lot of walks but in 1943 he had led the

league in both strikeouts and fewest hits allowed per game. Like Gordon, he had the worst year of his career in 1946, finishing 11-15. Cleveland wanted Gordon. The Yankees wanted pitching.

Gordon had a comeback year in 1947 and an equally good year in 1948. In 1948 Cleveland won the pennant and only their second (and, so far, last) World Championship in franchise history. Gordon was almost certainly the second-best player on that team and his 32 home runs set a record for AL second basemen. Gordon finished in the top ten in the MVP vote in both 1946 and 1947. In 1948, along with player/manager (and MVP) Lou Boudreau and third baseman Ken Keltner, he was part of one of the greatest infields in American League history.

The Yankees simply switched Stirnweiss back to second from third, where he had played much of 1946 and made pre-war star Billy Johnson (4th in the 1943 MVP vote as a rookie) their full time third baseman. Reynolds led the pitchers with 19 wins and won a total of 132 games over eight years with the Yankees. The Yankees won the World Series in 1947 and every year from 1949 through 1953. My sense is that most people thought the Yankees got a bit better of the deal. I'm not so sure, mostly because I think Reynolds has been slightly overrated (about which, more below). But it is arguable either way and is one of those rare trades where both teams could think they came out ahead.

PART III: FROM WORLD WAR II TO THE WILDCARD

CHAPTER 10
THE OVERDOG AS UNDERDOG: 1949-53

Do the people who make predictions about baseball ever get it right? Sure, sometimes. (And someday, if I have really a lot of time on my hands, I'll work my way back through the Sporting News or the NY Times to see just how often that is.) The experts did not see the Yankees coming in 1926. They did not see the Yankees coming in 1936. And they certainly didn't see the Yankees coming in 1949. In the *Sporting News'* more or less annual poll at the beginning of the season, 197 "experts" picked either Boston or Cleveland to finish first, with Boston a slight favorite. Only six writers picked the Yankees and even the Philadelphia Athletics got almost as many votes for third. Dan Daniels, also writing in the *Sporting News* was pretty blunt: "It is not my impression that this Yankee team can win the pennant." He was worried about Joe DiMaggio's heel: DiMaggio, in fact, missed half the season. He was worried about Keller's ability to return after his injuries: Keller did not. He worried about whether Rizzuto would hit and whether Berra could handle the catching. And he also worried about "the matter of … leadership" from the Yankees new manager, Casey Stengel, who came to the Yankees as a 58 year old who had not managed in the majors since 1943 and had compiled the uninspiring record of 581-742 in nine previous years as manager of the Dodgers and the Boston Bees.

I

Despite it all, the Yankees did win in 1949. When Joe DiMaggio finally made his season debut, on June 28, the Yankees had been in first the entire season and led by as many as six games. DiMaggio came back just in time for a three-game series against Boston in Boston: He went 5 for 11 with four home runs in a Yankee sweep. The Yankees stayed in first place until September 26, when, with DiMaggio out of the lineup with pneumonia, the Red Sox won two games in Fenway and then a third, a makeup of a rained-out game, at Yankee Stadium. It was the first time the Yankees had been out of first all season. But the season had one last twist when the Red Sox, ahead of the Yankees by a single game, came back to Yankee Stadium for the last two games of the season. The Yankees won both—the first 5-4 behind a Johnny Lindell home run in the bottom of the eighth and the second 5-3 behind a complete game from Vic Raschi. Although the first three games of the World Series against the Dodgers were all one run games (and the first two 1-0 games), the Series as a whole could not match the high drama of the regular season. The Yankees won 4 games to 1.

Before the 1950 season, the Red Sox were favorites. Looking at Boston's loaded lineup, the writers in the *Sporting News* preseason poll gave 118 votes to the Red Sox, only 38 to the Yankees. The "experts" did get it right about the Red Sox lineup: Boston was the first team to score over 1000 runs since the 1936 Yankees and the last until the 1999 Cleveland Indians. They did not get it right about the pennant race. The race was close, although not as close as the year before. The Yankees were in and out of first place all year, took over first place for good in mid-September, and finished three games ahead of the Tigers, four ahead of the Red Sox. In the World

Series, the Yankees swept the Philadelphia Phillies, their fifth World Series sweep in 13 World Series wins.

The writers had not learned in 1951. J. Taylor Spinks, the editor of *the Sporting News* declared bluntly: "The Yankees are not going to win again because their older players are showing the signs of wear, their pitching is uncertain and their relief hurling, in particular, is most unimpressive." Spinks acknowledged that "For four years the Red Sox intrigued the dopesters, and at the close of each of these seasons they had to accept the positions of also-rans." This season, though, Spinks continued, he was making his pick with "much greater confidence." The writers agreed: 149 writers picked the Red Sox for first, compared to 31 who picked the Yankees and 20 who picked Cleveland. Yeah, right. The race was close again, although not as close as either of the previous two years. The Yankees won 11 of their last 14 games to finish five ahead of Cleveland, eleven ahead of Boston. In the World Series, the Yankees met the Giants who had just won their own miracle pennant on Bobby Thomson's three run home run in the bottom of the ninth in a playoff game against the Dodgers. The Yankees won four games to two.

In 1952, with Ted Williams recalled to the Marines, the writers had the good sense not to pick the Red Sox again. Instead, they picked Cleveland. The Yankees, with DiMaggio retired, were picked for second. The Yankees started slowly and the race was close—again—but a 14-2 streak in early June put the Yankees in first place and they did not trail again all season. They finished 2 games ahead of Cleveland. In the World Series, they beat the Dodgers, 4 games to 3. Allie Reynolds was the pitching star and Mickey Mantle, still two

weeks short of his 21st birthday, had the key hit, a home run in the top of the sixth of game seven to break a 2-2 tie.

Finally, in 1953, the Yankees were the pick to win the American League although Cleveland had plenty of support as well. The Yankees got 109 votes for first, Cleveland 73. The writers were late to church, but the Yankees rewarded their new-found faith. The Yankees took over first place in April, led by 11 in mid-June and finished 8 ½ games ahead of Cleveland. The World Series was a rematch with the Dodgers. The Yankees won 4 games to 2, this time with second baseman and future manager Billy Martin as the unlikely star.

Five years. Five pennants. Five World Series championships. Over those five years, the Yankees were favored to win the pennant only once. They never won fewer than 95 games. They never won more than 99. It was one of the most remarkable runs in the history of baseball and in the history of professional sports more generally. More about that below.

How They Did It

I've made fun, gently I hope, of the experts' repeated failures to see the Yankees coming. It's not quite fair of me. Even looking back, it's hard to see how the Yankees ever won (except 1953) let alone five times in a row.

The Yankees were a team in transition. For the first three years they had Joe DiMaggio, a superstar in decline. For the last three years, they had Mickey Mantle, not yet a superstar. They had injuries, aging stars, and retirements. Good teams generally have stable lineups. The 1949-1953 teams were an exception. For all Yankee teams that won three straight pennants, I made up a simple measure of lineup stability. I figured the percentage of all possible games played by the

eight players (nine for the DH years) who played the most games in the three-year span. The measure is a little blunt but it captures three things all at once: injuries, platooning, and turnover from year to year. I suspected that the Stengel Yankees—lots of transition, lots of injuries, lots of platooning—would be the least stable of the Yankee champions. I was wrong. The least stable, by far, was the 1941-43 team (65.7%) but that was because of World War II. I had also guessed that the most stable would be some set of teams managed by Joe McCarthy, the "push button" manager. I was wrong about that, too. The most stable lineups for any three-year championship run were the 1926-1928 teams and the 1960-62 teams both at 85.5%. What I was right about is that 1950-52 Yankees were the least stable (76.4%) of the Yankee championship teams other than the war years. The pitching was more stable but, as I show below, it wasn't that good.

In contrast, the Red Sox lineup really was impressive. In 1950, six regulars hit between .310 and .328. The other two (shortstop Vern Stephens and second baseman Bobby Doerr) hit .295 and .294, with 57 home runs and 264 RBI between them. Utility man Billy Goodman, a D. J. LeMahieu type before D. J. LeMahieu, hit .354. The team as a whole hit .302, led the league in On Base Percentage and Slugging Average, scoring almost 7 runs a game. Cleveland did not have quite as strong an everyday lineup as Boston but Larry Doby (the first Black player in the American League), Al Rosen, Bobby Avila, Dale Mitchell, and Ray Boone (Aaron Boone's grandfather) were still an imposing core. Plus, Cleveland had one of the great pitching staffs of all time—Bob Feller, Early Wynn, Bob Lemon, all in the Hall of Fame, and Mike Garcia who, for the span from 1949 to 1953 was just as good as the others.

Remember that the 1936-1939 Yankees, the only other team to win four World Series in a row, led the American League in *both* runs scored and (fewest) runs allowed all four years. Here are the league leaders for 1949-1953. The Yankees don't show up on either list until 1952.

	Runs	**Runs Allowed**
1949	Boston	Cleveland
1950	Boston	Cleveland
1951	Boston	Cleveland
1952	Cleveland	New York
1953	New York	New York

So, how did they do it?

Some of it is park illusion. Yankee Stadium, over the five years, slightly favored pitchers. Fenway was an extreme hitter's park, even more than it has been since. The Yankees scored roughly as well at home as on the road. The Red Sox, loaded with right-handed hitters to take advantage of the short dimensions in left field at Fenway, hit much better at home. Take 1950, as an extreme example. Some of the Red Sox splits are astonishing. Here are the Red Sox regulars in 1950, home and away.

	Home			Away		
	HR	RBI	BA	HR	RBI	BA
Walt Dropo	24	93	.373	10	51	.277
Bobby Doerr	18	86	.344	9	33	.238
Vern Stephens	17	83	.347	13	61	.247
Johnny Pesky	1	29	.333	0	20	.291
Ted Williams	16	56	.356	12	41	.282

Dom DiMaggio	5	42	.397	2	28	.269
Al Zarilla	2	41	.333	7	32	.317
Birdie Tebbets	6	30	,336	2	15	.285
Billy Goodman	1	38	.376	3	30	.326

In 1950, the Red Sox outscored the Yankees 1027 to 914. That's a big difference, but compare both teams, home and road.

	Runs	HR	RBI	BA	OBA	SA	OPS
Yankees, home	440	78	413	.284	.370	.442	.812
Red Sox, home	625	100	592	.335	.422	.530	.952
Yankees, away	474	81	447	.280	.364	.439	.803
Red Sox, away	402	61	380	.269	.347	.398	.745

On the road, the Yankees were actually a better hitting team than the Red Sox.   For the full five years, the Yankees barely outscored the Red Sox (4069 to 4051). The Yankees also had a marginally better OPS (.769 to .766). If you look at OPS+, which takes park effects into account, the Yankees led the majors (108). The Red Sox were fifth (98). The Yankees were, in fact, the best hitting team in the league. It just wasn't obvious at the time, before Bill James (and others) started figuring out park factors.

The Yankees' pitching also involved an illusion, although of a different sort and for a different reason. From 1949 through 1953, the Yankees actually gave up the fewest runs in the league (3053), barely better than Cleveland's star-studded rotation (3055) but 500 runs better than the league average (3556). Five hundred runs above average converts—at the rough rate of 10 to 1—translates to fifty wins above average.

That would come to just short of half the Yankees' total wins above .500/average (104) for the full five-year run. Makes sense. Hitting is half the game. Pitching and defense are half. Well, no.

If the hitting was better than it seemed, the pitching was worse. This needs some explanation.

The core of the pitching staff was Vic Raschi, Allie Reynolds, and Eddie Lopat. Raschi had come up from the Yankees' farm system. He became a regular part of the Yankees' rotation in 1947and was 30 in 1949. Lopat came to the Yankees in 1948 from the Chicago White Sox and was 31 in 1949. Reynolds came to the Yankees in 1947, in a straight up trade for Joe Gordon. He was 32 in 1949. From 1949 through 1953, Lopat won 80 games. Raschi won 92. Reynolds won 83 and saved 28 more.   Among them, Lopat, Raschi and Reynolds started 426 of the Yankees 770 games over those five years or 55% of all the team's games. So far as I can tell without spending a lot more time clicking, adding, and dividing, this is the highest concentration of starts by any trio over any five-year span in Yankee history. (It is definitely not the highest in major league history: The Cleveland trio of Lemon, Garcia, and Wynn started 62% of their team's games over the same span. Glavine, Maddux and Smoltz started 61% of Atlanta's games from 1995-1999. The Oakland A's trio of Catfish Hunter, Vida Blue, and Ken Holzman, 1971-75, also has a higher percentage than the Yankee trio. There may well be other trios with even higher percentages.)   Whatever instability the Yankees had in their lineup, it was matched by a high level of stability in the pitching staff.   The problem is that they weren't all that good.

Three things made Raschi, Reynolds and Lopat seem better than they were. One is that the played with a lot of offensive support, even if park illusions meant that it wasn't obvious to contemporaries. This made their won/lost records better than they would have been with a team that scored fewer runs. Second, Yankee stadium played as a pitchers' park, with a park factor of 93 where 100 is neutral and Boston's Fenway was 107. This meant that the very same thing that suppressed Yankee batting averages also kept the pitchers' earned run averages low. The third thing is a bit more complicated. This is that not all of defense is pitching. There is also fielding. It's probably obvious, once you say it, that defense--preventing runs—is the joint effort of both pitchers *and* fielders. If a team prevents a run, whether below average or below "replace level," credit for that run has to be split between the pitcher and the fielder. They can't both get full credit, or you would be double counting. And there's the rub. How to split the credit?

Baseball-Reference has two answers. One is to compare FIP to Earned Run Average. Calculating FIP (Fielding Independent Pitching) is hard. It's based on walks, strikeouts and home runs—events that are almost entirely independent of fielding and then scaled to ERA. But precisely because FIP is scaled to ERA, it's very easy to compare the two measures. Raschi's ERA was 3.36 for 1949-53 and his FIP was 3.59.. If you believe FIP is meaningful—I do sort of—that means that Raschi's defense was saving him a quarter of a run a game. Reynolds ERA was 3.22 but his FIP was 3.56, a difference of a third of a run per game. For Lopat, a control pitcher who relied more on his fielders than did Raschi or Reynolds, the difference was even bigger, 2.97 to 3.71, a difference of almost

¾ of a run per game. That is, as it happens, a little larger than the difference between the Red Sox' Fenway inflated scoring in 1950 and the Yankees' Stadium deflated scoring in 1950.

A second way to allocate credit is to look at a team's ERA and then add or subtract fielding runs saved above or below average. This makes a little more sense to me as it leaves open exactly what I'm interested in open rather than simply assuming that all runs given up on balls in play—the plays that are not "fielding independent"—are the responsibility of the pitcher. In practice, the difference between the two methods isn't very big. Looking at a team level, which is where defensive runs saved make most sense, the Yankees saved 200 runs above average on defense from 1949-53, the highest figure in the AL. Their offense was 624 runs above average. The pitching? Net of defense, the pitching was 26 runs below average.

So, how did the Yankees win? Some of it was simply luck. You don't win four years in a row by a grand total of 11 games ahead of the second-place teams without at least a few good bounces. Some of it may have been Stengel but as Stengel himself once modestly acknowledged. "I couldn't have done it without the players." The best explanation is that they simply had the best lineup in the league, both hitting and fielding, once you strip away the illusions. Rizzuto led the league in runs saved from 1949-1953. But he wasn't alone. Here is where key Yankees placed in defensive runs saved and defensive wins in the AL for those years. (NB: runs saved do not translate into defensive wins because they do not include "positional adjustments." On a team level, since every team has just about the same number of games or innings at each position, it makes no difference at all. On an individual level, it makes a

huge difference in figuring an individual's value. You can think of runs saved as a measure compared to others who play the same position. Defensive Wins Saved, tries to measure overall value by giving what you might call bonus points for playing more difficult positions.)

	Pos	Runs Saved	Rank.	Defensive Wins	Defensive Wins Ranking
Phil Rizzuto	ss	59.0	1	11	1
Hank Bauer	rf	25.0	5	-.1	
Gene Woodling	lf	25.0	6	.1	
Jerry Coleman	2b	20.0	9	4	7
Yogi Berra	c	18	13	4.2	6
Gil McDougald	3b	17	15	2.5	20
Billy Martin	2b	14	22	3.0	11

For the five years, 1949-1953, the Yankees' fielding saved 200 runs above average. That comes out to roughly 20 wins above average.   After making all the adjustments—park factors, defensive support—Lopat led the Yankee pitchers with 6.8 WAA. Reynolds had 5.3. Raschi had 3.5.   The entire pitching staff for the five years were almost exactly average (-.6 WAA).   Seven Yankee position players (Berra, Rizzuto, Mantle, Woodling, Bauer, DiMaggio, McDouglad) were each above 6.9 Wins Above Average (offense and defense) for 1949-1953, even though several of them didn't play all five years. The total WAA for position players for all five years was 82.6. It wasn't the pitching. It was an everyday lineup that was much better than it appeared.

Overrated Pitchers: Eddie Lopat, Vic Raschi, Allie Reynolds

Who Overrated Them: Do I really have to say any more?

Top 20 MVP Votes, Lopat, Raschi, Reynolds

1947	Raschi, 11
1948	Raschi, 11
1949	Raschi, 7
1950	Raschi, 8 Lopat, 12
1951	Reynolds, 3 Raschi, 17
1952	Reynolds, 2 Lopat, 17
1953	Reynolds, 12

Overrated Catcher: Yogi Berra

Who overrated him: writers, especially the ones who voted for MVP

Yogi Berra overrated??? You've got to be kidding. The guy's a Hall of Famer and three-time MVP. He was a winner: 14 American League Championships and 10 World Series wins in 17 years. He was one of a very small number of players who was demonstrably better in clutch situations than he was the rest of the time. Bill James, no less, in his first Historical Baseball Abstract wrote a long essay arguing that Berra was the best catcher in Yankee history, better than Bill Dickey. He (James) ranked Berra at the very top of his list of catchers in career value (ahead of Johnny Bench and Mickey Cochrane and Gary Carter) and at the top of his list for peak value in the American League (ahead of Carlton Fisk and Thurman Munson

and Bill Dickey among others).   In his revised Historical Abstract, James abandoned his distinction between peak and career value, but he still had Berra ranked as the best catcher of all time. If somebody actually is the best, how can he possibly be overrated? You've got to be kidding.

I'm not.   Yogi was a great player.   At the time of his retirement, he was arguably, but not definitively, the greatest catcher who had ever played in the majors. (That leaves out Josh Gibson, the great Negro league player who never got a chance in the majors.) He just wasn't quite as great as the writers made him out to be.

Let's start with the good. His ten World Series wins is the most of any player, ever. More than that, the Yankees won 63.1% of the games Berra started. Think about that for a minute. Over the course of a 154-game season, that comes out to 97 wins. Over the course of a 162-game season, it comes out to 102 wins. Except that it's not for a single season. It's for an entire career.   Berra's in-the-lineup winning percentage is not the best ever, bit it's close.

One of the reasons the Yankees won so often with Berra in the lineup is that Berra hit best when it mattered most. Now, there are ongoing debates among analytic types, including everyone from Bill James to Stanford economists, based on massive data bases and deploying hundreds of thousands of words, about whether there is such a thing as clutch hitting *ability*. I do not want to enter that debate. I do, however, want to point out that, as is widely accepted by all the combatants in the debates about *ability*, there is such a thing as clutch *performance*. And Yogi Berra did perform. Baseball-Reference has a couple of statistics meant to measure clutch performance that are beyond my ability to understand, let alone explain. But

B-R also has a couple of "splits" that are reasonably easy to make sense of. He hit better with men on base (.870 OPS) than with nobody on (.781). Baseball-Reference also reports something it calls "late & close," defined as any plate appearance from the seventh inning on in which the batting team is either in a tie game, ahead by one run or has the potential tying run on deck   Berra's batting line in all situations was .348/.482/.830 (on base percentage/slugging average/OPS).   In late and close situations, it was .367/.531/.898. That's even more impressive in context: More players hit worse in "late & close" than hit better. That makes sense, even apart from the possible effects of nerves. "Late & close" are exactly the sort of situations relief pitchers were invented to deal with. Tired batters are facing fresh pitchers. Berra gets some credit simply for hitting better in "late & close" than he did the rest of the time. But Berra did even better than that. Thanks to Baseball-reference, I was able to specify 572 American League players who've had at least 500 at bats in "late & close" since 1920. The difference between Berra's OPS in those situations (.68) is the 16th best among those 572 players. I think that counts as clutch hitting.

Even without considering clutch hitting, Berra's totals are impressive.   At the time of his retirement, 1963 (if we leave out a four-game cameo for the Mets in 1965), Berra was the leading catcher in career WAR and WAA.

	WAR	WAA	From	To	G	AB	R	H	HR	RBI	BB	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS
Yogi Berra	59.7	34.2	1946	1963	2116	7546	1174	2148	358	1430	704	0.285	0.348	0.483	0.831
Bill Dickey	56.5	31.7	1928	1946	1789	6300	930	1969	202	1209	678	0.313	0.382	0.486	0.868
Gabby Hartnett	55.9	31.6	1922	1941	1990	6432	867	1912	236	1179	703	0.297	0.37	0.489	0.858
Mickey Cochrane	49.9	26.8	1925	1937	1482	5169	1041	1652	119	830	857	0.32	0.419	0.478	0.897
Wally Schang	47.9	22.9	1913	1931	1842	5307	769	1506	59	705	849	0.284	0.393	0.401	0.794
Roger Bresnahan	42	24.2	1897	1915	1446	4481	682	1252	26	530	714	0.279	0.386	0.377	0.764
Charlie Bennett	38.8	23.3	1878	1893	1062	3821	549	978	55	533	478	0.256	0.34	0.387	0.728
Ernie Lombardi	37.9	15.9	1931	1947	1853	5855	601	1792	190	990	430	0.306	0.358	0.46	0.818
Roy Campanella	35.6	17.1	1948	1957	1215	4205	627	1161	242	856	533	0.276	0.36	0.5	0.86
Ray Schalk	33.2	8.8	1912	1929	1762	5306	579	1345	11	593	638	0.254	0.34	0.316	0.656
Smoky Burgess	32	14.5	1949	1963	1380	4091	471	1224	119	605	426	0.299	0.364	0.455	0.819
Rick Ferrell	30.8	6.4	1929	1947	1884	6028	687	1692	28	734	931	0.281	0.378	0.363	0.741
Sherm Lollar	30.1	11	1946	1963	1752	5351	623	1415	155	808	671	0.264	0.357	0.402	0.759
Johnny Kling	29.1	13.4	1900	1913	1261	4246	475	1154	20	514	281	0.272	0.319	0.357	0.676
Charles Zimmer	28.5	11.9	1884	1903	1195	4263	580	1159	26	598	367	0.272	0.342	0.372	0.714
Walker Cooper	27.4	8.4	1940	1957	1473	4702	573	1341	173	812	309	0.285	0.332	0.464	0.796
Del Crandall	26.9	7.4	1949	1963	1394	4583	552	1176	170	628	374	0.257	0.313	0.412	0.725
Steve O'Neill	26.3	4.7	1911	1928	1590	4795	448	1259	13	534	592	0.263	0.349	0.337	0.685
Jack Clements	25.9	10	1884	1900	1119	4118	582	1181	74	687	332	0.287	0.349	0.421	0.77
Ed Bailey	25.6	11.5	1953	1963	1022	3129	388	803	145	480	470	0.292	0.367	0.378	0.744

Not only did Berra lead in both WAR and WAA, he was also the career leader in games, runs, home runs and runs batted in. Not bad.

So how can I call him overrated? Let's go back and rethink a little.

Yogi was a winner, but that's because he played for the Yankees for a long time and the right time. On the list of players with the most World Series wins, Yankees occupy the top 13 lines and 26 of the top 27. (Joe DiMaggio is second on the list with nine. The only non-Yankee on the list is Eddie Collins who, as it happens, went to high school in Tarrytown, just north of New York City, and college at Columbia, just three miles south of Yankee Stadium.)   And the Yankees' .631 winning percentage in games Berra started is topped by their winning percentage in games started by 11 other Yankees, including Frank Crosetti, Gene Woodling, and Joe Collins. It was good to be a Yankee but the success really was a team effort.

I

And the clutch hitting? It's real but notice that it is clutch within the context of a game, not the context of a season. Did Berra rise to the occasion in big games? There's an easy way to find out. Compare Berra in the regular season to Berra in the World Series. For most players, that comparison would not be fair—comparing thousands of at bats over the course of a career to 20 or 30 at bats in the World Series, a number small enough to allow for flukes of all sorts. But Berra played in 75 World Series games with 295 plate appearances, a large enough number to mean something. And Berra did have his moments—most memorably two home runs off Don Newcombe in game 7 of the 1956 Series—as you would expect from someone who played as many games as he did. Still, his overall numbers in the World Series are blah—a .274 batting average, a .359 on base percentage, a .452 slugging average, and an .811 OPS—slightly below his regular season totals. Now, there is no shame in hitting slightly worse in the World Series than in the regular season. As in "Late & Close" situations, the pitchers are likely to be better. Plus, the weather is colder. But clutch hitting it is not.

But what about his position at the top of the WAR and WAA leader boards for catchers, the most important pieces of data? Well, It's a little complicated. In the late 1950's and maybe the early 1960's, I would listen to the radio to hear the baseball scores. (Otherwise, before the internet was even a glimmer in Al Gore's eyes, I would have to wait for the newspaper the next morning and even then the paper often left out the late games.) The announcer, in any case, would give the score and the "battery"—the pitcher and catcher. It puzzled me. I understood why he would give the name of the pitcher: He changed every game. But why the catcher? I knew that

Yogi was the Yankee catcher and later that it was Elston Howard. I have realized since that the habit of naming the "battery" was left over from a time when catchers rotated, not as frequently as pitchers, but far more often than they do today. Berra was not the first catcher to be an almost everyday player, but he did play more and longer than any catcher had before him. Berra led the league in games at catcher eight years in a row, from 1950 through 1957. Nobody else has come close. Berra was an important part of a long process in which catchers both catch more games in a season and play more seasons. The same has not happened at other positions. Whether this is because of better equipment or better training, I do not know. My guess is it's both. Look at a current list of catchers by WAR. All but six of the leaders in 1963 have disappeared from the list. Berra has dropped from first in both WAR and WAA to fifth in WAR and sixth in WAA. This puts us in a bind. We could acknowledge that Bench and Carter and Rodriguez and Fisk and maybe Piazza have all passed Berra on the list of greatest catchers ever. Or we can insist that Berra still rates at the top of the list of catchers because Bench and Carter and Rodriguez and Fisk and Piazza played under conditions to compile statistics in a way catchers of Berra's era could not. But then, in the interest of consistency, we would have to allow that Bill Dickey and Gabby Hartnett and Mickey Cochrane and maybe even Wally Schang accumulated value under conditions even less favorable to catchers. Either way, Berra gets a slight demotion.

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Johnny Bench	75.1	46.6	1967	1983	2158	7658	1091	2048	389	1376	891	0.267	0.342	0.476	0.817
Gary Carter	70.1	40.1	1974	1992	2296	7971	1025	2092	324	1225	848	0.263	0.335	0.439	0.773
Ivan Rodriguez	68.7	33.3	1991	2011	2543	9592	1354	2844	311	1332	513	0.297	0.334	0.464	0.798
Carlton Fisk	68.4	35.3	1969	1993	2499	8756	1276	2356	376	1330	849	0.269	0.341	0.457	0.797
Yogi Berra	59.6	34	1946	1965	2120	7555	1175	2150	358	1430	704	0.285	0.348	0.482	0.83
Mike Piazza	59.5	35.8	1992	2007	1912	6911	1048	2127	427	1335	759	0.308	0.377	0.545	0.922
Bill Dickey	56.5	31.7	1928	1946	1789	6300	930	1969	202	1209	678	0.313	0.382	0.486	0.868
Gabby Hartnett	55.9	31.6	1922	1941	1990	6432	867	1912	236	1179	703	0.297	0.37	0.489	0.858
Ted Simmons	50.3	19	1968	1988	2456	8680	1074	2472	248	1389	855	0.285	0.348	0.437	0.785
Mickey Cochrane	49.9	26.8	1925	1937	1482	5169	1041	1652	119	830	857	0.32	0.419	0.478	0.897
Wally Schang	47.9	22.9	1913	1931	1842	5307	769	1506	59	705	849	0.284	0.393	0.401	0.794
Gene Tenace	46.8	28	1969	1983	1555	4390	653	1060	201	674	984	0.242	0.388	0.429	0.817
Thurman Munson	46.1	25.5	1969	1979	1423	5344	696	1558	113	701	438	0.292	0.347	0.41	0.756
Buster Posey	44.9	27.1	2009	2021	1371	4970	663	1500	158	729	540	0.302	0.372	0.46	0.831
Bill Freehan	44.8	21.2	1961	1976	1774	6073	706	1591	200	758	626	0.262	0.34	0.412	0.752
Jorge Posada	42.7	17.3	1995	2011	1829	6092	900	1664	275	1065	936	0.273	0.374	0.474	0.848
Yadier Molina	42.1	16.3	2004	2021	2146	7555	758	2112	171	998	537	0.28	0.331	0.402	0.733
Roger Bresnahan	42	24.2	1897	1915	1446	4481	682	1252	26	530	714	0.279	0.386	0.377	0.764
Jason Kendall	41.7	14.6	1996	2010	2085	7627	1030	2195	75	744	721	0.288	0.366	0.378	0.744
Darrell Porter	40.8	18.4	1971	1987	1782	5539	765	1369	188	826	905	0.247	0.354	0.409	0.763

None of this, however, is to address very directly what seems to me the clearest evidence of overrating. That is Berra's remarkable run in MVP voting. Berra was voted the league MVP in 1951, 1954 and 1955. He finished second in 1953 and 1956, third in 1950 and fourth in 1952. He finished in the top 20 another six times. That's impressive. The problem, it seems to me, is that Berra was never the most valuable player in the league and rarely even the most valuable player on the Yankees.

1950: The Yankees win the pennant. Phil Rizzuto is second in the league in WAR and wins the MVP. Billy Goodman of the Red Sox finishes second. Berra is third in the MVP vote with three first place votes. His WAR is lower than Rizzuto's and Larry Doby's but higher than Goodman's. The league leader in WAR was pitcher Ned Garver, who finished with a 13-18 record for the seventh place St Louis Browns.

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Nobody in 1950 was ready to vote for a pitcher with a losing record for a losing team. Garver got no first-place votes and a total of 6 points, compared to 146 for Berra and 284 for Rizzuto. Berra's third place finish was roughly what he deserved.

1951: Berra's first MVP. The vote was highly divided. Berra got 6 first place votes, as did Garver (this year a 20-game winner) and Allie Reynolds, the Yankee pitcher. Minnie Minoso, Ferrs Fain, Ellis Kinder (a Red Sox reliever), Rizzuto and Yankee pitcher Eddie Lopat all got at least one first place vote. The league leader in WAR was Ted Williams. Williams got no first place votes. Garver, Eddie Joost, the A's shortstop, Early Wynn, an Indians pitcher, and Minnie Minoso, playing mostly for the White Sox, and Doby all finished with higher WAR than Berra. It's not too hard to figure out what happened. The Yankees had won the pennant for the third straight year. Joe DiMaggio, in his final year, was no longer a significant factor. Mickey Mantle, 19 years old and in his rookie year, had been a disappointment. Rizzuto had fallen off from the year before. Somebody, the voters must have thought, was responsible for the Yankees' success and Berra was an obvious candidate. 1951 is the only year he led the Yankees in WAR. My view is that he did not deserve the MVP but it wasn't (yet) nuts.

1952: The Yankees won again. Berra finished fourth in the voting for MVP. Pitcher Bobby Shantz, who had a sensational year for the A's and helped them finish above .500 for the first time in three years, won the award. Allie Reynolds finished second and Mantle, emerging as a star at the age of 20, finished third. By WAR, Berra finished sixth in the league, behind Billy Pierce (White Sox pitcher), Larry Doby again, and Cleveland third baseman Al Rosen as well as Shantz and

Mantle.   Again, Berra did better than I think he deserved although not by much.

1953: Here's where it starts getting weird. The Yankees won their fifth straight championship. Berra finished second in the MVP vote to Al Rosen, a unanimous winner after missing (by one point of batting average) winning the triple crown. Berra finished third *on the Yankees* in WAR, behind Mantle and Hank Bauer and tenth in the league. Why did Berra finish second in the MVP vote? Got me.

1954: This is one of the years the Yankees lost the pennant as Cleveland won a league record 111 games. Any number of Indians could have won the award. Doby, second baseman Bobby Avila, and pitcher Bob Lemon all got 5 first place votes. Berra got seven and won the MVP. His WAR was 5.3, ninth in the league, behind, among many others, his teammate Mickey Mantle. It's pretty easy to imagine that there was some vote splitting among the Indians but even that doesn't explain it.

1955: This one is even stranger. The Yankees did win the pennant again and there was probably some (arguably legitimate) preference for a member of the winning team (although this seems not to have mattered the year before). But Berra was fourth *on the Yankees* in WAR, behind Mantle who, in retrospect, was clearly the best player in the league, as well as Gil McDougald and Hank Bauer. Berra was even out of the top ten in the league but he still won the MVP.

1956 The Yankees won again. This was Mantle's Triple Crown year and he was, rightly, the unanimous MVP. Berra finished second. Berra was sixth in the league in WAR, tied with Minnie Minoso, behind Early Wynn, Herb Score, Frank Lary and Al Kaline as well as Mantle.

That's seven straight years in the top four of MVP voting. Not once was his league rank in WAR equal to or greater than his rank in the MVP voting. That's overrated. What explains it? Most important is that the Yankees won the pennant in six of those seven years. But that's not enough: Berra wasn't even the best player on his own team all but one of those years. Berra's biggest weakness as a batter was that he was a bad ball hitter and rarely walked—but nobody was paying much attention to walks in the 1950s. His biggest strength was as an RBI man. It helped to bat behind Mantle. And voters were paying much more attention to RBI totals in the 1950s than they do today. Possibly most important, there may be a slight bias in favor of catchers in MVP voting. Catchers have only led their league in WAR three times, all in the National League (Jonny Bench, Gary Carter, and Buster Posey, once each). Nonetheless, catchers have won 16 MVP awards (out of a possible 182) since 1931. This bias in favor of catchers may have been particularly strong in the 1950s when Roy Campanella, as well as Berra, won three MVPs even though he finished second in WAR on his own Brooklyn Dodgers each year (twice to Jackie Robinson, once to Duke Snider). MVP voters may think that catchers, uniquely, make contributions that are not captured in statistics, including WAR. They might think that catchers are managers on the field, or brilliant pitch callers, or brilliant at pitch framing. I guess it's possible, but it doesn't seem likely. There's even some evidence in Berra's case that pitchers, especially early in his career, disliked pitching to him precisely because he grabbed at pitchers, the opposite of effective pitch framing.

Yogi Berra seems not to have been quite so lovable as the press made him seem. He may not have been as lovable as

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his association with a cartoon character (Yogi Bear, introduced in 1958 at the peak of Berra's fame) made him seem. But he was a man of principle and character. He was a great player but, much as it pains me to say it, just not as great as MVP voters made him out to be.

An Afterthought: Better with Berra

My comments on Berra were just about the first thing I wrote for this book. After I wrote those comments I realized that some of the claims for Berra that don't turn up in WAR or WAA could be tested. Did Berra really help the pitching staff, either by pitch calling or pitch framing? If he did, it should show up in the box scores. Yankee pitchers should have done better with Berra than with other catchers. If Berra was good at what is now called pitch framing, shouldn't it show up in the ratio of strikeouts to walks? From 1947 through 1960, Berra caught about 70% of the Yankees' games. That's a lot but it still leaves 30% (about 600 games) he did not catch. That's enough for a meaningful comparison. That still left me with a big problem: I thought that to get the data I would have to go through the box score for each of the 2000 plus games the Yankees played in Berra's prime. I was not willing to do that. And then … Baseball-Reference to the rescue. I had not realized it but B-R provides breakdowns of each team's pitching by catcher. I still had to put the data together but that took me only about an hour (a lot less than the days I suspect I would have needed to go box score by box score). What I found is in the table below.

	Berra games	Others games	Berra ERA	Others ERA	Berra SO/W	Others SO/W
1947	47.0	101.6	3.30	3.35	1.04	1.17
1948	59.1	87.8	3.72	3.77	0.90	1.01
1949	95.2	51.4	3.34	4.32	0.89	0.73
1950	136.2	9.7	4.10	4.14	1.00	1.32
1951	133.0	16.1	3.49	4.29	1.23	0.89
1952	127.8	16.9	3.15	3.07	1.14	0.92
1953	119.6	29.3	3.19	3.17	1.22	1.23
1954	139.4	11.9	3.16	4.88	1.20	0.98
1955	137.1	15.4	3.16	3.90	1.06	1.11
1956	130.3	23.3	3.49	4.43	1.13	1.05
1957	114.5	40.5	2.99	3.04	1.45	1.24
1958	83.9	69.3	3.40	3.00	1.40	1.47
1959	111.2	44.3	3.45	4.00	1.45	1.30
1960	50.5	104.8	3.70	3.42	1.05	1.24
Totals	1484.6	622.2	3.38	3.59	1.15	1.12

There's no evidence from this that Berra was particularly good at pitch framing. With Berra catching, Yankee pitchers had a marginally better ratio of strikeouts to walks but the margin is small. Then look at the earned run averages—3.38 with Berra catching, 3.59 with anyone else catching. One fifth of a run per game (3.59-3.38) is a big deal. Over the course of the 100 games a year Berra was catching, year after year, that's 20 runs a year or about two extra wins (in WAA or WAR). That's a lot. Now, I can think of lots of other ways to explain why Yankee pitchers did better with Berra than the Yankees' other catchers—familiarity, the selective use of backup catchers for weaker pitchers, the limits of the backup catchers

themselves (which is why they were backups in the first place). I also don't think that even giving Berra full credit for the reduced runs given up would be enough to justify Berra's three MVPs. In two of the years Berra won the MVP he was significantly more than 2 WAR behind the league leader and in the third year (1951) he was 1.8 WAR behind Ted Williams. I also suspect, but do not know, that other catchers (Bench and Fisk and Cochrane among them) might benefit from a similar analysis and that Berra would not move up on my career list. I could be wrong but, to quote Detective Adrian Monk, "I doubt it." Even with Bill James and Pete Palmer and Baseball-Reference, there's a lot we still don't know.

A Note on Phil Rizzuto

Bill James wrote a whole book, *The Politics of Glory* later retitled *Whatever Happened to the Hall of Fame*, with Phil Rizzuto's qualifications for the Hall as a running theme. (His conclusion: It depends on what you think the Hall should be.) There is absolutely no reason for me to do here what James did there. But it would be odd to write a book about the Yankees without saying something about Rizzuto, who is one of the most beloved figures in Yankee history, for his thirteen years at shortstop, his seven championships, and his forty years as a highly idiosyncratic announcer. As it happens, Rizzuto is about as good an example as you can find of the peculiarities of MVP voting.

I do not have in mind 1950 when Rizzuto not only won the MVP award but probably deserved it. DiMaggio was on the downside of his career. Ted Williams missed 65 games with a broken elbow. Rizzuto hit .324, the best of his career, scored 125 runs and provided excellent defense. He led all position players in WAR. And the Yankees won the pennant. It should

have been—and was—an easy choice. Rizzuto got 16 of 23 first place votes.

It's the other years that are puzzling, particularly 1949. In 1949, Rizzuto hit .275, two points above his career average. His OPS+ was 88, which is to say he was a significantly below average hitter. His WAR for the year was 3.0. His WAA was 1.1. That's the record of an above average player—his WAA was positive—but hardly the record of a star. He was, by WAR, the sixth most valuable player on the Yankees. He was, again by WAR, the fifth most valuable shortstop in an eight team league (after Eddie Joost, Vern Stephens who hit 39 home runs and drove in 159, 42-year-old future Hall of Famer Luke Appling, and Lou Boudreau, who had won the MVP the previous year). Of course, in 1949 nobody was paying attention to WAR and WAA because they hadn't been invented yet.

What the writers who voted for MVP did know was that the Yankees had won the pennant. They also knew that this particular pennant required an explanation. The Yankees had not been favored at the beginning of the season. They squeezed out a win by beating Boston on the last two days of the season. DiMaggio, their great star, had been out for half the season and the team had suffered an extraordinary string of injuries. The writers, if they were like the rest of us, needed a story to make sense of a season that otherwise made no sense. And the story they settled on was that Rizzuto had somehow held the team together.

Writing in the *Sporting News* just after the Yankees' final win against the Red Sox, Dan Daniel wrote that "Standing out in this success, right through the last two victories over the Red Sox, was the spectacular work of Phil Francis Rizzuto." Daniel

paused to acknowledge the contributions of reliever Joe Page, "Old Reliable" Tommy Henrich, and of course, The Great DiMaggio. And then he concluded that "it all simmers down to Rizzuto, the greatest shortstop of the year." Daniel also quoted Henrich himself, that "the solid man of our club is Rizzuto. Just so long as Phil is at shortstop, don't worry."

Rizzuto did not win the MVP vote in 1949. Ted Williams did, after leading the league in home runs, RBI and just narrowly missing the lead in batting average. The New York press went nuts, not in celebration of Rizzuto's strong showing but in outrage that he had not won. Jimmy Cannon in *The Post* called it "one of the worst selections ever." Herb Goren in *The Sun*—New York used to have a lot more papers than it has now—made what he seemed to think was the clinching argument: The MVP voters, he claimed "are supposed to judge players according to value in winning games. … The Yankees finished on top didn't they?" That argument would have been more convincing if Rizzuto had actually been the best player on the Yankees.

What was going on? Sometimes there's an obvious and overwhelming choice for MVP—a Mickey Mantle in 1956 who was easily the best player on the best team. But when there isn't, there's lots of room for constructing a story that's only loosely related to facts. When there are immeasurables (leadership or inspiration) or the unmeasured (fielding in 1949), there is even more opportunity to construct stories.

Look at Rizzuto's record for his ten best years, listed from top to bottom by WAR, followed by his standing in the MVP vote.

Rizzuto By Year

	WAR	MVP Rank
1950	6.8	1
1942	5.8	19
1952	5.4	14
1941	4.6	20
1947	4.6	No votes
1953	4.0	6
1951	3.7	11
1949	3.0	2
1946	2.2	No votes
1948	1.6	33

1950 makes sense. It was Rizzuto's best season and his best finish in the MVP vote. Beyond that, the only relationship I can see in the table is that Rizzuto did worse in the years (1946 and 1948) the Yankees did not win the pennant. 1949, when Rizzuto finished second, was actually a below average year for him. Because fielding was Rizzuto's strength and because fielding was (and is) hard to measure, it was easy to roll out stories about Rizzuto's value whenever writers needed to explain something they didn't understand. Performance matters. But so do stories and that's how players get both overrated and underrated.

Bad Trades

The Yankees have made a lot of good trades. Getting Ruth from the Red Sox and Rodriguez from the Rangers and Randolph, and Maris, and Nettles were all clear wins, especially if you don't mind spending someone else's money. (I don't.) They've also made some bad trades. The 1951 trade of Lew Burdette (plus cash) to the Boston Braves for Johnny

Sain is usually counted among the bad trades and a template for the sort of bad trade—a prospect for a veteran—that the Yankees seemed to make routinely when George Steinbrenner owned the team.

Sain had been a star for the Braves, winning 20+ games for the Braves four of the previous five years, leading Boston to a pennant in 1948 ("Spahn and Sain and two days of rain"), one of only two they won before departing for Milwaukee and eventually Atlanta. In 1951, though, the Braves had faded from contention. By late August, they were barely over .500 and trailed the Dodgers by 16 games. Sain himself was 7-13, with an elevated ERA, and 33 years of age, possibly with a sore shoulder. The Braves were last in the league in attendance. I suspect the Braves had some regrets about trading Sain. He was a local hero and, later, a successful pitching coach but they were ready to let him go.

Burdette was a borderline prospect. He was a 24-year-old who had pitched in two games for the Yankees in 1950, a total of 1 1/3 innings.   Burdette was a control pitcher with a lot of nervous mannerisms, not the sort of prospect who gets scouts excited, then or now. His record in the minor leagues was a distinctively mediocre 52-47.

I can understand why the Yankees made the trade. Sain had four decent years for the Yankees, a 33-20 record and a league lead in saves in 1954 (26) after he was converted to a full-time reliever. Burdette, though, blossomed with the Braves. From 1956-1961, Burdette averaged 19 wins and 11 losses. For his career, he won 203, a total that, if it had been compiled with the Yankees, would have placed him fourth among the tram's all-time leaders. And that's not even counting his three wins to help the Braves upset the Yankees in the 1957 World

Series. It was clearly a bad trade for the Yankees. And there is an overwhelming temptation to draw a lesson from it to harangue more recent general managers: Don't trade prospects for fading veterans. I'm not so sure.

Sain's ERA+ for his years with the Yankees was 107. But, like Raschi, Reynolds and Lopat he had the advantage of playing in front of an excellent defensive team. Make the adjustments and Sain's WAA was 0.0. That's not good. It's not bad. It's average, exactly average. That would seem to tilt things in Burdette's direction. Not so. Burdette also had the advantage of playing in front of a very good lineup, including both Hank Aaron and Eddie Mathews. From 1953-1962, Burdette's tenure with the team, the Braves had the second-best record in the National League, just short of the Dodgers. For the full length of his career, Burdette's ERA+ was 99, just a tick below average. His WAR, post Yankees, was 28.6 but his lifetime WAA was -4.2. That's *negative* 4.2. Burdette was, in effect, an innings eater who had a few good years. Could the Yankees have used a pitcher like Burdette? Sure, especially in the late 50's when Burdette was at his peak and the Yankees' pitching was mediocre. Could the Yankees' have won the 1957 World Series if Burdette had not been on the Braves? Sure, but that's a bit of an "if my grandmother had wheels" type speculation. Did the Yankees win 9 pennants in eleven years while Burdette was with the Braves? That's not speculation.

Sometimes one team wins a trade. Sometimes a trade hurts both teams. Sometimes a trade helps both teams (as in the Gordon for Reynolds trade). This one? My guess is that it didn't matter anywhere as much as it seems at first glance. I draw no deep lessons about trading prospects for veterans.

World Series

From 1927 through 1953, 27 years, the Yankees appeared in the World Series 16 times. They won 15 of those. From 1927 through 1941, they won the World Series 8 consecutive times with a won-lost record of 32-4.   They outscored their opponents by 217 to 102. As best I can tell, the no American League team has ever had a better record over any 36-game span, regular season or postseason.   (The Chicago Cubs did go 34-2 in the National League in August and September 1906.) The Yankees did lose the World Series in 1942 to the Cardinals. They then promptly won the next seven series they appeared in. They did slump all the way down to a 28-12 record. In their sixteen World Series from 1927 through 1953, the Yankees' won-lost record was 61-20. That's the percentage equivalent of winning 122 games in a 162 game season, something no team has ever done. They did all this with four different managers (Miller Huggins in 1927 and 1928, Joe McCarthy, Bucky Harris in 1947, and Casey Stengel for the last five.) And they did all this against the best the National League had to offer. I would say which team had the second-best streak in the World Series but no other team is close. OK, I will say. The Red Sox won all five of the World Series they appeared in from 1903 through 1918. That really isn't close and we all know what happened to the Red Sox next—no more World Series wins for 86 years.

Describing what the Yankees did is easy. Explaining it is impossible. Here are some possibilities.

1)   The team with the better regular season record usually wins the series.

That would make sense: The better the record, the better the team; the better the team, the more likely to win. In fact,

each of the eight Yankee World Series teams from 1927 through 1941 did have a better record than its NL opponents. But, from 1943 through 1952, the NL team had a better record three times as did the Yankees 3 times (with one tie). Overall, the team with the better record has won the World Series 62 times (out of 117). That's something but not much.

2)   The better hitting team usually wins the series.

There's no particular reason to think good hitting matters more in the World Series than elsewhere. The conventional wisdom, insofar as there is any, is the reverse: Good pitching stops good hitting. Still, it's worth looking. And, over the 16 World Series in question the Yankees were the better hitting team (as measured by OPS+) twelve times. But overall, the better hitting team has only won 62 of 115 World Series (with two ties in OPS+). Take out the Yankees from the 16 Series in question and the team with the higher OPS+ won a grand total of 50 but lost 49. That isn't going to explain anything.

3)   The team with better pitching usually wins the series.

That would seem to make sense if good pitching really does stop good hitting. The problem is there's no evidence it's true. Remember that the Yankees, particularly in the years before expansion, were a team driven more by good hitting than by good pitching. In fact, in the 16 World Series, the National League team had the better ERA+ 10 times, the Yankees, 5. Overall, the team with the better ERA+ has won only 52 of 112 World Series (excluding five times they were tied). That certainly doesn't explain the Yankee success.

4)   The team with more postseason experience usually wins the series.

And how many times have we heard that experience will be the decisive factor in the postseason? A lot. It's as if experience could swing a bat or throw a curve. There are lots of ways to look at this. You could count up how many years of experience a team has on its roster. You could even multiply years of experience by at bats or batters faced and get a really fancy measure. If I could figure out a way to do either of those things easily, I would. I can't, so I'll keep it simple. Do teams that have appeared in the previous World Series win more often than teams that did not? The answer is that they do, but only if they're the Yankees. Overall, the Yankees are 19-6 as repeat participants compared to 8-7 as non-repeaters. For the 16 World Series in question (1927-1953), the Yankees were repeaters 10 times and won 9. Maybe that does explain it. But if you look at teams besides the Yankees, it looks very different. Repeaters are 14 and 24. It looks as if it's not experience that explains the Yankees' success so much as it's the Yankees' success that makes experience look more important than it is.

Sometimes there just aren't explanations. Some people like to call it fate or destiny or even a Divine Plan. As for myself, much as I root for the Yankees, it seems to me pretty unlikely that intelligent design would operate at this level of detail. If you want to call it fate or destiny, that's your business. I don't see any difference, in effect, between using those terms and simply calling it chance. I can't explain why the Yankees have done so well in the World Series. It's frustrating for an analyst. But it still happened and that's good enough for me as a fan.

CHAPTER 11
THE STENGEL YEARS CONTINUE: 1954-1958

Douglass Wallop published *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant* in September of 1954. The novel was made into a Broadway musical the next year and a movie a few years after that under the title *Damn Yankees*. It's the story of an aging Washington Senators fan who makes a deal with the devil to become the young Joe Hardy who leads his team to the pennant. (These were the days when the going joke was: "Washington: first in war, first in peace, last in the American League.") Mickey Mantle, Yogi Berra, and Moose Skowron all make uncredited appearances in archival footage and some of the numbers ("Ya Gotta have Heart," "Whatever Lola Wants") still hold up surprisingly well.

The Yankees, in fact, did not win the pennant in 1954. It's hard to blame them. They won 103 games, as many as they had won in any year since 1939, as many as they would win again until 1961. I have no evidence that *Damn Yankees* was anything more than fiction. But a deal with the devil is as good an explanation of what happened as any. The Cleveland Indians enjoyed one of the great fluke years of all time. Cleveland won 111 games, 7 more than the "Pythagorean Theorem" predicted, 19 more than they had won the year before, 18 more than they would win the next. Their 111 wins set an American League record that would last until the Yankees won 114 in 1998 in a schedule eight games longer. As John Sterling says, "That's baseball."

1955 was back to normal. The Yankees won 96 games, just one less than they had averaged from 1949-53. In mid to

late September, they won 11 of 12 to finish three games ahead of Cleveland. The next three regular seasons were almost uneventful (aside from Mickey Mantle's dominance and his Triple Crown 1956). In none of the seasons were the Yankees out of first at any time after June 15. In 1956, they finished nine games ahead of Cleveland. In 1957 and 1958, they finished ahead of the White Sox, by eight and by ten.

The excitement from 1955 through 1958 was concentrated in the World Series. All four series went seven games, the longest streak of winner-take-all-games before or since. In 1955 the Brooklyn Dodgers, after seven World Series appearances and seven losses (5 to the Yankees) finally won one. In game seven the Yankees outhit Brooklyn 8 to 5. The biggest play of the entire series was Sandy Amoros' running catch of Yogi Berra's slicing line drive to left with two on and nobody out in the bottom of the sixth. He also doubled up Gil McDougald, who had been running with the pitch, at first. Johnny Podres pitched a complete game shutout for the Dodgers. The Yankees got a measure of revenge in 1956. The Dodgers won the first two games, both at Ebbets Field. The Yankees won the next three, all at Yankee Stadium, capped off by Don Larsen's perfect game in game 5. The Dodgers won Game Six, 1-0 in ten innings when Jackie Robinson drove in Junior Gilliam with a single to left in the bottom of the tenth. Clem Labine pitched the complete game shutout for the Dodgers and Bob Turley pitched the complete game for the Yankees. It's a game that I suspect would be much more celebrated if it had not been preceded by Larsen's perfect game or succeeded by a different outcome. The Yankees won game seven 9-0 as Yogi Berra hit two home runs off Don Newcombe. Johnny Kucks pitched the complete game

shutout. In 1957 the Yankees met the Milwaukee Braves with Hank Aaron, Eddie Mathews and Warren Spahn. The Braves had moved to Milwaukee from Boston only five years earlier and were, at the time, the only National League Franchise the Yankees had not met (and beaten) in a World Series. It was a tight series—five games decided by two runs or less, an extra innings game, and neither team ever leading by more than a game. In game seven, Lou Burdette, obtained by the Braves from the Yankees in 1951, pitched a complete game shutout, his third complete game, his second shutout of the Series. In the 1958 rematch, Milwaukee took a three games to one lead. At that point, no team had ever come back from a 3-1 deficit to win the World Series. The Yankees did it. They won game five, 7-0; game six, 4-3 in ten innings; game seven, 6-2. The key hits in game seven were an RBI single by Elston Howard with two out in the top of the 8th with the score tied, followed immediately by Moose Skowron's three-run home run. The star of the Series was Bob Turley. After giving up four runs and getting only one out in his game two start, he came back to pitch a complete game shutout in game five. He got a one out save in game six, coming in after the Braves had already scored one run and had men on first and third in the bottom of the tenth. And he won game seven, pitching 6 2/3 innings in relief of Don Larsen. The losing pitcher in games five and seven was Lew Burdette. That's baseball, too.

Underrated Shortstop (and Second Baseman and Third Baseman) : Gil McDougald

What Underrated Him: WAR

Gil McDougald is probably best remembered as the batter who hit the line drive in 1957 that hit Herb Score, Cleveland's star pitcher, in the eye, hospitalizing Score, and eventually

leading to the end of Score's career. Less well remembered is that McDougald himself was hit by a line drive by Bob Cerv during batting practice in 1955. The line drive damaged McDougald's inner left ear and would lead, after McDougald's playing career, to prolonged deafness although his hearing was eventually repaired by a cochlear implant. It seems impossible to write about McDougald without also writing about those two line drives, but they are not why McDougald is underrated.

McDougald was probably the single player most hurt by Yankee Stadium, ever. At home, McDougald batted .255/.333/.348 (BA, OBA, SA) for an OPS of .680. Away, he hit .296/.379/.469 for an OPS of .847. The ratio of his home OPS to his road OPS was .803. Of the roughly 120 players who have played both 200 home games and 200 road games for the Yankees, that is the very lowest ratio—lower than Joe Gordon or Joe DiMaggio, lower than Moose Skowron or Elston Howard or Dave Winfield, all right-handed batters who were hurt by the stadium, and much lower than Alex Rodriguez or Aaron Judge, right handed hitters who actually hit better at Yankee Stadium than away. But I wasn't prepared, some pages back, to cut DiMaggio any slack for failing to adapt to Yankee Stadium and I see no reason to cut McDougald any slack here. Yankee Stadium is not the reason—at least not the main reason—McDougald is underrated.

For the full 16 years from 1949 through 1964, when the Yankees were winning 14 league championships, McDougald was pretty clearly the fourth most valuable player on the Yankees, after Mantle, Berra, and Ford. Here are the top seven Yankees, batters and pitchers, by WAR for those years.

	Games	WAR	WAA
Mantle	1883	98.3	73.9
Berra	1901	55.7	32.7
Ford	432	48.2	26.1
McDougald	1336	40.1	24.0
Bauer	1387	29.6	13.3
Howard	1190	25.6	12.1
Maris	685	25.4	16.6

That's good company (9 MVPs and a Cy Young award among the other six players). But that's not why McDougald was underrated either. McDougald's contribution to the Yankees' success was pretty well recognized. He was the rookie of the year in 1951, the pick over no less than both Minnie Minoso and Mickey Mantle. He finished 9th in the MVP vote in 1951, 7th in 1956, 5th in 1957, all slightly to significantly better than he deserved simply on the basis of WAR.

McDouglad was in eight World Series in his ten years with the Yankees, winning five. He hit slightly worse than he did in the regular season and had no particularly great or memorable moments aside from a home run in the top of the tenth of Game Six in 1958. That is certainly not why he was underrated.

The main reason McDougald was—and still is—underrated has to do with the way WAR is calculated. WAR—Wins Above Replacement—is calculated as wins contributed beyond what a hypothetical "replacement player" would contribute. That's fine for some purposes. But, in practice, a player does not play instead of a hypothetical replacement player. He plays instead of an actual player. His value isn't fixed in relationship to that hypothetical player but varies depending on the abilities of the actual player he is replacing.

The more you can get a player into the lineup instead of a weak alternative, the more valuable he is (and the more he's a replacement for a strong player, the less valuable he is). This is, of course, a long way of explaining why versatility matters. And Gil McDougald was among the most versatile of players. He had been a second baseman in the minors but the Yankees need a third baseman in 1951 to fill in for a fading Billy Johnson, so McDougald played third. When the Yankees called up Andy Carey to play third in 1954 and Billy Martin went into the army, McDougald switched to second. When 38-year-old Phil Rizzuto was released in 1956 and the Yankees had no good replacement, McDougald switched to shortstop. And when Tony Kubek was ready to take over at shortstop, McDougald switched back to second. And it's not just that McDougald played third one year and second another and shortstop yet another. He could, in a single year, play all three positions as he did in 1956, 1957 and 1959. Here's where he played for each of his 10 years with the Yankees.

	2nd	ss	3rd
1951	54		83
1952	38		117
1953	27		135
1954	92		35
1955	122		21
1956	31	92	5
1957	21	121	7
1958	115	19	
1959	54	52	25
1960	42		84

And did I mention that McDougald not only played three positions, he played each one well? He led the league in double plays turned three times, once as a third baseman, once as a shortstop, once as a third baseman. In 1953, he led the league second basemen in defensive runs saved and finished 4th as a third baseman. Remember that "defensive runs saved" depends in part on games played and that McDougald was splitting his time between two positions. In 1959, McDougald finished in the top 5 in defensive runs saved, which would not be a big deal in an eight-team league, except that McDougald did it at *each* of three positions. McDougald was a D. J. LeMahieu type before there was a D. J. LeMahieu, a player who gave the Yankees the flexibility to get their best players on the field in any one season and in any one game. McDougald didn't just plug holes. He plugged the holes that were leaking the most. That's why he is underrated.

Underrated Center Field: Mickey Mantle

Who Underrated Him: The fans who booed him, the writers who criticized him, himself

There's an undertone of sadness in almost every word written about Mickey Mantle. Some of it comes from people my age, for whom Mantle evokes our own lost youth. Two of Mantle's biggest fans are the actor and director, Billy Crystal, and the sportscaster, Bob Costas. I'm about the same age as both of them—about three months younger than Crystal, about four years older than Costas. Both grew up on Long Island. I grew up in Westchester. For us, and for all the other baseball fans who grew up in the New York metropolitan area, Mantle was the only game in town. The Giants and Dodgers had deserted for California. Mantle was the Yankees' biggest star, our first hero, and, at least in this case, you don't forget your

first. Some of it is uglier: Mantle was the last great white star (at least until Mike Trout) and his memory helps us continue to mistake exclusion for innocence. Most of it, though, has to do with a sense of regret, of possibilities lost. When Mantle arrived at Spring Training, in 1951, just four months after his nineteenth birthday, after one year in the Class C minors and another in the Class D minors, Casey Stengel anointed him. "There's never been anyone like this kid we got from Joplin. He has more speed than any slugger and more slug than any speedster—and nobody has ever had more of both of them together." Well, Mantle turned out not to be the greatest player ever and when his legs gave out on him when he was still in his early thirties, it was hard not to speculate. What if he has taken better care of himself? What if he had gotten to bed a little earlier, what if his drinking had been more restrained? Mantle himself clearly shared these regrets. In her excellent biography of Mantle, a book whose subtitle ("The Last Boy and the End of American Childhood") evokes nostalgia, Jane Leavy quotes Costas on an interview with Mantle, long after his playing career had ended: "He said, without a thimble-full of bravado, but wistfully and with affection and respect for the other players involved, 'I know I had as much ability as Willie. And I had probably more all-around ability than Stan or Ted. The difference is none of them have to look back and wonder how good they could have been.'" Crystal, in a video available on YouTube, reports that Mantle was reluctant to go inside the Hall of Fame because he (Mantle) thought he didn't belong. If only. What could have been. Mantle is the baseball equivalent of Marlon Brando, wailing in *On the Waterfront*, "I coulda been a contender. I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am." He is, if you like such allusions, Joseph Conrad's

Lord Jim, tortured and eventually destroyed by his inability to come to terms with his own failures. My belief, for what it is worth, is that this view of Mantle's career is borderline nuts.

Mantle, at his peak, was just about as good as you can get. I've already pointed out, in the comment on Babe Ruth, that Mantle has the third highest WAA total for three consecutive years (1955-57) after only Ruth (and that just barely) and Barry Bonds, who is, to put it mildly, under strong suspicion of steroid use. You can define "peak" just about any way you like—one year, three best year, five best years. Mantle is near the top on any list. I use WAR below but WAA would show pretty much the same.

Best Single Season			Three Best Seasons		Five Best Seasons	
Ruth	1923	14.2	Ruth	39.7	Ruth	61.4
Yastrzemski	1967	12.5	Bonds	34.3	Hornsby	54.1
Hornsby	1924	12.3	Hornsby	33.6	Bonds	53,9
Gehrig	1927	11.9	**Mantle**	**32.9**	Mays	53.8
Bonds	2001	11.9	Mays	32.8	Cobb	51.9
Ripken	1991	11.5	Cobb	32.5	Gehrig	51.8
Wagner	1908	11.5	Yastrzemski	32.5	**Mantle**	**51.1**
Mantle	**1957**	**11.3**	Gehrig	31.7	Williams	50.7
Musial	1948	11.3	Williams	31.5		
Cobb	1917	11.3	Wagner	30,9		
Mays	1965	11.2	Trout	30.9		
Morgan	1975	11.0	Musial	30.2		

That's not bad for someone who had to wonder how good he could have been.

Mantle won three MVP's (1956, 1957, 1962) and finished second three times (1960, 1961, 1964). That's very good—in the range of Mays, Trout, DiMaggio, Musial, but well short of Barry Bonds. Incredibly, he deserved even better. By WAR,

Mantle was the best player in the league every year from 1955 through 1958 and again in 1961. In 1962, when he won his final MVP—there really is a bias in the voting toward older players—he finished fourth in the league in WAR. But he only played 123 games that year, finished second in WAR among position players, and first in WAA among all players. Plus the Yankees won the pennant. In both 1955 and 1958, Mantle led the league in WAR as the Yankees finished first, but each year finished fifth in the MVP vote. Mantle could have won five or even six MVPs. That's a what if. But it's a what if about the voters' judgment, not Mantle's performance.

Was Mantle a winner? The Yankees won 12 pennants and 7 World Series in Mantle's first 14 years. The Yankees' winning percentage in games Mantle started: .591. Does Mantle deserve all the credit for his team's success? No, but he deserves as much as DiMaggio or Berra or Jeter, if not more. In the clutch? In the World Series, Mantle wasn't quite as good as in the regular season (.903 OPS to .977) but he does hold the career record for most home runs in the Series with 18 (3 more than Ruth) and RBI (1 more than Berra). It helps, of course, that he also played in more World Series games than anyone other than Berra. By every measure in the regular season, he hit better when it mattered most. His career OPS was .977. With runners on base, it was 1.006 and with runners in scoring position it was 1.017. With two outs and runners in scoring position, it was 1.074. Late and close, it was 1.100. Does this mean that Mantle had a "clutch gene?" Who knows? It does mean that you can't accuse Mantle of padding his stats when it didn't matter. A team leader? Nobody's ever accused Mantle of being a rah-rah type but it's also clear that his teammates not only liked but respected Mantle. Unlike

DiMaggio who was famously cool to Mantle, Mantle seems to have gone out of his way to help younger players. If you believe in this sort of stuff, Mantle also seems to have been an inspiration to his teammates for his willingness to play in pain.

Mantle struck out a lot by the standards of the 50s and 60s. (He led the league five times.) But his strikeout totals are dwarfed by current standards. He was an average center fielder at his peak and significantly below average as his legs gave out, but center field is a demanding position and average there is still a good thing with a great hitter. The damning knock on Mantle, the source of regret, is that his peak was too short, that he didn't take care of himself, and that his legs—literally and metaphorically—gave out well before they should have. This knock is fair, but it also needs some context.

Through his age thirty season (1962, the year of his last MVP), Mantle was third among all players, ever, in WAR for players his age, behind Ty Cobb and a whisker behind Rogers Hornsby. To put it just a little differently, that means he was ahead of Ruth, Mays, Gehrig, Hank Aaron, Mike Trout and Barry Bonds as well as anybody else you care to name. After 30, it's a different story. Mantle was at 90.6 WAR through his age 30 season. For the rest of his career, he accumulated only 19.6 WAR. Of the 20 top players through age 30, only four had a lower WAR after 30 than Mantle: Mike Trout, whose career is very much still in progress, Ken Griffey, who was injured a lot, Jimmy Foxx, who had a drinking problem of his own, and Albert Pujols, whose age might—I understate--not be what the official record shows. In any case, Mantle, 3rd in WAR through age 30, ended his career 16th all time and 11th in WAA.

Still, one consideration makes Mantle's record after 30 look (even) worse than it was. For the last 6 years of his career,

teams were scoring an average of 3.84 runs a game, lower than any single year since the end of World War I to 1962. WAR is not context dependent. Taking into account the lower offensive context from 1963-1968 would not affect Mantle's WAR totals. But it certainly affected his raw numbers. Baseball-Reference—who else?—used to have a tool that helps make sense of this, a process they call "neutralization." B-R takes a player's OPS+ (context independent), multiplies that by league average OPS in another year, then adjusts hits, home runs, walks and all the rest (but not outs, which are fixed) to make the player's stats what they would have to be to equal the "neutralized" OPS. It's very clever. It's also a little goofy. Triples, for example, would not multiply proportionally in relationship to OPS. Some deadball triples would surely turn into home runs in a lively ball era. And neutralization doesn't tell us anything about relative value than we don't already know from OPS+ or WAR or WAA that are already context independent. But it's fun. OPS+ and WAR are informative, but they don't exactly sing. For better or worse, our ears are much more accustomed to finding a melody in what are now old-fashioned stats. Mickey Mantle's line in 1956, his triple crown year, sings loud and clear: .353 Batting Average, 52 Home Runs, 130 RBI. I know that without looking it up. I promise you that there is not a single OPS+ or WAR or WAA that I would know without checking—and even with a check I would probably have to look twice. Neutralization lets me translate stats in a lower scoring environment to stats that mean more to me in a higher scoring environment. Through 1962, Mantle batted .309 with .429 OBA and an average of 39 home runs per 162 games. From 1963-68, he hit .269 with an OBA of .398 and an average of 29 home runs per 162 games. That's a big

drop off. But "neutralize" it to 1956 and it looks a lot different: a .294 BA, a .428 OBA, and 33 home runs per 162 games. That's still a drop off but a lot less dramatic than it looks at first glance.

So, what to make of Mantle? Could he have been better? Sure. You can say that about any of us. If you want to feel wistful that Mantle was not the first to break Ruth's all-time home run record, I wouldn't try to stop you even if I could. But let's be reasonable. And it is not reasonable to expect anyone--and certainly not a 19-year-old—to be the greatest ever at anything. Depending on what standard you use Mantle is anywhere between the 16th best position player ever (by WAR) and the third best ever (by 3 season WAR, disqualifying Bonds). That is good. I don't know about you, but I would be happy to be the 16th best (not to mention 3rd best) in the world at just about anything. Isn't it time to stop mourning what Mantle didn't do and celebrate him for what he did do?

New York and Kansas City

In 1954 the Chicago businessman Arnold Johnson bought the struggling Philadelphia Athletics and moved them to Kansas City for the start of the 1955 season. Johnson was already a business partner of the Yankee owners, Del Webb and Dan Topping. In fact, Johnson had already purchased Yankee Stadium itself and was renting it back to the Yankees with significant tax advantages for both sides in the deal. Webb and Topping also sold Johnson the stadium used by the Kansas City Blues, one of the Yankees' top minor league teams, agreed to grant Johnson territorial rights to Kansas City without a fee, and moved their own affiliate to Denver.

The arrangement and the complex relationship between Johnson and the Yankee owners generated a fair amount of

suspicion in the American League where many were (understandably) already resentful of the Yankee success. This suspicion only intensified as the Yankees and A's conducted no less than nineteen trades over the next seven years. These trades brought the Yankees Clete Boyer, Bobby Shantz, Ralph Terry and, most notably, Roger Maris. Boyer would seem to be an especially egregious case. Boyer had been signed as a "bonus baby," required by the rules of the moment to be kept on a major league roster. Once he was ready for the big team, after having been "stored" for several years on the As's roster, Boyer was traded back to New York. Ralph Terry presented a similar example: He had been signed by the Yankees but was traded to the A's as a 21 year old, then brought back to the Yankees two years later when the Yankees needed an additional starter. Bill Veeck, one of the co-owners of the White Sox declared that "Until Arnold Johnson died, Kansas City was not an Independent Major League baseball team at all. It was nothing more than a loosely controlled Yankee farm club."

Veeck's opinion seems to be pretty much the consensus. I have seen one article on SB Nation that tries to quantify the trades. It counts out up the total Wins Above Replacement that "each player contributed to each team after the trade" and concludes that the Yankees came out ahead 64 to 36. That seems reasonable except that it leaves out what each player did *beyond* the first team (Yankees or A's) he was traded to. One way to do this would be to trace a whole chain of trades. (The A's traded Boyer to the Yankees. While with the Yankees, Boyer accumulated 19 WAR and then was traded to Atlanta for Bill Robinson. Robinson was a bust with the Yankees, -2 WAR, but then he was traded …. And so on and on). I've simplified

matters. I've counted up total WAR after the trade, whether with the Yankees, the A'a, or any other team. This isn't the best way to assess how much the Yankees or A's benefitted from the trades but it does a very good job of assessing the trades themselves. Here's what I found. I'm leaving out trades that involved a total future WAR of less than 1.

	NYY got:	WAR	KCA got:	WAR
03/30/55	$50,000.00		Ewell Blackwell	0.0
			Tom Gorman	6.3
			Dick Kryhoski	1.4
			Wally Barnet	3.8
05/11/55	Sonny Dixon	-0.1	Enos Slaughter	4.5
			Jonny Sain	0.0
08/25/56	Enos Slaughter	1.7	waiver price	
10/16/56	cash		Bob Cerv	9.0
02/19/57	Wayne Belardi	0.0	Rip Coleman	-0.7
	Art Ditmar	4.5	Milt Graff	0.3
	Jack McMahan	0.0	Billy Hunter	-0.8
	Bobby Shantz	12.9	Mickey McDermott	-2.6
	Curt Roberts	0.0	Tom Morgan	5.4
	Clete Boyer	28.2	Irv Noren	1

			Jack Urban	0.2
06/15/57	Ryne Duren	5.4	Billy Martin	-2.9
	Jim Pisoni	0.1	Woodie Held	21.4
	Harry Simpson	1.3	Ralph Terry	13.5
	Milt Graff	0.0	Bob Martyn	0.3
06/15/58	Virgin Trucks	-0.6	Harry Simpson	1.1
	Duke Maas	-2.2	Bob Grim	1.4
			Russ Snyder	5.2
05/26/59	Ralph Terry	11.1	Johnny Kucks	0.4
	Hector Lopez	3.4	Tom Sturdivant	4.5
			Jerry Lumpe	12.2
12/11/59	Roger Maris	32.2	Norm Siebern	15.4
	Kent Hadley	-0.1	Hank Bauer	-2.1
	Joe DeMaestri	0.2	Marv Throneberry	0.0
			Don Larsen	4.1
05/19/60	Bob Cerv	1.1	Andy Carey	0.6
06/14/61	Bud Daley	0.7	Art Ditmar	-0.5
			Deron Johnson	6.5

		Yankees Total WAR		A's Total WAR
		96.2		108.7

I draw several lessons from the chart.

1) It's long: 19 transactions involving a total of 64 players, if I include the minor trades.

2) Several players were traded in both directions (Ralph Terry, Enos Slaughter, Bob Grim, Bob Cerv). The Terry and Slaughter trades, in particular, do suggest that the Yankees were using Kansas City as a farm club, as extra roster spots, a place to store players until they were ready (Terry) or needed (Slaughter).

3) Most of the trades were small change, involving marginal prospects who became marginal major leaguers (at best) or former stars well past their peak. Of the 64 players who went from one team to another only eight had a future WAR of ten or more, and that's counting Terry twice.

4) The trade that looks to me the least balanced isn't the Roger Maris trade but the 1957 trade in which the Yankees got both Bobby Shantz, who led the league in ERA for the Yankees in 1957, and Clete Boyer, a future starter. In return, the A's got almost nothing (although they likely expected more from pitchers Tom Morgan and Mickey McDermott).

5) The Yankees came out slightly ahead in high value players (Maris, Boyer, Shantz) than the A's (Norm Siebern, Deron Johnson, Woodie Held, Jerry Lumpe) but, overall, the A's received slightly more future WAR than they gave up.

6) The A's problem wasn't the players they got from the Yankees but what they did with them. They sold Deron Johnson to Cincinnati two years after getting him from the Yankees and, two years after that, he finished fourth in the national league vote for MVP. A year and a half after getting Woodie Held, the A's traded him to Cleveland where he played at an almost all-star level for five years. (On the trade with Cleveland they did get back none other than a young Roger Maris who, of course, was simply passing through.)

It certainly does seem that there was something not quite right about the relationship between the Yankees and the A's. But the Yankees were much less clearly the beneficiary of that peculiar and suspicious relationship. What kept the Yankees at the top of the American League was not their relationship with Kansas City but the ongoing depth of their minor league system. As in the 1930's and 1940's, the Yankees could both promote from that system (Mantle, Skowron, McDougald, Bauer, Howard, Ford, Bob Grim, Andy Carey) and trade away the excess to fill in needs. Money matters. It's a constant refrain in understanding the history of the New York Yankees. But we still have to specify how it keeps working even under very different rules.

CHAPTER 12
THE END OF EMPIRE: 1959-1964

1959 was the first year I was paying attention to the Yankees from day one. They repaid my future loyalty by dropping to last place on May 26, after a 12-2 loss to the Red Sox. In mid-June the Yankees made it back to within 1½ games of first place Cleveland, but that had more to do with the failure of any team to dominate (five teams within 1½ of first) than the Yankees' excellence. The Yankees played .500 ball the rest of the way and finished the season in third place at 79-75, their worst record in more than three decades. There were two obvious villains. Mickey Mantle, still only 27 years old after averaging .331 and over 100 RBI per year, with three home run championships and two MVPs over the previous four years dropped to .283 with 31 home runs and 75 RBI. The Yankee fans booed Mantle all year, especially when he struck out, which he did often—126 times, to lead the league with the third highest total in American League history. The other villain was Bob Turley. Turley had enjoyed the year of his life in 1958—a 21-7 record, heroics in the World Series, and a Cy Young Award when there was still only one for both leagues. But Mantle and Turley were not the only villains

Between 1958 and 1959 the Yankees dropped from 759 runs scored to 687 and from 577 runs allowed to 647. That looks like a team effort, shared in equally by pitchers and hitters. Not so. Two other things happened at the same time. One is that scoring league-wide was up league wide. That made the decline in hitting look less serious than it was (compared to league average) and the decline in pitching look like more. The second thing that happened is that the Yankees'

defense got much worse (from first to fourth in defensive efficiency). The result is that, when you look at Wins Above Average for the two years, the pitching actually improved slightly, from almost exactly average to two wins above. Turley's falloff was offset by improvements from Art Ditmar and the relievers (Ryne Duren and Bobby Shantz). In short, the fall off was entirely among position players, from a total of 19.5 WAA to 4.8, a drop off of 15 wins or slightly more than the drop of 13 actual wins (from 92 to 79). Mantle shares part of the blame. He dropped from 6.7 WAA to 4.7. But Mantle still led the league's position players in both WAR and WAA as he had the previous four seasons. And a drop of two wins hardly accounts for a team drop of 13. Andy Carey dropped from 2.1 to minus 0.3 and lost his job to Clete Boyer, who wasn't any better (at least in 1959). 36-year-old Hank Bauer dropped from 1.2 wins above average to 1.6 below and 43 year old Enos Slaughter, as a sometime outfielder and pinch hitter, dropped his batting average from .304 to .172 and his WAA from .4 to -.9. But the biggest drop belonged to Norm Siebern, a 25-year-old former Minor League player of the year and, in 1958, a burgeoning star. Siebern regressed on both offense and defense, dropping from an excellent 3.1 WAA in 1958 to a negative .6 in 1959. Among them, five players (Mantle, Carey, Bauer, Slaughter and Siebern) accounted for a decline of 12 wins, just about enough to cover the entire team decline. It is tempting, given the presence of Slaughter and Bauer on the list to attribute the drop off to aging. Not so. Both Mantle and Siebern were young and the at bat adjusted age of the Yankees was about 28, second *youngest* in the league both years. In any case, Slaughter retired at the end of the season while

Siebern and Bauer were both dispatched to Kansas City for Roger Maris.

I still remember opening day of the 1960 season. I have no idea whether I was listening on the radio or watching on TV (or why, for that matter, I was not in school on a Tuesday afternoon). What I do remember was that newly acquired right fielder Roger Maris went four for five with two home runs and a double. The Yankees beat the Red Sox—I did have to look up the date and the score—8 to 4 and managed 17 hits in all. They were off and running. The race was close most of the season. As late as September 14, the Yankees were still tied for first with the Baltimore Orioles but they (the Yankees) won their last 15 games of the season and finished a deceptively comfortable eight games ahead.

The 1960 World Series was a different story. The Yankees won three of the first six games by a combined score of 38-3. The Pirates won the other three by a combined score of 14-8. Normally an overall margin of that sort (46-17) would result in a four-game sweep or a five-game victory. Not in 1960. Game Seven was as exciting a game as ever played. The Pirates went ahead after two innings, 4 to nothing. The Yankees came back in the tops of the fifth and the sixth, on a home run by Skowron, a single by Mantle and a three-run home run by Berra to take a 5-4 lead. The Yankees stretched the lead to 7-4 in the top of the eighth. The Yankees' chances of winning, per Baseball-Reference's after the fact calculation, reached as high as 94%. In the bottom of the eighth the Pirates scored five runs, featuring a bad hop single that hit Tony Kubek in the throat and capped off by a three-run home run by substitute catcher Hal Smith (Who? Exactly). In the top of the ninth, the Yankees tied the score—singles by Richardson,

pinch hitter Dale Long, and Mantle, followed by a run scoring ground out by Berra. And then the bottom of the ninth: Great fielding but not particularly strong hitting Pirate second baseman Bill Mazeroski hit the second pitch from Ralph Terry deep to left field. Home run. Game over. It is still the only walk off home run to win a World Series. Reportedly, Mickey Mantle was in tears in the clubhouse after the game.

1961 had happier endings. It was the first year of expansion. Ralph Houk replaced Casey Stengel as manager, a change appreciated by most of the players. The race with the Tigers was close until the end of August. The Yankee won their first thirteen games in September and pulled ahead to win comfortably. The Yankees won 109 games, their highest total since 1927, their best winning percentage since 1939 and the most they would win again until 1998. The big news, though, was the home run race with both Mantle and Maris chasing Babe Ruth's venerable record. On September 10, team game 145, Maris had 56 and Mantle had 53. Mantle got sick and missed ten of the Yankees' last twelve games. He finished with 54. Maris carried on and hit number 61 off Tracy Stallard in the fourth inning of the Yankees' final game. It was the only run in a 1-0 victory. Nobody cared about the score. The World Series, against Cincinnati, was almost an afterthought. The Yankees won 4 games to 1.

In 1962, Mantle missed 39 games with various injuries. Maris fell off, almost inevitably, from the year before. The Yankees won 13 games fewer than the year before, the same drop off they had from 1958 to 1959. And they still won the pennant. They took over first place on July 1 and finished five games ahead of the Twins. The World Series was more dramatic. The Yankees beat the Giants four games to three.

They won game seven one to nothing on a complete game shutout by Ralph Terry. On the last play of the game, with two out and men on second and third, Willie McCovey hit a scorching line drive. Bobby Richardson caught it and gave Terry a measure of redemption for 1960.

In 1963 and 1964 the Yankees won the American League pennant both years, their fourth and fifth in a row. In 1963, Mantle missed over 90 games and Maris missed over 70, both with various injuries. Yogi turned 38. The Yankees still won 104 games and finished 10 ½ ahead of the White Sox. Elston Howard was voted the MVP, the fourth straight year a Yankee had won the award (two for Maris and one for Mantle before Howard). Howard was the first African American to win the award in the American League. Ten had already won in the National League, which had been much faster to integrate. In 1964, Yogi Berra took over as manager. The race was closer, although not quite as close as the final one game margin made it seem. In both years the team was carried, in large part, by a pitching staff that was both good and one of the youngest in the Yankees' championship history. Whitey Ford was 34 in 1963 but Ralph Terry was still just 27. Jim Bouton was 24 as was relief putcher Hal Reniff. Al Downing was 22. The next year they were all a year older but 27-year-old Rollie Sheldon and 22 year old Mel Stottlemyre started taking many of the starts that had gone to Terry the year before.

The World Series did not go well. In 1963, the Dodgers, now in Los Angeles, swept the Yankees. Koufax, Drysdale, and Johnny Podres got all but 2 outs of the entire series for the Dodgers and the Yankees scored a grand total of four runs. 1964 was a heart breaker, not quite as painful as 1960 but still

hard to take, a seven-game loss to the Cardinals, with Gibson beating Stottlemyre 7-5 in the final game.

Bad Losses

The 1960 World Series was a very painful loss. Was it the most painful loss ever in Yankee history? At the time I certainly thought so. But I was young and foolish and there was more to come. Now, I would rank it third. Here's my list of the five most painful losses in Yankee history. Honorable mentions go to the seventh games of the 1955, 1957 and 1964 World Series, game five of the 1995 ALDS against Seattle (Don Mattingly's last game), game seven of the 2017 American League Championship Series against Houston and possibly game 2 of the 2007 American League Divisional Series against Cleveland (the game where a swarm of midges broke Joba Chamberlain's attention, letting Cleveland tie a game they eventually won in the 11th). The ratings are based on 1) the importance of the games 2) the closeness of the games 3) the level of expectations for the Yankees and 4) just a little bit extra for the intensity of the rivalry.

1) October 10, 1904: Boston Americans 3, New York Highlanders 2. This is the game where Jack Chesbro's wild pitch gave the Red Sox the pennant. See my discussion of Chesboro for the details.

2) October 10, 1926: St Louis Cardinals 3, New York Yankees 2. I wasn't around for this one, but I have seen the movie—*The Winning Team* starring Ronald Reagan, no less, as Pete Alexander and Doris Day as Mrs. Alexander along with some archival clips of the actual game. As I remember the movie, which is not well, it's decent, a definite step up from *Bedtime for Bonzo*, that Reagan had starred in the previous year. On October 9,

39-year-old Alexander, nearing the end of a brilliant career, had pitched a complete game to tie the World Series at three apiece. In game seven the Yankees took a 1-0 lead on a Babe Ruth home run, then St. Louis went ahead with three runs in the top of the fourth. The Yankees made it 3-2 in the 6th. Then, in the bottom of the seventh the Yankees loaded the bases off of Cardinals starter Jesse Haines—a single by Combs, a sacrifice bunt by Koenig, an intentional walk to Ruth, a groundout by Meusel, a walk to Gehrig. Bases loaded, two out, rookie Tony Lazzeri coming to bat. In comes Ol' Pete, by legend and possibly in fact hung over. A ball. A strike. A long foul ball that misses becoming a grand slam by a few feet. Strike three. In the 9th, Alexander gets out Combs and Koenig, then walks Ruth. With Meusel at bat, Ruth tries to steal second and catcher Bob O'Farrell throws him out. Inning over. Game over. Series over. In almost everything I have ever read about the series, Ruth's attempted steal is depicted as a dumb play. I don't see it. One run down, two out and a man on first? It seems to me one of those fairly rare occasions when even a fifty-fifty chance of stealing is worth the risk. No matter. It was a tough loss.

3) October 13, 1960: Pittsburgh Pirates 10, New York Yankees 9.

2) November 7, 2001: Arizona Diamondbacks 3, New York Yankees 2. It was almost 1960 in reverse. The Diamondbacks outscored the Yankees 37-14. Arizona won games one, three and six by a combined score of 28-3. The Yankees won games three, four and five by 2-1, 4-

3 in 10 innings, and 3-2 in 12 innings. The ending aside, it was one of the best World Series of all time. In game four, with the Yankees down, 3-1 with two out in the ninth, Tino Martinez hit a two run home run to tie the score. In the tenth, Jeter homered with two out to win the game. In game five the Yankees were again trailing by two—this time 2-0—with two out in the bottom of the ninth. Scott Brosius hit a two run home run to tie the game and Alfonso Soriano singled in the winning run in the bottom of the 12th. In game seven, the Yankees were trailing 1-0 in the seventh when Martinez drove in Jeter to tie the score. In the eighth. Soriano homered off Curt Schilling and the Yankees led 2-1. In the bottom of the eighth, Mariano Rivera came in in relief of Mike Stanton who had himself relieved Roger Clemens the inning before. To be clear let me identify him by his full name, The Great Mariano Rivera. That's The Great Mariano Rivera who had appeared in 51 previous postseason games, 77+ innings, and given up a total of 7 runs, 6 earned. That's The Great Mariano Rivera who had appeared in 51 previous postseason games, had won six, had never lost, had saved 24 games and had been credited with four more "holds." That's The Great Mariano Rivera, who had already appeared in three games in the 2001 World Series, won one, saved another, and had given up only two hits and one walk in 5 innings. That Mariano Rivera.

In the bottom of the ninth, Mark Grace led off with a single. Damian Miller laid down a sacrifice bunt. Rivera, a good fielder who had only made one error in his entire major league career to that point, fielded the ball and tossed it to second to get the lead runner. But the ball

fluttered away, leaving men on first and second. Rivera got the next man. Then Tony Womack, who a few years later would make an awful showing in 108 games for the Yankees, doubled to left to tie the score. Two batters later, Luis Gonzalez hit a little broken bat hump backed liner just over a drawn in infield. That one hurt.

The 1960 World Series was worse than the 2001 Series in one way. In 1960, the Yankees hammered the Pirates and deserved to win. In 2001, the Yankees were lucky that they were still playing when game seven came around. Still, I think the 2001 series was more painful. Part of it was seeing Rivera lose. Rivera really was the best postseason pitcher ever. It's a pity that he should be remembered, even in part, for a dramatic loss. The Yankees themselves had won four of the previous five World Series, including three in a row, and had won eleven consecutive post season series. The Yankees had established a level of postseason success equivalent or greater to the 1936-39 or 1949-53 Yankees. I had not expected to see that in my lifetime, certainly not in a three-tier playoff system. They seemed invincible. To see that come to an end was devastating.

1) October 20, 2004: Boston Red Sox 10, New York Yankees 3. This one is so painful, the wounds so fresh, I can barely write about it. The other games on the list were all close. This one wasn't but it was game seven of the American League Championship Series. The Yankees had taken a three to zero series lead, outscoring the Red Sox 32-16. The Red Sox came from behind in both games four and five, winning 6-4 in twelve innings

and 5-4 in fourteen. They won game six 4-2. In game seven the Red Sox scored two runs on a David Ortiz home run in the first (off Kevin Brown) and four more on a Johnny Damon grand slam in the second. The game was too painful to watch but too important to turn off. I remember it as the most depressing seven and a half innings of baseball I have ever forced myself to watch. The Yankees became the first team to blow a three-game lead in a postseason series. The Red Sox went on to end the "Curse of Babe Ruth," winning their first World Series since selling Ruth to the Yankees, 85 years earlier. It was awful.

Maris, Ruth and the Asterisk

When Aaron Judge broke Roger Maris' team and league records for most home runs in a year, he was celebrated as no Yankee had been since Mickey Mantle and possibly since Joe DiMaggio or Babe Ruth. Roger Maris himself was treated very differently when he broke Ruth's record in 1961.

Maris had the misfortune to break Ruth's record during the very first expansion year. Ruth's 60 home runs in 1927 was as close to a sacred number as baseball has ever had. There were, I think, four different reasons people thought Maris was committing sacrilege. 1) Maris wasn't as good an overall hitter as Ruth. 2) Maris wasn't Mickey Mantle who became an object of sentimental reverence in direct proportion to his getting older and slower. 3) Maris broke the record in a 162-game season while Ruth set his record during a 154-game schedule. Ford Frick, the Commissioner of Baseball, declared in a press conference that there should be "some distinctive mark on the record books to show that Babe Ruth's record was set under a 154-game schedule." That "distinctive mark" was widely

interpreted as an asterisk, a term Frick never used. Nevertheless, most record books did list two separate records for most home runs in a season, one for a 154-game season, the other for a 162- game season.   4) Although the voices weren't quite as loud as those pointing to the extra eight games, there were still plenty of voices shouting that Maris was batting against pitchers whose quality had been diluted by expansion.

Points 1) and 2) are both true but beside the point. Nobody was claiming that Maris was as good as Ruth or that, like Mantle, he had been a lifelong Yankee. Points 3) and 4) are also both true but partial. Points 3) and 4) are both about *context*, exactly the sort of thing analytics has looked at much more systematically than anyone did in 1961. Schedule length matters as does the quality of pitching. But so do park effects and general offensive context, whether as matter of the physical composition of the ball, offensive strategies or, for all I know, stages of the moon. It is also exactly these issues that Baseball-Reference's "neutralization" tool is designed to consider. So, let's convert all the Yankee home run hitters to a 154-game schedule and the general offensive context of 1927, the year Ruth set his record. (Converting to a different year would change the totals but not the ranking.) I'm including a lot more than just Ruth and Maris because I think the whole thing is pretty interesting.   The third and fourth columns show "neutralized" numbers. Columns five and six show, respectively, the actual games played and the actual home runs hit.

Name	Year	Age	G	PA	HR	Gact	Hract
Aaron Judge	2022	30	149	683	64	157	62
Roger Maris	1961	26	153	684	63	161	61
Luke Voit	2020	29	144	624	62	56	22
Babe Ruth	1927	32	150	677	60	151	60
Babe Ruth	1921	26	152	677	56	152	59
Mickey Mantle	1961	29	145	638	56	153	54
Babe Ruth	1928	33	154	686	55	154	54
Mickey Mantle	1956	24	149	665	54	150	52
Babe Ruth	1920	25	142	611	53	142	54
Alex Rodriguez	2007	31	150	684	53	158	54
Aaron Judge	2017	25	147	656	52	155	52
Lou Gehrig	1934	31	154	695	49	154	49
Alex Rodriguez	2005	29	154	703	49	162	48
Babe Ruth	1926	31	152	653	48	152	47
Babe Ruth	1929	34	136	584	48	135	46
Babe Ruth	1930	35	145	644	47	145	49
Lou Gehrig	1927	24	154	697	47	155	47
Mickey Mantle	1958	26	149	690	47	150	42
Babe Ruth	1931	36	144	659	46	145	46
Lou Gehrig	1931	28	154	732	46	155	46
Babe Ruth	1924	29	153	672	45	153	46
Lou Gehrig	1936	33	154	688	45	155	49
Mickey Mantle	1960	28	153	673	44	153	40

Reggie Jackson	1980	34	136	597	44	143	41
Curtis Granderson	2012	31	152	665	44	160	43
Tino Martinez	1997	29	150	660	44	158	44
Joe DiMaggio	1937	22	149	667	43	151	46
Roger Maris	1960	25	136	602	43	136	39
Bobby Murcer	1972	26	152	711	42	153	33
Jason Giambi	2003	32	148	672	42	156	41

Bet you weren't expecting to see Luke Voit in third. Some of that is what happens when you get a small sample from a COVID shortened season. Some of it is that Voit really was a terrific home run hitter. I also like the boost Bobby Murcer gets, as Murcer played in extreme low offense years that disguise just how good he was. In any case, Aaron Judge is still in first and Maris is still in second, now three home runs ahead of Ruth. Maris deserved better than an asterisk or even a separate line in the record books. By the way, Ruth's 1927 record lasted 34 years. Maris' record lasted 37 as the major league record and lasted over 60 years as the American League record. Give the man his due.

What It Was Like to Be a Yankees Fan in the Early 1960's

"New York Yankees press agents have been spreading the word around all these that Yankee fans are the smartest, happiest, tallest, best-dressed, best-fed, best-scrubbed fans in the major leagues…. Wall Street bankers supposedly back the

Yankees; Smith girls approve of them; God, Brooks Brothers and United States Steel are believed to be solidly in the Yankees' corner".

GAY TALESE, NYT, June 29, 1958, p 196

I'm part of this story but it isn't about me. It's about my Benefactor.

For reasons I no longer remember, I was at home all summer in 1963. Most of my friends were away doing whatever it was they were doing. On July 31, I got on a bus, probably in White Plains and took it, I think, to the Woodlawn stop on the IRT where I caught the 4 train to Yankee Stadium. I was by myself. For a fifteen-year-old who had lived a sheltered suburban life, it was a grand adventure. As I walked up to the Stadium to buy a ticket, somebody (an usher? a security guard?) called me aside. "Hey, kid, you want a ticket?" He explained that the owner of a box wasn't using all his tickets that day and had asked him to give them away. I'm not stupid (or, generally, suspicious). I said yes.

I walked into the Stadium and discovered that my ticket was in the first row on the third base line. Sitting behind me was a couple who seemed beneficiaries of the same source as had gifted me. Sitting next to me was a man who, I figured immediately, was our benefactor. He was, as I remember, middle aged, with an impeccable haircut, wearing a suit and tie. I thanked him. He simply nodded in acknowledgment. We did not talk at all for the remainder of the game. As I remember, my benefactor neither ate nor drank nor cheered.

The game was close. The Yankees scored one run in the third and another in the fourth. Kansas City tied the game with two in the top of the seventh. In the ninth, Tom Tresh came up

to bat with the score tied and two out. Tresh, then in his second year, seemed to me the very embodiment of Yankeeness, a switch hitter like Mantle, who had stepped in the year before to play shortstop when Tony Kubek was in the army and become the rookie of the year. Tresh also seemed to me clean cut, which, to a 15-year-old probably meant the he was white, had light brown hair, and did not obviously belong to any ethnic group. (This was four weeks before the famous March on Washington and well before the movements that would challenge my unthought biases and those of millions of others as well.)   Most of all, Tresh seemed self-controlled, a professional, confident, sure that success would be his. Tresh promptly hit a home run over the left field wall to win the game. My benefactor, sitting just to my left, allowed himself a half smile, stood up and walked off. That's what it was like to be a Yankee fan in the early 1960's.

(How do I remember these details sixty years later? I don't. I remember the ticket, the tie and jacket, the half-smile … and that Tresh hit the walk off homer to left field. The walk off was the key. Tresh had three with the Yankees. It was easy to find them all on Baseball-Reference and then narrow it down to a specific date with a full play-by-play account.)

A 39 Year Winning Streak

1964 was the final year of one of the most extraordinary winning streaks in the history of baseball, probably in the history of American professional sports.   It was the 39th consecutive year the Yankees had finished above .500. It was also the 39th consecutive year the Yankees had finished third or better,   During that span the Yankees finished first 26 times—that's two-thirds of the years—and won 19 World Series.   Their overall winning percentage was .623.   That

I

comes out to the equivalent of winning 101 games in a 162-game schedule, every year for 39 years. The second longest streak of consecutive years above .500 belongs to the current Yankees, 30 and counting. After that the next longest streak is 18 years, by the Baltimore Orioles from 1968-1985. The White Sox had 17 consecutive winning seasons from 1951 through 1967. Five other teams, including the Red Sox twice, had consecutive year winning streaks of 15 or 16 years. That's it. You could divide the Yankees' 39-year streak in half and it would still be longer than any other team's.

So far as I know, there isn't as long a streak even in other professional leagues. The Patriots and the Bears and the Cowboys don't come close in the NFL. Neither do that Lakers or Celtics in the NBA. The second longest consecutive year streak I can find in any league is the NHL Canadiens, from 1951 through 1982. It's possible to find a longer streak in college sports, but not easy. In basketball, neither Kentucky nor Kansas nor Duke nor UNC nor UCLA has had a streak as long as the Yankees. Even the UConn women's basketball team is only at 37 years, although they're still counting.   In college football, neither Notre Dame nor Michigan nor Ohio State has done it. Alabama did top the Yankees' streak but barely, forty years from 1911 through 1950.

The Yankee streak is unambiguously an organizational accomplishment. The last man playing from the 1926 team that started the streak was Lou Gehrig. The last player from Gehrig's last year (1939) was DiMaggio. And the last player from DiMaggio's last year (1951) was Mantle. That's turning the team over completely three times and still winning every year.

Below, teams with 15 or more years in a row above .500. The Yankees' streak from 1993 is, of course ongoing.

TEAM	First Year	Last Year	Years	1st	League Champ	World Series Wins	W/L Pct
Yankees	1926	1964	39	26	26	19	0.623
Yankees	1993	2023	31	17	7	5	0.584
Orioles	1968	1985	18	7	5	2	0.586
White Sox	1951	1967	17	1	1	0	0.562
Red Sox	1967	1982	16	2	2	0	0.551
Giants	1958	1973	16	2	1	0	0.547
Braves	1991	2005	15	14	5	1	0.606
Cardinals	1939	1953	15	4	4	3	0.599
Red Sox	1997	2011	15	1	2	2	0.561

Underrated Catcher: Elston Howard
Honorable Mention

Howard surprised me—although I guess that's part of the point of being underrated.　How, I thought, could Howard be underrated? Quite the reverse: he won the MVP award in 1963 and finished 3rd in 1964 even though he never finished better than 8th in WAR.　My bad.　I forgot two things.　One was that Howard was the first Black player with the Yankees and the Yankees resistance to integration probably delayed Howard's making the major leagues for at least a year or two.　When Howard did finally join the Yankees, in 1955 at the age of 26, he found himself stuck behind Berra at catcher.　From 1955 through 1959, Howard shuttled between catcher, the outfield

and occasional stops at first base, playing between 97 and 125 games. Even when Howard became the Yankees' primary catcher, in 1960, he played only 107 games. When Howard finally played 129 games in 1961, he hit .348 with 21 home runs. He was 32 years old. That's old for anyone to become a regular. It's especially old for catchers, whose careers are usually short. If we look at the list of career WAR for catchers, Howard ranks a not very impressive 48th. If, however, we look at WAR just between the ages of 31 and 35, the stretch when Howard finally got his chance. Howard ranks second, ahead of Berra and Fisk and Dickey and Bench and Piazza and everyone else besides the Yankees' own Jorge Posada. He deserves some credit.

Overrated Second Base: Bobby Richardson

Who Overrated Him: MVP voters, All-star voters, Ralph Houk

Bobby Richardson was a bit player on the Yankees' 1955 and 1956 pennant winners, a semi-regular on the 1957 and 1958 pennant winners and then a regular from 1959 through 1966, a span including five more pennants. He was, by all accounts, a gentleman, a milkshake drinker on a team of carousers, a committed member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Two of his five children were pastors and a third was married to a pastor. In 1963, he won the Lou Gehrig memorial award, an annual award for contributions to community and philanthropy. (Full disclosure: Other winners have included Pete Rose, currently banned from baseball, Steve Garvey, who turned out to be nowhere near as clean as his carefully cultivated image, and Curt Schilling, well-known as a collector of NAZI memorabilia as well as for a remarkable range of offensive statements about race and sexuality. Other winners have been more deserving, and I have no reason whatsoever

to suspect Richardson's character.) Character aside, Richardson is famous for his performance in the 1960 World Series, where he had 11 hits, a grand slam home run, 12 RBI in a seven-game series. Even though the Yankees eventually lost that series (on the dramatic walk off home run by Bill Mazeroski), Richardson was named the series MVP, the only player on a losing team so honored. Two years later, Richardson caught the line drive from Willie McCovey with men on second a third that ended the almost equally dramatic seventh game of the 1962 World series, a one-nothing win for the Yankees. At the time of his retirement, Richardson had played more games at second base for the Yankees than anyone else other than Tony Lazzeri. Richardson was a five-time gold glove winner, an eight-time all-star and in his best season, 1962, the runner up (to Mickey Mantle) for the Most Valuable Player award for the entire American League. And there's the rub.

In the usually sober SABR Baseball Biography Project, Len Pasculli writes that, "Bobby Richardson was inarguably one of the best second sackers in his day, and a convincing case could be made that he is the greatest all-time Yankee second baseman after Hall of Famer Tony Lazzeri." With all due respect to both Richardson and Pasculli as well as MVP and all-star voters, I think it would be easier to make the case that Richardson was the *worst* second baseman in Yankee history.

Start with WAR. Remember that it includes, or at least tries to include, defensive value, which should credit Richardson who probably really was a good fielder. Here's a chart of career WAR for the 17 players who've played 300 or more games for the Yankees, more than half of those at second base.

Player	WAR	G	From	To
Willie Randolph	54.0	1694	1976	1988
Tony Lazzeri	46.4	1659	1926	1937
Robinson Cano	44.4	1374	2005	2013
Joe Gordon	36.8	1000	1938	1946
Snuffy Stirnweiss	28.8	884	1943	1950
Horace Clarke	16.0	1230	1965	1974
Jimmy Williams	14.5	685	1903	1907
Del Pratt	13.2	420	1918	1920
Aaron Ward	11.9	908	1917	1926
Alfonso Soriano	10.6	626	1999	2014
DJ LeMahieu	10.4	606	2019	2023
Steve Sax	10.0	471	1989	1991
Bobby Richardson	8.1	1412	1955	1966
Chuck Knoblauch	7.5	539	1998	2001
Jerry Coleman	6.5	723	1949	1957
Billy Martin	5.9	527	1950	1957
Pat Kelly	4.7	591	1991	1997

Richardson isn't second on the chart. He isn't third or fourth or even fifth. He's 13th. Richardson managed to run up the grand total of 8.1 WAR in over 1400 games. That means that over the entire course of his career that he added roughly 8 wins to the Yankee total beyond what a decent Triple A second baseman would have produced. But don't stop there. Notice that Richardson played more games for the Yankees than any of the other second basemen beside Willie Randolph and Lazzeri. In roughly the same number of games, Robinson Cano added about 40 wins. Joe Gordon added roughly 36 wins in exactly 1000 games. Even the much-maligned Horace Clarke added more wins in fewer games. Then look at the four players on the chart with lower WAR totals than Richardson (Chuck Knoblauch, who stopped being able to throw a ball from second to first, Jerry Coleman, who could not hit, Billy Martin, who was a better manager than player, and Pat Kelly, the last starting second baseman on a Yankee team with a losing record). Only Coleman played in half as many games as Richardson and that barely. All four, on a per game basis, produced more WAR than Richardson. On a per game basis, Richardson is dead last. It gets worse.

Switch from WAR to WAA (wins above average). WAR measures a player's contribution in comparison to a hypothetical "replacement level" player. In contrast, Wins Above Average compares a player to a statistically average major league player. A team of average players would, no surprise, win (on average) exactly half its games. In effect, WAR gives more credit for longevity than does WAA, for players who drag out their careers even when they are below the major league average but still better than a minor leaguer. It is hard to have a negative WAR. In principle (although there

are occasional exceptions) a player with a negative WAR would get cut, replaced by someone else, easily available, who would be no worse and possibly better. That's what "replacement level" means. In contrast, WAA credits longevity less. By definition, WAA counts as many wins *below* average as it counts wins above average*.* For a team like the Yankees, who have been in near constant contention for over a century, being better than a replacement level player isn't enough. Sometimes, simply being average—a higher standard—isn't enough. At least arguably, WAA does a better job of measuring contributions to actually winning a championship rather than simply winning 30% of a team's games. And here is a list, same standards of inclusion as the last one (300+ games, more than half at second) of Wins Above Average.

Player	WAA	G	From	To
Willie Randolph	30.6	1694	1976	1988
Robinson Cano	23.8	1374	2005	2013
Joe Gordon	23.3	1000	1938	1946
Tony Lazzeri	20.2	1659	1926	1937
Snuffy Stirnweiss	17.7	884	1943	1950
Del Pratt	6.4	420	1918	1920
DJ LeMahieu	4.6	606	2019	2023
Jimmy Williams	3.4	685	1903	1907
Steve Sax	3.2	471	1989	1991

Alfonso Soriano	1.8	626	1999	2014
Billy Martin	0.1	527	1950	1957
Chuck Knoblauch	-0.7	539	1998	2001
Jerry Coleman	-0.8	723	1949	1957
Horace Clarke	-1.4	1230	1965	1974
Aaron Ward	-1.8	908	1917	1926
Pat Kelly	-2.0	591	1991	1997
Bobby Richardson	-9.1	1412	1955	1966

Here, Richardson is dead last, at 9.1 wins *below* average. That does not mean, in a strict sense, that Richardson was the worst second baseman in Yankee history. That honor likely goes to one of many bit players who never got the chance to play in 100 games, let alone 1400. No matter: Richardson did more to keep the Yankees under .500 than any other second baseman in their history. And one more step. Richardson's *minus* 9.1 WAA is the lowest of any player at any position in Yankee history. Hal Chase is second at -7.7. You could make a case that Richardson was the least valuable player in the entire history of the Yankees.

How did so many voters, for MVP, for all-star games, get it so wrong? Casey Stengel came close to getting it right: "He doesn't drink, he doesn't smoke, he doesn't chew, he doesn't stay out late, and he still can't hit .250." (Credit to Len Pasculli for including the quote in his SABR biography. If I'm going to blast Pasculli for massively overrating Richardson, I should

also give him credit for what he gets right.) Maybe you think Casey was being harsh. After all, Richardson was actually a career .265 hitter and twice topped .300. Maybe, but I think Casey was probably a little generous. It's not just that Richardson hit .265. He hit a remarkably empty .265. Richardson had virtually no power. Despite his famous display in the 1960 World Series, Richardson hit a grand total of 34 regular season home runs, a little less than one every 40 games. He didn't hit many doubles or triples either. So far as I know, Richardson had good speed. He did steal in double digits for three straight years when nobody else besides Maury Wills was running much. But his career total of 73 stolen bases is matched by 48 times caught stealing. That's a lousy ratio. Richardson did lead the league in sacrifice hits twice but that's a mixed bag. These days nobody thinks the sacrifice hit is a very good strategy except in very limited circumstances. I would add that it's a particularly bad strategy when you have Mantle and Maris batting behind you, as Richardson did in his league leading years. And worst of all, Richardson rarely walked. His top total was 37 in two different years. The result: Richardson's lifetime On Base Percentage was .299. Remember that's OBP, not batting average. Sure, nobody was paying much attention to OBP in the 1950s and '60s. But we know better now. A recognition of the importance of walks is about as consistent a finding as there is from nearly half a century's worth of baseball analytics. Remember those 17 second basemen who played at least 300 games for the Yankees? Richardson's OBP was the lowest of the bunch, lower than Horace Clarke's or Pat Kelley's or even Jerry Coleman's. He couldn't hit *and* he couldn't (or wouldn't) walk.

1962, the year Richardson finished second in the MVP vote, pretty much sums it up. Remember, this was clearly Richardson's best year. Stengel had occasionally batted Richardson lead off but much more often batted him seventh or eighth. In 1957, he even batted him 9th a couple of times, each time behind Don Larsen, a good hitting pitcher. In 1961, Ralph Houk replaced Stengel as manager and introduced a kinder and gentler regime—or at least one with a much more stable lineup. In 1961, Richardson batted leadoff in 117 games. In 1962, Houk batted Richardson first or second in all but four games. And in those four games? Richardson batted third. Richardson did hit just over .300 in 1962. He led the league in hits with 209 (as well as sacrifice hits). Not bad. But all things considered Richardson was roughly a league average hitter, the only year he was even that good. Richardson did lead the league in hits but that was in large part because he also led the league in plate appearances and at bats. Richardson also led the league in outs made in 1962 as he did in 1961, 1964, and 1965. (He missed tying for the lead in 1963 by one out.) His career best .337 OBA in 1962 was barely above league average and exactly equal to the Yankees' team average. Richardson did score 99 runs (also a career best) in 1962, good for fourth in the league. But he did this with more plate appearances than anyone else in the league and he did it with Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris, Elston Howard, Tom Tresh and Moose Skowron batting after him. It's not so glittering an accomplishment as it seems at first—and even at first it's not all that glittering. But my point isn't that Richardson was mediocre, although he was that. It's that he was mediocre *and* overrated. When it came to the MVP vote Richardson finished second to Mickey Mantle. It was the one MVP award Mantle

won that might have been undeserved. Mantle did not lead the league in WAR. He finished at 6.0, just behind Brooks Robinson (6.1) and two pitchers, Hank Aguirre (6.2) and Camillo Pascual (6.1). Given the closeness of WAR, that Mantle played only 123 games (and thus led everyone but Aguirre in WAA), and, most importantly, that the Yankees won the pennant it was at very least reasonable for Mantle to win. But it was not reasonable for Richardson to finish second or to get five first place votes out of a total of sixteen. By WAR, Richardson was the 36th best player in the American League. Richardson wasn't even the second-best player on the Yankees. By WAR, just on the Yankees, Richardson was behind Mantle but also behind Whitey Ford, Clete Boyer, Tom Tresh, Ralph Terry, Elston Howard and Roger Maris. And that was his best season.

CHAPTER 13
THE WILDERNESS YEARS: 1965-75

The Yankees were busy off the field after their near miss in the 1964 Series. Dan Topping and Del Webb, who had owned the team since 1947, sold the Yankees to CBS. And Ralph Houk, who stayed on as General Manager, fired Yogi Berra, after one year as manager, and hired Johnny Keane, the manager of the Cardinals team that had just beaten the Yankees in the World Series.

Everything else seemed pretty much the same. Mantle was back. So were Maris and Ford and Howard and a host of young stars—Joe Peptone and Tom Tresh and pitchers Jim Bouton, Al Downing and Mel Stottlemyre, all still 26 or under. The writers did see Baltimore and Chicago both challenging the Yankees but the Yankees were—how could they not be?—favorites to win an unprecedented sixth straight league championship. All the pieces were in place. It didn't happen. The Yankees started slowly, went above .500 for the first time all season in early August, and then slipped back to finish at 77-85. This was the Yankees' first losing season since 1925. They finished in sixth (in a ten-team league), 25 games out of first. They had not been within eight games of first since the middle of May.

1966 was even worse. With their old stars starting to break down and the new stars failing to take their place, the Yankees started slowly under Keene. When the team had won only four games of their first twenty, General Manager Ralph Houk replaced Kene with … Manager Ralph Houk. It didn't help. The Yankees finished last, for the first time since 1912,

tenth in a ten-team league. 1967 was only slightly better, a ninth-place finish with 72 wins, up two from the year before.

In 1968, the team revived behind a group of young pitchers including Stan Bahnsen (23), Mel Stottlemyre and Fritz Peterson (both 26) and two emerging stars in the outfield, Roy White (24) and Bobby Murcer (22). The team finished at 83 and 79, the first time over .500 since 1964. They fell back very slightly in 1969, finishing a single game under .500 and then took a leap forward in 1970.

The 1970 team still featured White and Murcer as well as Peterson, Stottlemyre and Bahnsen, but added catcher Thurman Munson. Munson was elected rookie of the year, the first Yankee to win that honor since Tresh in 1962.   In the middle of June, the Yankees pulled within 1 ½ games of first place Baltimore but Baltimore would pull away as the season wore on. The Yankees finished 93-69, good for second in their division, but a distant 15 games behind the Orioles.

From 1971 through 1975, the Yankees hovered around .500, never finishing more than 2 games below .500 (80-82 in 1973), never more than 16 games above (89-73 in 1974). In 1973, George Steinbrenner led a group of investors who bought the Yankees from CBS for the bargain price of 8.8 million dollars, less than CBS had paid nine years earlier, about one quarter of what they would pay, some years later, for the services of Gerrit Cole for a single season. At the press conference announcing the purchase, Steinbrenner promised: "we plan on absentee ownership as far as running the Yankees. We're not going to pretend we're something we aren't. I'll stick to building ships." Yeah, right.

In 1974 and 1975, the Yankees played in Shea Stadium while Yankee stadium was being renovated.

In 1974, the Yankees made a run at the division championship, under manager Bill Virdon. They were in first place (by a game) as late as September 26, but Baltimore won its last nine games (three by walk offs) and finished two games ahead of the Yankees. The Yankees were not quite as good as their record suggested. They outscored opponents by only 48 runs (a performance that generates a Pythagorean projection of only 86 wins) and their ability to stay close to first had as much to do with the mediocrity of other teams as the Yankees' excellence. Baltimore's winning percentage (.562) was and still is the lowest winning percentage of any team to lead the American League.

In 1975, the Yankees were, for the first time in a decade, favorites to win their division. And the Yankees did contend again, at least for a while. On June 28, the Yankees were in first, a half-game ahead of the Red Sox. But a series of injuries, particularly to the outfield (Bonds, White, Piniella, and Maddox) crippled their chances. After June 28, the Yankees lost 20 of their next 32 games. Still new owner George Steinbrenner fired Virdon and hired Billy Martin, for the first time. It didn't help, at least not that year, as the Yankees finished third, with 83 wins, a dozen behind the Red Sox.

The CBS years (plus a couple) were not awful. The Yankees had a few stars. White, Murcer, Munson, and Stottlemyre were all very good. For the eleven years from 1965 through 1975, the Yankees were seven games over .500. For the eight years 1968 through 1975, they were 52 games over .500, although in a league with competition diluted by expansion, fourth best in the American League after Baltimore, Oakland, and Boston. But there were no World Series wins, no World Series appearances, no first-place finishes. They weren't

awful. They were mediocre. For a team that had dominated baseball for half a century that was a big comedown.

The Collapse

What did happen to the Yankees in 1965?

I know that looks like one question. It's really two. One question is why the Yankees fell off between 1964 and 1965. The other is why they did not recover quickly as they had in the past. The first question is easier to answer than the second.

The Yankees went from 99 wins in 1964 to 75 in 1965, a drop of 24 wins. That was the biggest drop in team history since 1912 and still the second biggest now (if you leave out strike or COVID shortened seasons).

There's a conventional explanation of what happened between 1964 and 1965. The Yankees got old. That's not quite right but it points in the right direction. Neither the 1964 nor the 1965 Yankees was an old team. Look at the team ages, position by position in both years. (300+ at bats for batters, 100+ innings for pitchers)

	1964	1965		1964	1965
C Elston Howard	35	36	SP Jim Bouton	25	26
1B Joe Pepitone	23	24	SP Whitey Ford	35	36
2b B. Richardson	28	29	SP Al Downing	23	24
SS Tony Kubek	28	29	SP Ralph Terry	28	xxx
3B Clete Boyer	27	28	SP Rollie Sheldon	27	xxx
Util Phil Linz	25	26	SP Mel Stottlemyre	xxx	22
LF Tom Tresh	25	26	SP Bill Stafford	xxx	26
CF Mickey Mantle	32	33			
RF Roger Maris	29	30			
OF Hector Lopez	34	35			

Those are not old teams. The average age of position players (weighted by at bats) was 28.1 in 1964, second highest

in the league but only slightly above the league average of 27.5. In 1965, the Yankees were again second highest in the league but still only 28.3, as younger players got more of the playing time. Pepitone, Richardson, Kubek and Boyer—the entire infield—plus Tresh were all under 30 both years. And the pitching staff was even younger—an average of 27.0 (weighted by innings pitched) in 1964 and 27.2 in 1965. The league average for the two years combined was also 27.2. Bouton, Downing, Stottlemyre and Stafford weren't just under 30. They were all under 27.

The Yankees were not an old team, but they did have old players at key positions, particularly Howard at catcher and Mantle in center. Some of the drop off between 1964 and 1965 was simply bad luck. Comparing records by Pythagorean Theorem, the drop off was 16 games, still a lot but also a lot less than the drop off (24 games) in actual wins. Comparing records by WAA, which traces the Pythagorean Theorem, but not perfectly, the drop off was only 12 games (from 11.2 to negative 1.1). Mantle (-2.9 in WAA year over year) and Howard (-3.9) account for more than half the decline. Mantle was only 33 but Howard was 36, an age at which very few catchers remain productive. Another loss came from Roger Maris (-1.9) who was injured much of the year and whose absence created more playing time for 35-year-old Hector Lopez, a below average player. The pitching staff in 1965 was almost as good as it had been in 1964 (8 WAA instead of 9). I still think Mantle and Howard were underrated, but if you want to blame anyone for 1965 Mantle and Howard are the leading candidates.

The decline of Mantle and Howard explains a big part of the drop off from 1964 to 1965. It does not explain the Yankees' failure to recover. The Yankees also had big drops

in 1925 (20 games), 1940 (18 games) and 1959 (13 games). Each time the Yankees came back to win the pennant the next year. Not in 1965: They didn't win again for over a decade. Players get old all the time. Aging, by one year, every year, is even more certain than death and taxes. Babe Ruth got old. Gehrig got sick. DiMaggio got old and so did Bill Dickey and Berra and Mariano Rivera and Derek Jeter. The Yankees didn't exactly replace Ruth or Gehrig or even DiMaggio, who was followed very closely by Mantle. Each had a unique set of skills that were, in a literal sense, irreplaceable. But the Yankees did have a steady stream of stars—not just Ruth and Gehrig and DiMaggio and Mantle but also Tony Lazzeri and Lefty Gomez and Joe Gordon and Charlie Keller and Whitey Ford and, for that matter, Elston Howard. It is the Yankees' long gray line. But that line came to a halt in 1965. Stottlemyre and, later, Roy White and Bobby Murcer were all good players, but they weren't enough to lift the Yankees above .500 for several years and weren't enough to win a pennant until Stottlemyre and Murcer were gone and White was past his peak. Why the Yankees did not come back is the harder question, if only because trying to explain why something didn't happen is almost always harder than explaining why something did happen.

There's a conventional wisdom here, too, sort of. It's that George Weiss and Dan Topping, knowing they were going to sell to CBS, had let the farm system rot. Or maybe it's that, having let the farm system rot, agreed to sell to CBS. But Marty Appel, in his excellent *Pinstripe Empire* is skeptical of either explanation. "Did they cut back on scouts? No. Did they reduce the number of farm clubs? No. Did they cut back on bonuses? No."

Appel proposes two other explanations. One is that the Yankees long reluctance to sign Black players finally caught up with them. Appel is right about this but it was also true of the American League more generally. In 1965, the National League had Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, Billy Williams, Jimmy Wynn, Roberto Clemente, Richie Allen, Willie McCovey, Joe Morgan, Felipe Alou, Vada Pinson, Bill White, Maurie Wills, Frank Robinson, Juan Marichal, and Bob Gibson. That includes nine Hall of Famers on a list of every player with a WAR above 5. The American League had Zoilo Versalles and Tony Oliva of the Twins, both born in Cuba, and Don Buford of the White Sox. That's it. That may explain why the National League won 19 of 20 all star games from 1963 through 1982 but it doesn't explain the Yankees' decline within the American League.

Appel's second argument is more convincing. It's that 1965 was the first year of the amateur draft. Held in June of 1965 and lasting a whopping 72 rounds—although with only the Orioles and Astros picking over the last 20 or so rounds—the draft made it harder for rich teams, which is to say the Yankees, to stockpile talent. The problem with this explanation is that the timing isn't quite right. The effects of the draft on major league rosters would take at least a few years to settle in, by which time the Yankees had recovered from their lows. Still, the years from 1965, the beginning of the amateur draft, through 1976, the beginning of free agency, are likely the years that money was *least* able to produce a winning team. Look at the teams that dominated those years—the Baltimore Orioles (four-time AL champions), Oakland (three straight World Series champions), the Cincinnati Reds (four-time NL champions),

Pittsburgh and Minnesota. There isn't a big market team among them.

Beware of explanations that begin, "It's no coincidence." They're the sort of explanations social scientists use when they think somebody or somebodies did something to someone else or some group of elses but can't find any evidence of intention. They're the sort of arguments orange haired former presidents make when they want to claim a conspiracy when there's no evidence of anyone actually conspiring. And still … An amateur draft intended to increase "competitive balance?" A free agency system that tilted the advantage back to rich teams? And this when the Yankees had their worst decade in over half a century? I can't avoid it. It's no coincidence.

The Yankee Owners, Best to Worst
Jake Ruppert (and Til Huston), 1915-1939
Del Webb and Dan Topping, 1945-1964
Ruppert Family, 1939-1945
George Steinbrenner 1973-2010
Steinbrenner Family, 2010--
CBS, 1964-1973
Frank Ferrell and Bill Devery, 1903-1915

Do I have to explain?

Underrated Corner Outfield: Roy White
Who Underrated Him: Everybody

If I were sitting down to design an underrated player, I would give him the following characteristics. I would make him a quiet type, the type who shows up, does his job, and doesn't make a lot of fuss. I would make him a consistent player, somebody who has a series of good years but never a freak

great season. I would put a lot of his value in an ability to get on base, particularly from walks. I would let him hit for a little power but not a lot. I would make him a good base runner but not a big base stealer.   I would have him play a low-profile position (left field, second base but not shortstop or center) and I would make him a good fielder but not a flashy one. I would have him play for mediocre teams. And, most importantly, I would place him in a low offensive environment. Roy White checks every box.

     White joined the Yankees in 1965, the year after the Yankees' incredible run of 29 AL championships in 44 years. By the time the Yankees won again, in 1976, White was 32 and beginning the downside of his career. From 1965 through 1975, the Yankees' Dark Age, White led the team in WAR and WAA. He did not lead the team in home runs. (That was Bobby Murcer.) He did not lead the team in batting average.   Elliott Maddox, Ron Bloomberg, Danny Cater, Thurman Munson, Murcer, and Chris Chambliss all did better. White didn't lead the team in OPS or OPS+. He never led the league in anything except once in runs (1976), once in At Bats (1973), once in walks (1972) and, fittingly, twice in sacrifice flies and twice in games played. What did White lead the team in? He was the most valuable base runner on the team (I'm adding together baserunning and keeping out of double plays), 33 runs above average. He was also 31 defensive runs above average as a left fielder, the third best total on the team after Craig Nettles and Jerry Kenny. He led in walks, almost twice as many as the runner up (Horace Clarke). Those are the "little things." They add up.

     The kicker, though, is that White played in some of the worst hitting environments since the end of the dead ball era in

1920.   In my comment on Mantle, I introduced Baseball-Reference's "neutralization" tool.   It helps explain Mantle's apparent fall off after 1962.   Apply it to Roy White and the effects are even more dramatic.   Below are White's basic statistics, year by year, for his actual career, for his career "neutralized" to 1956, roughly average year, and "neutralized" to 2000, a very good hitter's year.

		Actual			Neutral to 1956			Neutral to 2000		
	G	BA	HR	RBI	BA	HR	RBI	BA	HR	RBI
1965	14	.333	0	3	.351	0	3	.371	0	3
1966	115	.225	7	20	.240	8	22	.253	9	27
1967	70	.224	2	18	.248	2	21	.263	2	25
1968	159	.267	17	62	.304	19	79	.320	22	94
1969	130	.290	7	74	.304	7	78	.319	8	22
1970	162	.296	22	94	.308	22	98	.324	25	116
1971	147	.292	19	84	.316	20	96	.333	23	114
1972	155	.270	10	54	.302	12	69	.318	13	81
1973	162	.246	18	60	.259	18	64	.273	21	76
1974	136	.275	7	43	.291	7	46	.307	8	55
1975	148	.290	12	59	.300	13	61	.316	14	72
1976	156	.286	14	65	.306	15	73	.322	16	86
1977	143	.268	14	52	.270	13	50	.285	15	60
1978	103	.269	8	43	.284	9	46	.300	10	55
1979	81	.215	3	27	.212	3	26	.223	3	30
162 Game Average		.271	14	65	.289	15	75	.304	16	84

Put Roy White in 2000, and he would have had 9 full seasons hitting over .300, four seasons with 20 or more home runs, 2 seasons with 100+ RBI.   He also would have had six years scoring more than 100 runs and a lifetime OBA of .398.   He would move from 13th to 9th on the Yankees all-time list for

runs scored and from 20th to 15th on the all-time RBI list (with everyone else also "neutralized").

White finished in the top ten in the league in WAR twice (1970 and 1971) and in the top ten among position players four times (including a second to Nettles, then still with Cleveland in 1971).   He finished 12th in the MVP vote in 1968, 29th in 1969, 15th in 1970, and 26th in 1976. In 1971, when White was likely among the four best players in the league, he got no votes at all. In 1976, White's last outstanding year, he finished 11th in the league in WAR (5.5), just ahead of teammate Thurman Munson who won the MVP with 304 points. White got three points. Over the course of his entire career, White got the grand total of 47 points in the MVP vote. He appeared on the Hall of Fame ballot once, 1985. By Jay Jaffe's system, he had the 12th highest JAWS score of any player on the ballot. That year 36 players received at least one vote. White was not one of them and was removed from the ballot in future years. That pretty much sums it up.

One Year Wonders: Part Two.

In an earlier note, I picked relief pitcher Wilcy Moore for the Yankees' best example of a one-year wonder. Among position players, I considered Bobby Bonds and Birdie Cree but thought they didn't quite qualify. I could have also considered Kevin Maas who hit 21 home runs in half a season in 1990 and never again topped an OPS+ of 100. But Maas wasn't really ever a wonder. Even in 1990, he was a one-dimensional player who did not field well and did not hit for average. Luke Voit, who led the league in home runs during the COVID shortened 2020 season, is another possibility but Voit was also pretty good in 39 games in 2018 and decent in 2019. He may have been a wonder but it wasn't for just one year.

So, my pick for the best example of a one-year wonder among Yankee position players is Elliott Maddox. Maddox' story is almost as curious as Wilcy Moore's.

Maddox was signed by the Tigers in 1968 after his sophomore year at the University of Michigan. (Maddox did later complete his degree, taking courses while playing in the majors.) By 1970 he was playing regularly in the majors, mostly at third base, for a mediocre Detroit team. He hit .248 with an OPS+ of 92. He was 22. At the end of the season, Billy Martin became manager of the Tigers and promptly traded Maddox to the Washington Senators, soon to become the Texas Rangers. The Senators/Rangers moved Maddox to centerfield where Maddox' play, by both the judgment of observers and by the numbers, was excellent. But he didn't hit. For his three years with the Senators and Rangers, Maddox' batting average was .236 with an OPS+ of 89. In 1973, with the Rangers in last place, the team fired manager Whitey Herzog and hired none other than Biilly Martin.

By this time, Maddox had established a reputation as a "trouble maker." What was this reputation based on? Well, Maddox showed up to spring training one year with an Afro. He had given a black power salute in the Senators' last game in Washington, in solidarity with fans who were booing the team for their impending move to Texas. He had a "Free Angela Davis" sticker on his locker and he was friends with Curt Flood, who brought one of the first cases that would eventually lead to free agency. This was all very heady stuff in the 1970s. His fielding style, by his own description, was "nonchalant," which is to say he played hard but didn't make a big show of hustle. He was exactly the sort of player Billy Martin did not like. Toward the end of Spring training, the Rangers sold Maddox to

the Yankees. The Rangers received no compensation at all in players. Billy Martin seems simply not to have wanted him on his team.

In 1974, Maddox flourished with the Yankees under manager Bill Virdon. Maddox hit over .300 and led American League center fielders in range factor. The Yankees themselves made a surprising run at the pennant, finishing just two games behind Baltimore. Maddox himself finished fourth among position players in WAR and eighth in the vote for MVP. He was still just 26 years old.

By this time Maddox had converted to Judaism, in part because he found parallels in the experiences of African Americans and Jews. Although the Yankees had, by pretty common knowledge, long been in search of a Jewish star to appeal to New York's large Jewish population, the Yankees seem not to have promoted Maddox' conversion. Wonder why?

In Spring training of 1975, the Yankees got into a brawl with the Rangers—still managed by Billy Martin—when two Ranger pitchers seemed to throw at Maddox and the Yankees retaliated. Just days earlier, Maddox had called Martin a liar for misleading him about his future with the Rangers the year before. After the brawl, Martin stayed gracious as ever: "How could I have lied? …. He never was going to make our ballclub. He's popping off because he had a good year. When he hits .200 this year, he won't say a thing."

No matter: Maddox started out in 1975 the way he had played in 1974. Through mid-June, Maddox was playing just as well as he had the year before, perhaps even a shade better, and the Yankees were tied with Boston for first place. Then, on June 13, at Shea Stadium, the Yankees' home field for the

year while Yankee stadium was going through renovations, Maddox slipped on a wet field while catching a ball in the ninth inning of a game against the White Sox. He tore two ligaments in his knee and did not play again for over a year. He had had one glorious season and would never repeat it.

To add insult to injury—I like it when you can take metaphors literally—as the Yankees fell behind Boston with Maddox out of the lineup, the Yankees fired Virdon and hired Billy Martin. Martin did admit, at least publicly, that he had been wrong about Maddox. And Martin did play Maddox for 18 games in 1976 when Maddox came back from his injury. But Maddox was not the same. The Yankees traded him away to the Orioles for 1977. Maddox played only four more years in all, three for the Mets. He was out of baseball at the end of the 1980 season, still only 32 years old.

Maddox himself said, "I am the only guy who has played for three managers and been traded by three managers, all named Billy Martin." Would Maddox's career have been any different if he had not had to deal so often with a manager who disliked him? It's unlikely it would have made much difference after his 1975 injury. But it does seem quite likely Maddox's career would have worked out differently if he had had a different manager in either Detroit or Texas. But then nobody would have given him away to the Yankees before Maddox' star turn in 1974. The pity is that that turn did not last longer.

CHAPTER 14
THE BRONX ZOO 1976-81

In 1976, the Yankees lost their first game, then won their next three to move into first place. They never dropped out of first place for the rest of the year, stretching their lead to 14 ½ games in late July and coasting home. In the American League Championship Series, the Yankees beat Kansas City 3 games to 2. The Yankees won game five 7 to 6 on a home run by Chris Chambliss in the bottom of the ninth (after George Brett had tied the game with a three-run home run in the top of the eighth). The World Series was much less fun: The Cincinnati Reds won their second straight championship, this one in a four-game sweep.

From 1921 through 1964, every Yankees team had featured a superstar—Ruth, then Gehrig, then DiMaggio, then Mantle—and often two. Sometimes, as from 1921-23, the superstar led the team without a lot of support from teammates. Sometimes, as in the late 30's and the 50's and the early 60's, the entire team was loaded.   The 1976-81 teams were different. They were an ensemble cast. The biggest stars—or at least the best paid players—on the 1975 team were Catfish Hunter, who had come to the Yankees as the first big budget free agent, and Bobby Bonds, who had just come to the Yankees in blockbuster trade for Bobby Murcer. But by 1976 Hunter had begun to fade and Bonds had been shipped off to the Angels, for Mickey Rivers and Ed Figueroa.

Thurman Munson won the MVP award in 1976. Rivers finished third. First baseman Chris Chambliss finished fifth. But it was Graig Nettles, who was 16th in the MVP vote, who led the team in WAR. In fact, the Yankees had five regulars

with five or more WAR (Munson, Rivers, Nettles, rookie Willie Randolph, and Roy White). They were only the third team ever to do that (after the 1939 Yankees and the 1972 A's) and no team has done it since. Add Chambliss and they were only the eighth team ever to have six players with four or more WAR. The starting pitching, after allowing for park effects and fielding, was, at best mediocre but the relief pitching (with Sparky Lyle and Dick Tidrow) was excellent. The defense was the best in the league (a defensive efficiency of .729, 95 runs above average on defense, at the time the fourth highest in league history).

Before the 1977 season the Yankees added Reggie Jackson and Don Gullett as free agents and traded for shortstop Bucky Dent. With an all star at every position, they were overwhelming favorites to repeat. They did but it wasn't easy. Munson and Jackson started squabbling during Spring training. Manager Billy Martin did not much like Jackson, who did not much like Martin. And neither Munson nor Martin nor even Jackson nor any of the other Yankees players liked owner George Steinbrenner. Some despised him.

In a nationally televised June game in Boston, Martin pulled Jackson out of the game, mid inning, for failing to hustle. Jackson was humiliated and furious. Yogi Berra had to hold back Martin from coming to blows with Jackson in the Yankee dugout. And yet they persevered. They moved into first place for good in late August and wound up 2 ½ games ahead of the Red Sox. The ALCS was a repeat—a three games to two win over Kansas City. This time the Yankees went into the top of the eighth of game five trailing 3-1 but scored one in the eighth and three in the ninth (five singles and a walk from six different players). In the World Series, the Yankees beat the Dodgers,

now a plane ride away in Los Angeles, 4 games to two. In the sixth and final game, Reggie Jackson homered on the first pitch from each of three different pitchers. As I remember— although I can't find confirmation—Jackson described his performance as "a triumph of the human spirit." The Yankees were World Champions for the first time since 1962.

And then came 1978. The Yankees started slowly and the Red Sox started fast. On July 16, the Yankees were at 47 and 41, in fourth place, 13 games behind Boston. Billy Martin was insisting on playing Jackson as Designated Hitter rather than in right field and batting him fifth or sixth rather than fourth. Speculation was rampant that Steinbrenner was about to fire Martin. On July 17, in a game against Kansas City, with the score tied 5-5 in the bottom of the tenth, Munson singled. Jackson was up next and Martin asked him to bunt. Jackson was stunned but he complied. After the first pitch, Martin took off the bunt. But Jackson was steaming mad and continued trying to bunt, eventually popping out to the catcher. Now Martin was furious, all the more so when the Yankees lost the game in the 11th. The Yankees were now 14 games behind Boston. Martin wanted Jackson suspended for the rest of the season. Steinbrenner suspended him for five days.

The Yankees promptly won five straight, all without Jackson. The night of the 23rd, Martin was drinking with several writers. Speaking of Steinbrenner and Jackson, Martin said. "They deserve each other. One's a born liar; the other's convicted." It was a good line: Steinbrenner had, in fact, been convicted of illegal campaign contributions (to Nixon, the campaign that featured Watergate) and obstruction of justice. It also got Martin fired as soon as the line hit the papers. Steinbrenner brought in former Cleveland pitcher Bob Lemon

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as manager—only to announce a week later, on old-timer's day, that Martin would return as manager in 1979. In those days, the Yankees were rarely boring.

Whatever the reason—Jackson's suspension, Martin's firing. Lemon's leadership, some non-existent law of averages, luck, karma, gamma rays from the moon—the Yankees started turning the season around after the very game that led to Jackson's suspension. After that game, the Yankees won 43 of 58 while the Red Sox went 26 and 33. The key games were a four-game sweep in Boston, September 7 through 10. The Yankees won by a combined score of 42-9. The papers called it the Boston Massacre. On September 16, the Yankees were, improbably, now in first, 3 and ½ games ahead of Boston. But this was a season with even more twists and turns to come. The Red Sox, in near collapse, pulled themselves together and won twelve of their last fourteen games. The Yankees won nine of fifteen and the two teams ended the season tied at 99 and 63. In the playoff game at Fenway, the Red Sox went ahead two to nothing until the top of the seventh. In the seventh, White and Chambliss singled. With two out Bucky F***ing Dent—that's his official name in Boston—hit a three-run home run over the famous Green Monster in left field. The Yankees added one more run on a double by Munson and another on a Jackson home run in the eighth, then held on for a 5-4 win.

I have no idea *why* the Yankees great comeback happened. *How* it happened is much easier to explain. The Yankees pitching got much better in the second half of the season while the Red Sox stopped hitting. Take a look at both teams through and after July 9:

	Won	Lost	Runs	Runs Against	RPG	RAG
NEW YORK						
Through 7/19	48	42	390	361	4.3	4.0
After 7/19	52	21	345	221	4.7	3.0
BOSTON						
Through 7/19	62	28	488	351	5.4	3.9
	37	36	308	306	4.2	4.2

Very simple: The Yankees started pitching and the Red Sox stopped hitting. Some of the individual splits border on the astounding. Here's the Yankee pitching. Guidry's record was ridiculously good but look at Figueroa and Hunter and Gossage, too.

	Through 7/19			After 7/19		
Guidry	13	1	2.23	12	2	1.16
Figueroa	8	7	3.64	12	2	2.29
Tidrow	4	7	3.78	3	4	3.93
Beattie	2	4	4.42	4	5	3.24
Hunter	2	3	5.97	11	3	2.71
Gossage	5	9	2.23	5	2	1.68
Lyle	6	1	3.33	3	2	3.72

And then take a look at the Red Sox hitting. Left fielder Jim Rice held up in the second half. The rest? Not so much

	Through 7/19			After 7/19		
	BA	HR	RBI	BA	HR	RBI
Fisk	0.296	13	49	0.269	7	39
Scott	0.267	8	32	0.204	4	22
Remy	0.267	0	24	0.295	2	20
Burleson	0.248	4	35	0.247	1	14
Hobson	0.255	15	48	0.245	2	31
Rice	0.321	23	76	0.306	23	63
Lynn	0.331	16	49	0.262	6	33
Evans	0.273	18	42	0.217	6	21
Yaz	0.311	10	54	0.228	7	27

After the regular season drama, on and off the field, the postseason felt anticlimactic. In the ALCS, the Yankees beat Kansas City—again—this time three games to one. In the World Series, the Yankees beat the Dodgers—again—in another six-game series.

1978 was a triumph. 1979 was a tragedy, on the field but even more off. The team started slowly again, now with Lemon as manager. On June 17, with the team at 34 and 31, Steinbrenner tried switching managers again, this time replacing Lemon with Martin. It didn't work. On August 2, the Yankees went into an off day 14 games behind Baltimore. Thurman Munson was in Canton, Ohio, where his family lived, practicing landings in the private jet he had bought to commute between New York and Canton. On his third landing Munson crashed. He survived the crash itself but couldn't get out of the plane. He died a few minutes later as the plane went up in flames. The Yankees played out the season. They finished fourth. It was hard to think it mattered.

In 1980 there was, of course, a new manager, Dick Howser. During his first 19 years as owner of the Yankees, Steinbrenner made 19 managerial changes, including five separate stints for Billy Martin and two each for Gene Michael, Bob Lemon, and Lou Piniella. Under Howser, the Yankees moved into first on May 2 and stayed there the rest of the season, leading by as many as 9 ½ games and ending up three games ahead of 100-win Oriole team. The Yankees' 103 wins were their most since 1963. And then came the American League Championship Series. Kansas City finally broke through, sweeping the Yankees in three games. The Yankees were out of the postseason and Howser was out of a job.

1981 was a mess. Gene Michael—former shortstop, former general manager, and future head of scouting, future general manager, all for the Yankees, and, at least arguably, future architect of the great Yankee teams of the late 90's—began the season as the replacement for Howser. On June 11, Michael had the Yankees in first place at 34-22, two games ahead of Baltimore. And then the players went on strike. When the season resumed, two months later, the owners, in their wisdom, declared that there would be a split season, with the winner of the first half (already played, before the strike) in each division automatically qualified for the playoffs against the winner of the second half. This did not give the first half winners much incentive for the second half and the four first half winners (Yankees, A's, Phillies, and Dodgers) combined to win all of three more games than they lost in the second half. The Yankees went 25-26. It mattered not at all but Steinbrenner was not happy: Michael was out and Bob Lemon was back for the final 25 games of the season. In the very first American League East Division Series, the Yankees beat the Brewers

(second half winners) three games to two and then beat Oakland in a three-game sweep in the ALCS. The Yankees also won the first two games of the World Series, again against the Dodgers. And then Los Angeles won four in a row. After the World Series, Steinbrenner issued a public apology to the City of New York for *his* team's performance. This did not go over well with the players, but it was a fitting end to six years of a dynasty restored.

The 1976-1981 Yankees were not the Yankees' greatest teams. That honor belongs to the 1926-1928 Yankees or the 1936-39 Yankees or the 1949-1953 Yankees or the 1998-2001 Yankees. But they were probably the most entertaining. If rooting for the Yankees in the 1950's was like rooting for General Motors, rooting for the Yankees in the late 70's was like getting caught in an episode of the nighttime soap opera Dallas. Lots of drama, plenty of villains, plenty of heroes and, at least for a while, very high ratings. I am still expecting to wake up one morning to hear that one of the Yankees' seasons was only Yogi Berra's dream.

Greatest Comebacks

I spent more time than I should have—more time than anybody should have—trying to figure a scale to rate the greatest comebacks of all time. You know the sort of thing I mean: so many points for how far the comeback team was behind, how late the comeback started, how dramatic the ending. I gave up for two reasons. One is that these scales— Bill James is a master of devising them—are often just a way of codifying intuition. I know or think I know, for example, that the Giants' 1951 comeback was the best ever. How can I devise a scale that confirms that intuition? There's nothing wrong with that: It makes you examine your intuition or even—

this is what Bill James does—make it explicit what your intuition is based on. But it doesn't add much. My second reason is that there probably isn't such a thing as a best comeback. Different comebacks are best in different ways.

The chart below shows every comeback I could find where a team came back from ten or more games behind at some point in the season. (It is possible I missed some.) The second column shows who came back and the second column shows who they came back against. The next columns show the date of the biggest deficit, the number of games behind, their position in the league or division, and their won lost record at the time of that deficit. The next four columns show the won-lost record during the comeback, the won-lost percentage after the deficit, how many games they finished ahead of the second-place team. The last two columns show the season long won-lost percentage and what the team did in the postseason. Teams are listed by the date of the biggest deficit, from latest to earliest.

			Through …						After …					
		Against		GB	Pos	W	L	%	W	L		GA	Overall %	Post
1964	Cardinals	Phi	24-Aug	11	4	65	58	0.528	28	11	0.718	1	0.574	WS
1969	Mets	Chi	14-Aug	10	4	62	51	0.549	38	11	0.776	8	0.617	WS
1951	Giants	Bro	12-Aug	13	2	59	51	0.536	39	8	0.830	1	0.624	Lost WS
1930	Cardinals	Chi	9-Aug	12	4	53	52	0.505	39	10	0.796	2	0.597	Lost WS
1942	Cardinals	Bro	5-Aug	10	2	63	39	0.618	43	9	0.827	2	0.688	WS
1995	Mariners	Cal	3-Aug	13	3	44	46	0.489	35	20	0.636	1	0.545	Lost ALCS
1993	Braves	SF	23-Jul	10	2	55	42	0.567	49	16	0.754	1	0.642	Lost NLCS
1978	Yankees	Bos	19-Jul	14	4	47	42	0.528	53	21	0.716	1	0.613	WS
1914	Braves	NYG	6-Jul	15	8	26	40	0.394	68	19	0.782	10.5	0.614	WS
1935	Cubs	StL	5-Jul	10.5	4	38	32	0.543	62	22	0.738	4	0.649	Lost WS
2012	A's	Tex	30-Jun	13	3	37	42	0.468	57	26	0.687	1	0.580	Lost ALDS
1988	Red Sox	Det	13-Jun	10	5	28	30	0.483	61	43	0.587	1	0.549	Lost ALCS
2002	A's	Ana	30-May	10	3	24	28	0.462	79	31	0.718	4	0.636	Lost ALDS

I think there are four different ways the comebacks can be best.

There are the most improbable comebacks. Pride of place here goes to the 1969 Miracle Mets and the 1914 Miracle Braves. The two teams have much more in common than just a nickname. Most importantly, both teams had been lousy for years. The Boston Braves had finished below .500 for eleven consecutive years. Five of those years they had finished eighth. In 1909 they won 45 and lost 108. That's a .294 winning percentage, the very level both Baseball-Reference use to calculate *replacement level*. That's bad. They finished 65 games behind Pittsburgh. And the Mets, of course, had never finished above .500. Since entering the league in 1962, the Mets had finished 10th and last five times. They had finished ninth twice. That was it. Both wound up winning their league or division easily, the Braves by 10 ½ games over the Giants, the Mets by 8 over the Cubs. And both teams won the World Series in upsets, the Braves over the Philadelphia Athletics (World Series winners three of the previous four years), the Mets over the Orioles. The Braves won in a four-game sweep. It took the Mets five games.

The Mets started their comeback almost a month later than the Braves started theirs. The Mets played extremely well during their comeback, going 38 and 11 but they were helped by a collapse from the Cubs, who went 18-27 once they established their biggest lead. The Cubs had one stretch when they went 8-18 as the Mets went from six behind to 4 ½ ahead. The Braves started their comeback much earlier, on July 5, but they were even farther behind than the Mets, 15 games, the biggest deficit any team has ever overcome. And they did it starting from eighth and last, 14 games under .500. (The Mets

had been in second and over .500 since early June.) I give the Braves the slight edge over the Mets as the most improbable comeback because of where they started but it's close.

A big part of what made the Miracle Braves and the Miracle Mets miraculous was that the teams had such pathetic histories. As season comebacks, though, forgetting about the team histories, neither matched the St. Louis Cardinals comeback win over the Phillies in 1964.   The Cardinals comeback started later than any of the others (August 24) and with the fewest games remaining (39). As late as September 20, with only thirteen games remaining the Cardinals still trailed the Phillies (who had twelve remaining) by 6 ½. But the Phillies. In an epic collapse, lost ten in a row while the Cardinals won nine of ten.   That's a second way a comeback can be best.

A third way a comeback can be best is by catching up to another team that's also playing at a very high level. The Mets caught the Cubs and the Cardinals caught the Phillies because the Cubs and the Phillies collapsed. In 1914 the Giants didn't exactly collapse but they won only half their games over the second half of the season while the Braves were winning more than three of every four. At least two races were very different. On August 5, 1942 the Dodgers were 74 and 30, 10 games ahead of the Cardinals. They went 30 and 20 the rest of the year to finish with 104 wins, still the best record ever… for a second-place team. The Cardinals went 43 and 9 to finish with 106 wins.

1993 was the last year before the wild card made high level, high stakes pennant races almost impossible. On July 23, the Giants were 65 and 32, ten games ahead of the Braves. In early September, the Giants lost eight games in a row to fall 3 ½ games behind the Braves.   But the Giants rallied, winning

14 of 16 to tie the Braves before losing their final game of the year to the Dodgers and the pennant to the Braves. The Braves finished with 104 wins, the Giants with 103.

And that gets us to the fourth way a comeback can be best. That's the most dramatic. For drama, it counts how close the race is. It helps if there's a play off. It helps if there's a high level of competition. And it helps if the comeback is part of an ongoing rivalry. The Yankees' 1978 comeback against the Red Sox checks all the boxes. But the Giants' 1951 comeback against the Dodgers checks them twice. The Giants started their comeback later than the Yankees, August 12 to July 9. The Giants played at a higher level (an .830 winning percentage over 47 games, compared to .716 over 74 games for the Yankees). And the rivalry? I'm pretty sure it was just as intense for the Dodgers and Giants as for the Yankees and Red Sox. (Evidence: The Yankees almost doubled their average attendance when the Red Sox were in town; the Giants more than doubled their attendance against the Dodgers.) And the playoffs? The Yankees and Giants both won 5-4. Bucky Dent's home run against the Red Sox was high drama but what ten-year-old sits around dreaming of hitting a home run in the top of the seventh? If we're going to fantasize—and what ten year old does not?—it might as well be for a walk off three run home run with one out in the bottom of the ninth and your team down 4 to 2. And that's exactly what Bobby Thomson did. Much as I loved the Yankees' 1978 season, it can't quite match what the Giants did in 1951.

How the team was put together

From all the attention the signings of Hunter and Jackson and Gossage and Gullet got, you would think the 1976-78 Yankees were built on free agents. Not so. They were built on

trades, more than any other Yankee championship teams, especially if you don't count the 1921-1923 Yankees, which I don't because the "trades" that built those earlier Yankee teams (Ruth and Baker and Schang and Witt and Dugan and the whole pitching staff) were more purchases than trades. Here are all the Yankees who accumulated 2 or more WAR from 1976 through 1978. Players acquired through free agency accounted for 15.2 WAR. Players who came up from the minors within the Yankee organization accounted for 37.4. Players acquired through trades accounted for 96.

Free Agents		Trade		Minors	
Jackson	8.0	Nettles	19.2	Munson	13.4
		Randolph	15.5	White	10.0
		Rivers	15.2		
		Chambliss	9.6		
		Piniella	6.3		
		Dent	5.4		
		Gamble	2.8		
Gossage	2.3	Figueroa	9.4	Guidry	14.0
Gullett	2.6	Lyle	5.3		
Hunter	2.3	Tidrow	4.9		
		Torrez	2.4		
	15.2		96.0		37.4

Several things are remarkable about the trades that assembled the 1976-1978 teams. One is that the total haul nearly quadrupled the value of the much-maligned trades with Kansas City in the 1950's. Nettles and Randolph, each alone, accumulated as much WAR as all the players obtained from

the A's. Another is that they were pulled off by three different General Managers-- Lee McPhail, Taj Smith, Gabe Paul. A third is that, with one exception (the trade for Dent), they were one sided in favor of the Yankees. The Yankees traded away veterans (Danny Cater, Fritz Peterson, Doc Medich, Bobby Bonds) who faded and prospects (Spikes and Torres for Nettles) who didn't develop. Not a single one of the players the Yankees gave up was as valuable as Rivers or Chambliss let alone Nettles and Randolph. And none of that is to mention Sparky Lyle's Cy Young Award or Dent's playoff home run or his MVP award in the 1978 World Series. Somebody—or somebodies—knew what he was doing. The table below shows the nine trades that made the Yankees champions. The figures for WAR are totals after the trade, not just for the first team a player was traded to. There is a bottom line on the table. It shows the Yankees receiving more than 250 future WAR in return for under 60. It does not include the blockbuster 1975 trade of Bobby Murcer for Bobby Bonds because neither was with the team in 1976. If I did include it, it would only make the case stronger. Bonds accumulated a total of 19.8 WAR after the trade and 5.1 in his one year with the Yankees. Murcer accumulated a total of 4.6 and that includes some accumulated after getting traded back to the Yankees for a marginal prospect who never made the majors.

		WAR	From	For	WAR
1972	Sparky Lyle	15.6	Boston	Danny Cater	1.7
1973	Craig Nettles	49.5	Cleveland	John Ellis	2

				Jerry Kenney	0.1
				Charlie Spikes	0.8
				Rusty Torres	0.5
1974	Dick Tidrow	8.7	Cleveland	Fred Beene	-2.5
	Chris Chambliss	23.5		Tom Buskey	4.6
	Cecil Upshaw	1.1		Steve Kline	-0.7
				Fritz Peterson	-0.1
1974	Lou Piniella	9.3	Kansas City	Lindy McDaniel	0.9
1976	Ed Figueroa	9.2	California	Bobby Bonds	14.7
	Mickey Rivers	23.4			
1976	Oscar Gamble	18.6	Cleveland	Pat Dobson	0.9
1976	Willie Randolph	66.3	Pittsburgh	Doc Medich	8.8
	Dock Ellis	2			
	Ken Brettt	7.7			
1977	Bucky Dent	13.2	Chicago	Oscar Gamble	17.9
				LeMarr Hoyt	12.1

1977	Mike Torrez	9.4	Oakland	Dock Ellis	0.3
				Larry Murray	-2.4
				Marty Perez	0
		257.5			59.6

Underrated Second Base: Willie Randolph

Who Underrated Him: All the same people who overrated Richardson (except Ralph Houk, who was managing the Detroit Tigers by the time Randolph came up with the Yankees).

In their first great revival, 1976-1981, the Yankees won five division championships, four league championships, and two World Series. So, quick, who led the Yankees in WAR over those six years. 1976 MVP Thurman Munson? Cy Young winner Ron Guidry? Hall of Famer Reggie Jackson? Hall of Famer Goose Gossage? Nope. Nope. Nope. And nope. The answer is Willie Randolph. Randolph also tops the list of career WAR and career WAA for Yankee second basemen. (See the charts in the discussion of Richardson).

Player	WAR	From	To
Willie Randolph	29.8	1976	1981
Ron Guidry	26.8	1976	1981
Graig Nettles	26.0	1976	1981
Reggie Jackson	17.2	1977	1981

Thurman Munson	15.8	1976	1979
Mickey Rivers	15.1	1976	1979
Bucky Dent	13.5	1977	1981
Tommy John	12.2	1979	1981
Chris Chambliss	11.4	1976	1979
Rich Gossage	10.7	1978	1981
Ed Figueroa	9.6	1976	1980
Roy White	8.7	1976	1979
Oscar Gamble	7.9	1976	1981
Lou Piniella	6.8	1976	1981
Ron Davis	5.9	1978	1981
Rudy May	5.3	1976	1981
Sparky Lyle	5.3	1976	1978
Rick Cerone	4.1	1980	1981
Jerry Mumphrey	3.2	1981	1981
Dave Winfield	2.5	1981	1981

In 1980, Randolph led the first place Yankees with a WAR of 6.6, good for eighth in the league. George Brett (rightly) won the MVP award.   Randolph finished 15th, behind three teammates, none of whom had as good a year as Randolph

(Reggie Jackson, 2nd in the MVP vote, 4.8 WAR; Goose Gossage, 3rd, 3.4; and Rick Cerone, 7th, 4.2). 1980 was Randolph's best year but he had three other years with a WAR above 5 and four more with a WAR above 4, all comparable to or better than Jackson, Gossage, and Cerone in 1980. But Randolph only received MVP votes in one other year, 1978, when he finished 29th with a grand total of five points. His WAR of 5.8 was higher than that of 23 of the 28 players who finished ahead of him.

At first glance, Randolph looks remarkably similar to Richardson. They were both second basemen. They were both solid citizens. They were both under six feet tall and between 165 and 170 pounds. Richardson hit over .300 twice, peaking at .304. Randolph hit over .300 once for the Yankees (and, again, once for the Brewers when he was 36 years old). Randolph's top batting average for the Yankees was .305. Richardson hit 34 home runs in twelve years. Randolph hit 48 in thirteen years with the Yankees. They even played in similar offensive environments. Both were good fielders. Richardson won five gold gloves. Randolph won none but did have a good reputation and his numbers were generally better than Richardson's (17 Defensive wins above replacement per Baseball-Reference compared to 4.9 for Richardson). So, what was the difference? In a word, walks. Richardson never walked more than 37 times in a season. In his 13 seasons with the Yankees, Randolph never walked less than 53 times. In 1980, Randolph led the league with 119 walks. Richardson had a lifetime .299 On Base Average. Randolph had a .374 On Base Averaged with the Yankees. That's a huge difference.

Unlike Roy White, Randolph spent most of his Yank career playing for winning teams. In all other respects, he shared all

the characteristics that made White underrated. He went about his business without a lot of fuss. He played in a low offense context. He was a good fielder, but not a flashy fielder. He had a wide range of offensive skills but wasn't a big home run hitter. A big chunk of his offensive value came from drawing walks. Even though they played different positions, White and Randolph are a much better match than Richardson and Randolph.

Underrated Third Base: Graig Nettles

Who Underrated Him: MVP and Hall of Fame Voters

Graig Nettles had a caustic wit. Some of his best-known lines:

On Sparky Lyle, after he was traded away: "From Cy Young to sayonara."

On playing for the Yankees: "When I was a little boy I wanted to be a baseball player and also join the circus. With the Yankees, I've accomplished both.

On a prominent teammate: "The best thing about being a Yankee is getting to watch Reggie Jackson play every day. The worst thing about being a Yankee? Getting to watch Reggie Jackson play every day.

On fame: "People recognize me wherever I go, where it used to be just New York. I guess people who aren't even baseball fans watch the World Series. I was driving down the freeway in Los Angeles over the winter and a guy pulled up next to me and gave me the finger."

On his boss: "It's a good thing Babe Ruth isn't still with the Yankees. If he was, Steinbrenner would bat him seventh and say he's overweight."

On Steinbrenner again, significantly nastier: "The more we lose, the more he'll fly in. And the more he flies in, the better the chance there'll be a plane crash."

Nettles also got in fights. One, on the field, was in 1976 with Red Sox pitcher Bill Lee, who accused Nettles of a cheap shot. Another, off the field, was with Reggie Jackson, no less, at a party celebrating the Yankees' win over the A's in the 1981 playoffs. I can imagine that some of Nettles' teammates thought he was great, a no bullshit type with the bonus that he was willing to stand up to Steinbrenner. I can also imagine that some of his teammates—Reggie Jackson, for instance—despised him. Most of this has very little to do with Nettles' reputation. None of it has anything to do with his ability as a baseball player.

I ran across a list, more or less by accident, on Bleacher-Report that has Nettles as the most *overrated* third baseman in American League history. Jayson Stark, in *The Stark Truth*, also picks Nettles as the most *overrated* third baseman of all time. I like Stark's book. I even agree with some of his judgments. Not this one. Stark's argument is worth repeating, both because it makes some sense at the same time it illustrates how sloppy even smart people can be when they're thinking about things like overrating and underrating. According to Stark, Nettles is a "mini-cult hero to people who loved that group [1973-1983] of Yankees. I still hear from those people once in a while, trying to explain why they think Nettles got screwed by the Hall of Fame voters, why he was better than Brooks Robinson, why in many ways he's one of the Yankees' all-time greats." Stark is happy to acknowledge that Nettles was, at least, a very good player. But Stark also wants to argue that he (Stark) is "uniquely qualified" to separate what "Nettles

was great at from what he was not so great at." In particular, Stark argues that as a left-handed batter at Yankee stadium, Nettles got an unusually high boost from his home field: hitting 141 of his 250 Yankee home runs at home and with an OPS .100 points higher at home than on the road. Moreover, Stark points out that Nettles' lifetime batting average of .248 was (in 2007, the time of his writing) the third lowest of all players with 300 or more home runs. Stark does allow that Nettles was an excellent fielder but denies he was the equal of Brooks Robinson arguing that Robinson "smokes him .... In Gold Gloves, 16-2."

Some of this is both true and fair, which are not always the same thing. Nettles did benefit from Yankee Stadium. He did not hit for a high average. But what kind of evidence is it that some people may think Nettles belongs in the Hall of Fame? Of course some people do. You can also find some people who think Herbert Hoover was a great president or that Star Wars, Episode I, was a great movie. There's also straight forward evidence that most people—including those who count the most, the actual voters--think Nettles does not belong in the Hall of Fame. Nettles appeared on a total of four ballots, got 8% of the votes in 1994, his first year on the ballot (with 75% required for election) and then trended down through 1997 when he was taken off the ballot because he failed to reach even a 5% threshold. And the 16 Gold Gloves Robinson won to the 2 for Nettles? Gold Gloves are the most notoriously unreliable awards in baseball—based on rough impressions and reputation than on hard data. They are a much better indicator of rating—over or under—than of actual performance. Let's look at the record.

I pointed out, in my comment on Willie Randolph, that Randolph led the Yankees in WAR in the stretch from 1976-1981. Guidry was second and Nettles was third. But by 1981 Nettles was 36 years old and, unlike Randolph and Guidry, well past his peak. If we look at just 1976-1978—three AL East championships, three American League championships, two World Series championships, Nettles led the team in WAR. Here's the list:

Nettles	19.2
Randolph	15.5
Rivers	15,2
Guidry	14.0
Munson	13.4
White	10.0
Chambliss	9.6
Figueroa	9.4
Jackson	8.0
Piniella	6.3

Or take it one more step. Here's a list of WAR leaders in the entire America League from 1976 through 1978:

Carew	21.5
Brett	20.5
Palmer	20.2
Nettles	19.2
Tanana	18.8
Fisk	17.2
Randolph	15.5
Eckersley	15.3
Rivers	15.2
Rice	15.1

Nettles is fourth. That doesn't qualify him for the Hall of Fame but it's still pretty good. Notice that none of three Yankees on the list (Randolph and Rivers as well as Nettles) is in the Hall of Fame or even came remotely close to election. Of the other seven players, all but one (Tanana) are in. In 1976, when the Yankees won their first pennant in a dozen years, Nettles led the league's position players in WAR. (Mark Fidrych, the Tigers' one-year wonder, led if you include pitchers.) Nettles finished 16th in the MVP vote, behind teammates Munson, (1st), Rivers (3rd) and Chambliss (5th) not to mention another dozen players from teams which did not win the league championship. Nettles did do better in the 1977 and 1978 votes, finishing fifth and sixth. Over the entire three-year span Nettles got a total of 215 points in the MVP voting, less than Munson, Brett, Carew, Al Cowens (!), Rice, and Guidry each got

in a single season. I should also point out that Nettles also led all position players in WAR in 1971, when he was still with Cleveland. He finished 28th in the MVP voting. That sounds to me like an underrated player.

I still hear an objection. A large proportion of Nettles' value was as a fielder. He certainly would not have led the league in WAR in either 1971 or 1976 without the significant credit he got for his fielding. In fact, Baseball-Reference lists Nettles as fifth, all time, in defensive wins above replacement among third basemen. But calculations of defensive wins are notoriously less reliable than calculation of batting or pitching runs. Can we trust these numbers? Not completely, but I don't trust anything completely. But I do trust them for two reasons. One is that they correspond to team fielding statistics which do make a

kind of straight forward sense. I mean, in particular, "defensive efficiency" which is a simple proportion of balls put into play that are turned into outs. Does this figure need some qualification? Sure. But it still makes sense, roughly the inverse of batting average once you take out strikeouts and home runs. It will do, which brings me to my point. Although I think it's not often noticed, the Yankee teams of 1976-1978 were great fielding teams. They led the league in Defensive Efficiency each of those three years, with Defensive Efficiencies ranging from .716 to .729, just as the great Orioles teams had led in most of the late 1960s and early '70s. How much of the credit does Nettles deserve from the team performance? I don't know but I'm sure he deserves some.

The second reason I trust the numbers is that they correspond with subjective evaluations. Yeah, I know that most of what I've written here is about the differences between subjective evaluations and the cold, hard facts of new baseball statistics. I stick to that. But it is still the case that when subjective evaluations and analytics agree, it makes each more convincing. The four third basemen ahead of Nettles in defensive wins are Brooks Robinson, Adrian Beltre, Buddy Bell and Clete Boyer, all with reputations as great fielders. Nettles does not seem out of place on the list. If we make the comparison just to Nettles' rough contemporary, Brooks Robinson, Robinson does do better, but there's no shame in being not quite as good as the best fielding third baseman ever, whether measured by the numbers or by reputation. Robinson led the entire league in defensive wins above replacement twice. He led all third basemen in assists 8 times, in double plays turned three times, in range factor four times and in defensive runs saved 8 times. That is all very impressive even

if a bit short of what would be implied by his sixteen Gold Gloves. Nettles led American League third basemen in assists 4 times, in double plays turned, in range factor and defensive runs saved three times each. He also led the entire league—all positions—twice. That is not the equal of Robinson but it is still very good.

Does Nettles belong in the Hall of Fame? I don't know. Jay Jaffe has devised a system (JAWS) for judging if players are Hall Worthy. He takes the player's lifetime WAR and his WAR for his top seven seasons, then averages those two numbers and ranks them by position. It is not a perfect system by any means. I would make the peak shorter than seven years and give more credit—some credit—for special achievements. No matter, JAWS will do. By this standard, Nettles is the 12th most Hall Worthy third baseman of all time, just below the average (one half of a win) for all third basemen in the Hall. Of the eleven third basemen ahead of Nettles, 9 are in the Hall of Fame and a tenth (Beltre) is sure to be elected as soon as he is eligible. There is only one player (Scott Rolen) with a higher JAWS score who is not in the Hall of Fame. There are six with lower scores who are in. My case for Nettles as the most underrated third baseman in Yankee history does not depend on his belonging in the Hall of Fame. But it does help that it is, at very least, a reasonable thing to imagine.

Overrated Corner Outfield: Reginald Martinez Jackson
Who Overrated Him: MVP voters, George Steinbrenner, Reggie himself

Here's Reggie on Reggie:
"Sometimes I underestimate the magnitude of me."

"If I was playing in New York, they'd name a candy bar after me." (Said in 1973, while still with the Oakland A's. Turned out to be true)

"I didn't come to New York to be a star; I brought my star with me."

"I'm the straw that stirs the drink. Munson thinks he can be the straw that stirs the drink, but he can only stir it bad." (This was reported in an article in *Sport* magazine. To be fair, Jackson denied that he had ever said it.)

"I couldn't quit, because of all the kids, and the blacks, and the little people pulling for me. I represent both the underdog and the overdog in our society."

"The only reason I don't like playing in the World Series is I can't watch myself play."

Reggie's teammates on Reggie;

Catfish Hunter: He'd give you the shirt off his back. Of course, he'd call a press conference to announce it."

Catfish, again: "When you unwrap a Reggie bar, it tells you how good it is."

Billy Martin (the Yankee manager for much of Jackson's stay with the team): "It's not that Reggie is a bad outfielder. He just has trouble judging the ball and picking it up."

Reggie did not get along well with his teammates during his five years with the Yankees. He did not get along with his manager. By Jackson's own account, the only Black player on the team he got along with was Willie Randolph. And there's the rub. Reggie was born in 1946, almost exactly two years to the date before me. Like Reggie, I grew up in an affluent suburb, mine just outside New York City, his (Cheltenham) about a 40-minute drive from central Philadelphia. But there was a big difference. I was white in a high school that was

almost all white. Reggie, whose father was a dry cleaner and tailor, was one of a small number of Black kids in his school. I cannot imagine what it was like to grow up Black in a white suburb while segregation was still legal in most of the South. I cannot imagine what it must have been like for him to connect to Black teammates whose experience, in much more segregated settings, was as different from his as mine was from his, although for different reasons. I cannot imagine what it was like to grow up smart, articulate and assertive when none of those traits were thought a virtue in Black men.

I am not the only one who has thought this. In what we would now call an op-ed piece that appeared in the *NY Times* a few weeks after the 1977 World Series, Roger Wilkins, a former Assistant Attorney General under Lyndon Johnson and a civil rights activist, compared Jackson to Jackie Robinson and the boxers Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammed Ali. Jackson, Wilkins argued, "Is not the most beloved man in the Yankee clubhouse, but … he is himself, a whole man, no holds barred. … He is an intelligent, complex, driving and sometimes immature human being who forces the world to take him on his terms. Though a ballplayer with lesser skills might he constricted, Jackson is not diminished by what society expects a black man to be."

George Steinbrenner was generally a big supporter of Jackson but nobody has ever said that George was easy to work for. Billy Martin was no saint and I am inclined to take seriously Jackson's later claims that Martin was both a racist and an antisemite. Mickey Rivers, Jackson's teammate on the Yankees, may have gotten it right: "Your first name's white, your second is Hispanic, and your third belongs to a black. No wonder you don't know who you are." I can't imagine that

Jackson was particularly fun to hang out with. I'm also prepared to cut him a lot of slack.

I think the general consensus on Jackson is that he was a pain in the ass, but a great ball player, especially in the clutch. He was "Mr. October." I've already passed on making judgments about Jackson's personality. It is very simply the characterization of Jackson as a great ball player, a great clutch player, that I want to take issue with.

With the A's, one year in KC, eight in Oakland, Reggie was very good, maybe even as good as his press clippings suggested. In 1969, he had a breakout year as did his team. Oakland had its best year in over two decades, stretching all the way back to its time in Philadelphia. Reggie himself was sensational, at least through his first 100 games. On August 2, he was hitting .294 with 41 home runs and 86 RBI. That projects to 66 home runs and 139 RBI over the course of a 162-game season. Reggie did cool off for the rest of the season (.241 with 6 home runs in his last 51 games) but he still led the league in runs scored, slugging average, OPS, and OPS+. He finished third in both HR and RBI and 2nd in WAR (behind just Rico Petrocelli of the Red Sox, who had a freakishly good year that has probably never received the recognition it deserved). He finished 5th in the MVP vote, behind four other sluggers (Harmon Killebrew, Boog Powell, Frank Robinson, and Frank Howard), none of whom was as valuable that year as Jackson.

Reggie never again reached the heights of those 100 days in 1969, but he was very good over the next seven years, six in Oakland, one in Baltimore. Jackson led the league in HR and slugging average twice and in OPS+ three times. After a distinctly mediocre 1970 (.237 BA with 23 HR), Jackson led the AL in cumulative WAR in the span from 1971-1975 as his team

won five straight Western Division championships. When Jackson was the unanimous pick for MVP in 1973, he finished behind Bert Blyleven, Bobby Grich (13 votes between them compared to 336 for Reggie), and Detroit's John Hiller in WAR. But Blyleven and Grich are two of the most underrated players in baseball and history and nobody was about to vote for a relief pitcher (Hiller) on a third-place team. I think the vote was a mistake, but MVP voters have done much worse.

Then, in 1977, Reggie signed a record contract with the Yankees. The *Times* described the signing as "more a coronation than an unveiling" and speculated that the signing "could insure the Yankees' second straight American League Pennant." The Yankees did win in 1977 and 1978, not just the pennant but also the World Series. The Yankees did not win in 1979. They finished with the best record in the league in 1980 but lost the LCS to Kansas City. Reggie was the runner up to George Brett for MVP. (Brett led the league in WAR. Jackson was 14th.) In 1981 the Yankees made the World Series but lost to the Dodgers. And then Reggie was gone (to the Angels). That's all pretty good and those were some of my favorite Yankee teams ever. The tough question is how much Jackson had to do with the team's success.

I've already pointed out in my comments about Craig Nettles and Willie Randolph that Nettles led the 1976-78 three-time AL champions in WAR and that Randolph led the Yankees in the full span from 1976-1981 (five first place finishes, four World Series, two World Series wins). But that, you might object, isn't fair since Jackson wasn't even with the Yankees in 1976. That's right, so let's look just at 1977-1981, the full run of Jackson's time with the Yankees. Only four players were

regulars all five years. Only one pitcher was a regular in the rotation all five years. Here they are:

		G.	WAR
Ron Guidry	p	159	27.2
Willie Randolph	2b	665	24.8
Craig Nettles	3b	654	18.0
Reggie Jackson	rf	653	17.2
Buck Dent	ss	636	13.5

League wide, Jackson was 20th among position players for those years. Maybe you don't like my grouping five years together. I can see that, too. Here's a list, year by year, of players, just on the Yankees, with a higher WAR:

- 1977: Nettles, Rivers, Munson, Guidry, Randolph
- 1978: Guidry, Randolph, Nettles, Figueroa, Piniella, Rivers
- 1979: Guidry, John, Randolph
- 1980 Randolph, May
- 1981 Righetti, Mumphrey, Guidry, Nettles, John, Winfield, Randolph, Gossage, Dent, Davis, Reuschel, Gamble, Milbourne

Jackson was never better than the third best player (as measured by WAR) in any year. Let me be clear. For his five years with the Yankees, Jackson was still a very good hitter, arguably as good or better than he had been in Oakland. For those five years, Jackson was second in the league in HR (behind only Jim Rice, who had the advantage of playing in Fenway), 3rd in RBI, 4th in OPS and OPS+. And he led the Yankees in all those categories, some by a wide margin. He was without much doubt the best hitter on the Yankees for those five years. But that was his whole game. This is one

Billy Martin got right. Jackson's hitting was worth 143 runs above average with the Yankees. But his baserunning, which had been good with the A's was 5 runs below average with the Yankees and his fielding (also good with the A's) was 29 runs below average. Deduct another 32 runs as a positional adjustment and you come out to 77 runs above average or about 8 wins above average over the course of five seasons. It is possible, of course, that Jackson's dramatic defensive decline had something to do with Yankee stadium or the way the Yankees used him. Maybe, but there's a simpler explanation. Jackson was 30 when he joined the Yankees and was slowing down, quite literally. The lack of speed showed in his baserunning and, especially, in his fielding. Compare all this to Randolph. Randolph starts at 51 runs above average as a batter. Add in 22 runs for his baserunning, 48 for his fielding and another 23 as a positional adjustment. This comes to 144 runs above average (with rounding) or about 15 ½ wins above average. That's how Randolph comes out as a better player than Jackson.

But what about the clutch? Wasn't Jackson the original Mr. October, a star who shone the brightest—it's a claim that calls for cliched metaphors—when the night was darkest? Yes. Sorta. Maybe. What's undeniable is that Jackson was great in three consecutive postseason series for the Yankees: the 1977 World Series, which Jackson capped off with his signature performance, three home runs off three different pitchers in game six; the 1978 AL Championship Series; and the 1978 World Series. Over sixteen games (eleven wins for the Yankees), Jackson hit .429, got on base more than half the time, hit 9 home runs and drove in 22. That's spectacular. He was not so spectacular before or after. Before the 1977 Series,

Jackson has already played in 37 post season games with the Yankees and the A's. He hit .254 with 5 home runs and an OPS of .762. After the 1978 Series, Jackson played in 24 more post season games with a batting average of .220 and an OPS of .686. Remember that his lifetime OPS was .846. I know that pointing to Jackson's record aside from those three great series has some of the same quality as asking, "So, Mrs. Lincoln, other than that what did you think of the play?" Still, in 77 post season games, the rough equivalent of a half season, Jackson totals came to .278/.358/.527 for an OPS .885, better than his regular season performance but not by much. The biggest surprise to me is that despite playing for the three-time World Series winning A's and the back-to-back World Series winning Yankees, Jackson's won-lost record in the 76 post season games he started was 40-36. All of this is very good. Does it justify calling him "Mr. October?"

There is also little or no evidence that Jackson was a particularly good clutch player during the regular season. For his career, with two outs and a runner in scoring position, Jackson hit .253 with an .851 OPS, almost exactly the same as what he did in other situations. Late and close, Jackson hit .251 with an .804 OPS, slightly worse than what he did other times. With the Yankees, late and close, he hit .275 with an OPS of .863 (compared to .281 and .897 overall with the Yankees). None of this is bad but none of it is especially good either.

Jackson wasn't overrated because he was a loudmouth who annoyed a lot of people. He wasn't overrated because, when he played in New York, they did name a candy bar after him. He was overrated for almost exactly the same reasons a lot of players are overrated. He was a slugger. He hit a lot of

home runs. But, by the time he got to the Yankees, he was a one-dimensional player. Put Reggie in the Hall of Fame? He belongs. Put a plaque up to him in Monument Park? All sorts of people have plaques there. But tell me that he was one of the greatest Yankees of all time? Not close. He wasn't even the best player on his Yankee teams, not even the second best. I have Jackson ranked, with guidance from a list of leaders in WAA (more favorable to Jackson than WAR), as about the 17th best outfielder in Yankee history, a little below George Selkirk and Bobby Murcer, a little ahead of Gene Woodling.

A Note on Thurman Munson

For a long time, the consensus seems to have been that Bill Dickey was the greatest catcher in Yankee history and likely one of the couple of best catchers in the history of baseball. Sometime around 1990 the consensus shifted to Yogi Berra. This may be the result of an extended comment in one of the Bill James *Historical Abstracts* making the case for Berra as the best, not just in the history of the Yankees but in the history of baseball. In any case, both Berra and Dickey are in the Hall of Fame. Berra was elected in 1972, his second year on the ballot. Dickey was elected in 1954, eight years after his retirement. I've already had my say about Berra and I don't have anything to add about Dickey that others haven't already said.

What I do want to question here is the easy assumption that in the history of Yankee catchers there was Dickey and Berra and then everybody else. I've also had my say about Elston Howard and how he was held back by the Yankees' color line. The catcher I have in mind here is Thurman Munson, who died in a plane crash, two-thirds of the way through the 1979 season.

I do not want to claim Munson was underrated. He won the MVP in 1976 when he was, by WAR, only the 11th best player in the league and only the fourth best just on the Yankees. It was a classic version of a sort of thing that happens often in MVP votes: A team nobody was expecting to win won; it was an ensemble effort; since we don't have any other explanation, let's attribute the win to leadership (usually involving a catcher, shortstop, or second basemen). Munson was the beneficiary of that "narrative." Munson also finished 7th in the MVP vote in both 1975 and 1977 even though the only year he finished in the top ten in the league in WAR was 1973, when he finished 12th in the MVP vote. The big difference between Munson before and after 1975? Through 1974, Munson batted all over the line up but mostly in the second half. In 1975, he batted fourth almost all the time and in 1976 and 1977 he batted third. The result was more RBI opportunities and more RBI, which MVP voters have often counted heavily.

In MVP votes, Munson was probably overrated. In Hall of Fame votes? Not so much. After his death, there was a movement to waive the rule limiting eligibility to players who had been retired at least five years and to induct him immediately. This is what had happened for Lou Gehrig, who was elected by special election the year he retired and also for Roberto Clemente, who died in a plane crash on New Year's Eve, 1972. But the movement to induct Munson didn't go anyplace. Munson did appear on the Hall of Fame ballot in 1981. He got 15.5% of the vote (with75% required for election). He appeared on Hall of Fame ballots 14 more times. He never again got as much as 10% of the vote.

Is the difference between Dickey and Berra, on the one hand, and Munson, on the other, really so big? I don't think so.

Let's start with single seasons. Here's a list of the top five single season for Yankee catchers by WAR.

Thurman Munson	1973	7.2
Thurman Munson	1975	6.6
Bil Dickey	1937	6.5
Yogi Berra	1956	6.2
Yogi Berra	1950	6.0

Well, look at that. But, you might object, the point of ranking catchers isn't just single years. Even if we want to look just at peak values, we should look at the best three years, or the best five, or even the best seven. Ok, I can do that, too.

	Top 3	Top 5	Top 7
Thurman Munson	**19.3**	**29.5**	37.0
Yogi Berra	18.0	29.4	**37.9**
Bill Dickey	17.8	27.3	35.5
Jorge Posada	16.9	25.3	32.6
Elston Howard	16.1	23.1	26.5

Well, look at that, too. Munson has the highest three year total, the highest five year total, and the second best seven year total, not far behind Berra.

By career WAR, Berra and Dickey do lead Munson, but not by as much as you might expect.

Yogi Berra	59.4
Bill Dickey	56.4
Thurman Munson	46.1
Jorge Posada	42.7
Elston Howard	27.0

Not bad, but remember that Munson lost his later years, just as Elston Howard was robbed of his early years. So, here's the WAR through age 31, Munson's last full season.

Yogi Berra	43.8
Thurman Munson	43.7
Bill Dickey	40.6
Jorge Posada	16.7
Gary Sanchez	11.7

And one more thing. Why am I claiming that so many of the 1976-1981 Yankees are underrated (Randolph and Nettles and White as well as Munson)? The answer is easy. It was the worst hitting environment of any of the years in which the Yankees had good teams. Let's pull out the neutralization tool again and compare Munson's raw figures to Berra's, Dickey's, Howard's and Posada's and then "neutralize" them all to the American league in 1937, Dickey's best year.

	Raw	G	HR	RBI	BA	OBP	SA	OPS
Berra	2116	358	1430		.285	.348	.483	.830
Dickey	1789	202	1209		.313	.382	.486	.868
Munson	1423	113	701	.292	.346	.410	.756	
Posada	1829	275	1065		.273	.374	.474	.848
Howard	1492	161	733	.279	.324	.436	.760	

Neutralized to 1937		G	HR	RBI	BA	OBP	SA	OPS
Berra	2092	401	1713		.309	.375	.524	.899
Dickey	1789	208	1281		.321	.392	.500	.891
Munson	1362	129	907	.332	.391	.465	.856	
Posada	1738	284	1228		.289	.393	.503	.895

| Howard | 1488 | 179 | 905 | .304 | .353 | .475 | .827 |

Am I saying that if Munson had lived his career WAR would have been as high as Berra's or better than Dickey's? No. By the standards of catchers, Berra and Dickey and, even more, Posada and Howard were unusually good in their 30's. By 1979, the year of his death, Munson was already slowing down. And, since Munson despised Steinbrenner, it's also possible that Munson would have escaped the Yankees altogether. Do I entirely believe WAR for catchers? No to that, too, although the defensive values assigned do correspond at least roughly to reputation (high for Dickey, Berra, Munson, and Howard; lousy for Posada). Do I think Munson should be in the Hall of Fame? Not necessarily. But I do think Munson should be in the discussion for the Hall of Fame and certainly in the discussion of the Yankees' greatest catcher ever.

CHAPTER 15
BACK TO THE WILDERNESS: 1982-1992

On the surface, the seasons from 1982 through 1993 look like the mirror image of the Great Collapse from 1965 through 1975. In the Great Collapse, the Yankees declined suddenly and slowly built themselves back. In the Wilderness Years, the Yankees declined slowly, eventually hit bottom, and then recovered rapidly. In the Great Collapse, the Yankees had six winning years, five losing years, one last place finish, no first-place finishes and an overall won/lost percentage of .502. In the Wilderness Years the Yankees had seven winning years, five losing years, one last place finish, no first-place finishes and an overall won/lost percentage of .512. In both stretches, the Mets became the main attraction in New York, winning championships in 1969 and 1986 and drawing more fans.

Look just a little deeper, though, and one major difference leaps out. The 1965-1975 Yankees were—there is no other way to put it—boring. They featured a declining Mickey Mantle. The two players who played the most games over those eleven years were Roy White, a very good but very quiet player, and Horace Clarke, a decidedly average player (lifetime, -2 WAA) who, fairly or unfairly, has become the symbol of that era. The 1982-1993 Yankees were anything but boring. With George Streinbrenner now firmly in control, the team went through eleven managerial changes in eleven years:

1982 Bob Lemon (2nd stint), Gene Michael (2nd stint)
1983 Billy Martin (3rd stint)
1984 Yogi Berra (2nd stint)
1985 Yogi Berra, Billy Martin (4th stint)
1986 Lou Piniella

1987 Lou Piniella
1988 Billy Martin (5th stint), Lou Piniella (2nd stint)
1989 Dallas Green, Bucky Dent
1990 Buck Dent, Stump Merrill
1991 Stump Merrill
1992 Buck Showalter

And players?   There was Don Mattingly—Donnie Baseball—and Ron Guidry—the Gator—and Dave Righetti. There were future Hall of Famers Dave Winfield, Rickey Henderson, Phil Niekro and the Goose (Gossage). There were free agents galore: Tommy John, and Steve Kemp and Steve Sax and Don Baylor and Dave Collins and Ed Whitson as well as Winfield, Niekro, and Gossage. In fact, the Yankees relied more heavily on free agents in these years than for any comparable stretch in their history.

There were plenty of controversies. And there were plenty of fights, which seemed to happen when Billy Martin was drinking too much, which was pretty much all the time. In one particularly notorious fight, outside a cocktail lounge in Baltimore, Whitson broke Martin's arm. The main event, though, for almost a decade was Steinbrenner versus Winfield. In 1981, Winfield signed a contract, 23 million dollars for ten years, that made him the highest paid player in baseball.

Winfield later claimed that he snookered Steinbrenner, that Steinbrenner had not read or understood an inflation clause that raised the value of the contract from 16 to 23 million dollars. I'm a little skeptical: I can't believe that various lawyers and accountants didn't comb over the document at a time when 23 million dollars still counted as big bucks. No matter: Steinbrenner and Winfield started sniping almost immediately

and Steinbrenner does seem to have looked for ways to get out of the contract almost from the day he signed it. When the Yankees made the World Series in 1981 and Winfield went one for 22 against the Dodgers, Steinbrenner was furious. He would later call Winfield "Mr. May," an altogether explicit slight in comparison to Reggie Jackson, "Mr. October." Winfield sued Steinbrenner twice for failing to make contributions to Winfield's charitable foundation that had been mandated in his contract. In 1988, Winfield published his book, *A Player's Life*, with criticism of Steinbrenner as a running theme. Steinbrenner, always ready to escalate, hired Howard Spira, a gambler and FBI informant who had also worked briefly for Winfield's foundation, to dig up dirt on Winfield. Nobody came out of this incident looking good. Winfield was among the first, if not the very first, player to set up a charitable foundation. He was also the first winner of the Branch Rickey Award for Community Service. Still, Spira made a series of claims about Winfield's sexual indiscretions and Winfield himself acknowledged "improprieties" in handling his foundation's funds. Steinbrenner got into a dispute with Spira about how much he, Steinbrenner, owed Spira for his work. Spira threatened to spill more dirt on the Yankees. And Steinbrenner found himself suspended from baseball for the second time (this time primarily for his association with a "known gambler") in July 1990. And Howard Spira? He spent two years in jail for attempted extortion. His take on the whole nasty business pretty much sums up many views of the Yankees in the late 1980s: "I do not forgive him [Steinbrenner] for all the terrible things he did to me. I stand by what I've said: He ruined my life, my health and my reputation."

From 1983 through 1988, the Yankees were good, above .500 every year as managers churned in and out. In 1984 Detroit started 35-5 and drained the pennant race of any drama by the end of May. The Yankees finished third, 17 games behind. The big excitement in that season was the race for the batting championship between Don Mattingly and Dave Winfield. They went into the last day of the season with Winfield leading, .341 to .339. Winfield went one for four but Mattingly went four for five to win the title .343 to .340. Winfield remained bitter about what happened, not so much as losing the batting title as how he was treated: "Every time Donnie steps up to bat, cheers fill the stadium, standing O's in fact. Every time I step to bat there are boos. … Stuff like that hurts, believe me. It stays with you." Winfield, and many others, saw racial undertones in the preference for a white player over a Black one.

The Yankees' best year in the span was 1985. They started slowly, winning six and losing ten, which got Yogi Berra fired. Under Billy Martin, back for his fourth term as Yankee manager, the Yankees moved to within a game and a half of division-leading Toronto in late July, then fell back before winning 40 of 57 to finish two games back. The team finished 97-65, their best record of the Wilderness years. With Rickey Henderson joining Winfield and Mattingly in the lineup, they led the league in scoring for the first time since 1976,

In 1988 with Martin back for his fifth and final term as manager, the Yankees made another run for the division championship, leading Boston and Detroit as late as July 27. But the Yankees faded for the rest of the season (27-36), quite likely exhausted by Martin. They wound up fifth in a very tightly packed division.

After 1988 it got much worse: four straight seasons under .500, including a last place finish in 1990. Guidry was slowed by bone chips in his elbows and was sent to the minors in 1989 before deciding to retire. Mattingly was slowed by a bad back and lost much of the power that had made him an elite player. Winfield, after his best season as a Yankee in 1988 (.322 batting average with 25 home runs, 4th in the vote for MVP), sat out all of 1989 after back surgery for a herniated disk and was gone to California the next year. Willie Randolph, the team captain, a team leader, and one of the last links to the 1977-78 champions, left for free agency in 1989 without, so far as I know, ever getting a serious offer from the Yankees. Henderson, coming up on free agency, got traded back to Oakland 1989 for a small fraction of what the Yankees had given up for him 4 ½ years earlier. Steinbrenner seemed to be losing interest in the Yankees. He had become involved with the US Olympic Committee beginning in the Winter of 1988 and put most of his energies there. (To be fair, Steinbrenner led a commission that suggested fundamental and very positive changes in the way the United States supported its Olympics athletes.) In any case, the free agent signings (Steve Sax, Mike Witt, Andy Hawkins, Mel Hall) were fewer and lesser.

There is a conventional wisdom that what saved the Yankees was Steinbrenner's suspension from managing team operations in 1990. That suspension, according to the conventional wisdom, allowed Gene Michael, who took over as General Manager in August 1990, and others to rebuild the team without interference. Sometimes the conventional wisdom is right.

Overrated Outfield: Dave Winfield

I

Who Overrated Him: Hall of Fame Voters, MVP Voters, Gold Glove voters and George Steinbrenner before he underrated him

Dave Winfield was a great athlete. At the University of Minnesota, he was an all-American baseball player, primarily as a pitcher. He was also a starting forward on a Minnesota basketball team that was ranked as high as third in the country and wound up tenth after three late season losses (by a total of 11 points). Winfield was drafted fourth overall by the San Diego Padres in the baseball draft. He was picked in the fourth round by the Atlanta Hawks of the NBA. And he was picked in the 17th round of the NFL draft by his hometown Minnesota Vikings, even though he had never played football in either high school or college.

Unfortunately, athleticism is neither a prerequisite nor a guarantee of being a good baseball player. I have no interest in piling on. Winfield had the misfortune of playing for the Yankees for a decade when they won no World Series. He also got more than his fair share of flak from the New York press and he was badly sullied by the Sreinbrenner/Spira stuff. He deserved better on both counts.

What I have in mind is not an evaluation of Winfield the person. He was, so far as I can tell, complicated, probably even more complicated than the rest of us. I don't know enough, not any way near enough, to cut through those complexities and I'm not really all that interested in any way. It's Winfield the ball player I want to think about here.

Winfield was a first ballot Hall of Famer. He was the highest paid player in baseball. He finished in the top ten in MVP voting seven times, four with the Yankees. He won seven

Gold Gloves, five with the Yankees. *The Sporting News*, in a 1998 list, picked him as the 94th best player ever. I wish.

Let's clear up one issue first. In 1985, Steinbrenner famously called Winfield "Mr. May." It wasn't nice but that doesn't mean it wasn't fair. Let's look at the evidence.

The basis of Steinbrenner's charge against Winfield was Winfield's disastrous 1981 World Series. That was the series where the Yankees blew two games to none lead to the Dodgers. Winfield went 1 for 22. His only hit was a single in the top of the fifth of game five. That was bad. It's less clear what it means about Winfield. If my math is right, the odds of a .250 hitter going 1 for 22 by chance are about one in eighty, the chances of a .300 hitter going 1 for 22 are about one in three hundred. So, it's possible but not likely that Winfield hit a stretch of bad luck. But it's more likely he choked, as Steinbrenner strongly implied.

But how did Winfield do in other big games? It's not clear. Winfield's disastrous World Series followed an ALCS in which Winfield went just 2 of 13 in a three-game sweep of Oakland but that followed an ALDS win over Milwaukee where Winfield was 7 for 20. The only other time Winfield appeared in the post season was 1992, when he was a 40-year-old with Toronto. That time, in the ALCS against Oakland, Winfield was 6 for 24 but with two home runs. Then, in the World Series against the favored Atlanta Braves, Winfield was just 4 for 22 with just one RBI until his last at bat in the top of the eleventh of Game Six. Winfield came up with two on and two out. His double drove in both runs for a 4-2 lead that held up even though the Braves scored one run of their own in the bottom. Toronto won its first Championship and Winfield won the Babe Ruth Award as the best player in the entire post season. How to assess Winfield's

post season career? His overall stats are worse than mediocre: a .208 batting average and a .641 OPS, both well below his regular season standards. But his postseason WPA (Win Probability Added) is positive, which means that his hits came at key moments and that he did more, at least at bat, to help his teams win than he did to make his teams lose. My conclusion about Winfield in the postseason? It's dangerous to make conclusions based on small sample sizes.

What about during the regular season, especially with the Yankees? Well, from 1981 through 1988, Winfield's overall OPS was .854. With runners in scoring position, it was .921, which is good. With two outs and runners in scoring position, it was .837, not far off from his overall record. Late and close it was .751, well below his standard but about average for the entire team. Baseball-Reference also divides at bats into high, medium and low "leverage." I don't like using those statistics because I can't quite figure out how they're calculated. They should be at least loosely related to all of the other clutch statistics. In Winfield's case, they aren't. His OPS in "high leverage" positions was .873. In medium leverage it was .828. In low leverage it was .869. I'm a little skeptical about claims to "clutch ability" to begin with. I'm willing to be convinced if the evidence is overwhelming—as I think it is for Yogi Berra. But for Winfield, it's mixed. I would not, by any stretch of the imagination, consider him a clutch hitter. But neither would I call him a choke. Steinbrenner's "Mr. May" name calling was, so far as I can tell, neither nice nor fair.

My case that Winfield was overrated does not rest on issues of character, on or off the field. It doesn't rest on his perceived failures or triumphs in the postseason. It rests on how good he was, day in and day out, during the regular

season. Winfield was a good hitter with the Yankees. For his eight full years with the team he averaged more than 25 home runs per year and over 100 RBI. In fact, he drove in over 100 six of his eight years. One of the years he didn't, he drove in 97. And the other year he didn't was a strike season (1981) where he was on pace to drive in 100. Winfield's RBI record does, however, slightly overstate Winfield's value to the Yankees. Winfield did not walk a lot, which made it easier to drive in runs. And he typically batted third, fourth or fifth which also gave him more opportunities. Overall, though, Winfield's OPS+ with the Yankees was 134. That's 14th in team history (among players with 1500 or more plate appearances), the same range as Gary Sheffield, Rickey Henderson, Mike Stanley, Giancarlo Stanton, and Tommy Henrich. That's very good. But it's not great, certainly not for the highest paid player in the game.

The big problem with Winfield was his fielding. He did win five Golden Glove Awards during his eight seasons with the Yankees. But that's the sort of thing that happens when you have a skill that isn't measured well. The numbers simply do not back up the claim that Winfield was a Gold Glove fielder or, for that matter, even a good fielder. With San Diego, before he signed with the Yankees, Baseball-Reference credits him with 13 runs above the average right fielder over the course of more than 1000 games. With the Yankees, B-R has him 61 defensive runs *below* average. Add in that he was playing positions—left field and right—that are at a defensive discount and it's even worse. B-R puts Winfield at 103 runs below average for the Yankees once you consider both his actual fielding and a positional adjustment. In his time with California B-R puts him at -49 in just two years. As with clutch hitting, I

wouldn't make too much of a few defensive statistics. But in Winfield's case, the evidence is strong—a roughly average fielder when he was young, who got progressively worse as he aged. There's nothing unusual about that but it does cut into Winfield's value.

Remember that to win a pennant a team needs about 20 Wins Above Average. In a 162-game schedule that converts to about 101 wins (1/2 of 162 is average plus 20 above average). That also means that a team needs its leader in WAA to be around at least 4 or 5. The Yankees have, in fact, had 125 player seasons with a WAA of 4 or above and 162 at 3.5 or above. (That's both position players and pitchers.) A WAA of 3.5 translates, very roughly, to a WAR of 5.5. In the Yankees' 48 first place finishes, they have only had a leader in WAR below 5.5 four times—and one of those was a strike year. Take that as a standard, a very high standard for most players but not for a Hall of Famer who was the highest paid player in Baseball, a player you were counting on to lead the team.

Winfield's career WAR for the Yankees was 27.1. His single highest year was 5.4. Winfield's career WAA for the Yankees was 11.3. His single season high was 3.4 in both 1984 and 1988. For his career, Winfield is 34th on the Yankees' list of leaders in WAA, just behind George Selkirk and Red Rolfe, just ahead of Moose Skowron, all players who had careers comparable in length to Winfield or shorter. Those were all good players. None were the sort of marquee player who would lead your team to a pennant.

The year Winfield had his best showing in the MVP vote in 1988 when he finished 4th. He was 11th that year in WAA. His next best showings were in 1981 and 1983, finishing 7th

both years. By WAR, he was 22nd one year, 24th the other. I really do hate to say it but he was overrated.

All-Time All-Star Team of Yankees Who Never Won a World Series with the Yankees

C: Mike Stanley
1B: Don Mattingly
2B: Del Pratt
SS: Roger Peckinpaugh
3B: Frank Baker
LF: Rickey Henderson
CF; Bobby Murcer
RF: Dave Winfield
DH: Jason Giambi
P: Mike Mussina
P: Mel Stottlemyre
P: Jack Chesbro
P: Russ Ford
RP: Dave Righetti
Eligibility Pending: Aaron Judge, D. J. LeMahieu

A Note about Rickey Henderson

I probably should have put a couple of quizzes someplace where the headings didn't give away the answer. But I didn't. So: Five different Yankee position players have had seasons of 8 or more Wins Above Average. Babe Ruth did it an incredible seven times. Mickey Mantle did it three times. Lou Gehrig did it once and Aaron Judge did it in 2022. It seems obvious that the fifth should be The Great DiMaggio. Except it

isn't. It isn't Alex Rodriguez either. It certainly isn't Derek Jeter or Don Mattingly or Yogi.

It's Rickey Henderson, in 1985.

I think it's pretty well recognized that Rickey was a great player. He is the all-time leader in stolen bases and in runs scored. He is 14th all-time in WAR, just a bit behind Gehrig and a bit ahead of Mantle. He was a first ballot Hall of Famer and there seems to be a consensus that he was the greatest leadoff hitter ever.   He was not so clearly appreciated when he was with the Yankees.

Henderson came to the Yankees from Oakland in between the 1984 and 1985 seasons. The Yankees gave up five pretty good prospects to get him. In 1985 Henderson led the league in WAR and WAA by a wide margin over both Wade Boggs, himself a much underrated player, and George Brett. With Oakland, Henderson had played left field, which he did very well. The Yankees asked him to play center, which he also did very well. He finished third in the MVP vote to Brett and teammate Don Mattingly. The next year his batting average fell off but he hit a career high 28 home runs. He led the league in scoring for the second straight year and, also for the second straight year, set a team record for stolen bases. He was ninth in the league in WAR, sixth among position players. He received no votes for MVP. In 1987, he hurt his hamstring. He played in only 95 games, although at the same high level as the previous two years. He received no votes for the MVP but he did get a lot of grief from the papers and some teammates for "dogging it." In 1988, he hit over .300 with an OBA close to .400. For the third time in four years, he set a team record for stolen bases (93). That still stands. He was 9th in the league in WAR, fifth among position players, and 18th in the MVP vote.

In 1989, he got off to a slow start and, after 65 games, was traded back to Oakland for a much less impressive haul than the Yankees had given up 4 ½ years earlier. With Oakland, he wound up leading AL position players in WAR, as he did again in 1990. During his 4 ½ years with the Yankees, Henderson accumulated WAA at a rate of just over 6 per 162 games. That's faster than anyone else in team history except for Babe Ruth.

You would think the papers would have raked the Yankees over the coals for letting a great player get away in 1989. Not so. Michial Martinez, writing in the *Times*, reported that: "The Yankees were willing to part with their left fielder and leadoff hitter because of a feeling throughout the organization that his skills had begun to fade." He continued, matter of factly: "There is not a significant void with his loss. Dallas Green, the Yankee manager, put Steve Sax in the leadoff spot last night … and can use either Polonia or Mel Hall in left." Dave Anderson, in his column the next day was even harsher

[T]here is no quarrel here with the Yankees' trading Henderson, only with what they received in return. ,,, But that's what happens when an overrated Henderson is in the final year of his overpaid contract. … Two years ago, playing in only 95 games because of a damaged hamstring muscle, he had some of his Yankee teammates whispering that he was dogging it. … in The Annex That George Built [next to the Bronx Terminal Market, a wholesale vegetable market], he was just another produce truck that crushed carrots and spilled lettuce leaves and departed by dawn.

Why the animosity? Rickey didn't toe the line. He regularly snubbed reporters. When he did talk, he spoke ungrammatically. He did not mouth the standard platitudes,

that all he cared about was a winning team. When asked about DiMaggio, Mantle and Yankees tradition, he answered. "I don't care about them…. It's Rickey time." He talked about his own statistics. He made flashy "snatch" catches, complained to umpires and took much more time than most to circle the bases on a home run. He also talked about himself in the third person. (I have only recently learned that there is a term for this: illeism. The most famous practitioner is Donald Trump. Many people take it as a sign of delusions of grandeur. My own suspicion is that it comes from a failure to develop a strong sense of oneself independent of others' opinions.) And he often annoyed his teammates, by what he said, by what he did, and by what he didn't do. Is that enough to give up on a talent that rightly belongs in the inner circle of the Hall of Fame? Is that enough to give up a talent who rightly won the MVP his first year back with Oakland? You might think so. You might be right. But I don't agree.

The Trade Seinfeld Made Famous

Seinfeld, Season 7, Episode 12, January, 1996

George Costanza has been working for the Yankees. By a series of, well, Seinfeldian coincidences, Steinbrenner (voiced by Larry David but never seen) comes to think that George has died. He goes to tell George's parents. George's mother is stunned. His father, Frank (played by Jerry Stiller), sits, looking disconsolate, and then bursts out; "What the hell did you trade Jay Buhner for?! He had 30 home runs, over 100 RBIs last year. He's got a rocket for an arm. You don't know what the hell you're doing!!" And Steinbrenner answers, "Well, Buhner was a good prospect, no question about it. But my baseball people love Ken Phelps' bat. They kept saying 'Ken Phelps, Ken Phelps'."

It's a classic Seinfeld shtick—self-absorbed characters breaking social conventions with comically exaggerated anger. It's also a telling commentary on what happened to the Yankees between the late eighties and their resurgence in the mid-nineties.

Frank Costanza was right about the trade. In July of 1988, the Yankees traded Buhner, a 23-year-old outfielder, to the Seattle Mariners for Ken Phelps, a 33-year-old first baseman/designated hitter who had never played more than 125 games in a season. It was exactly the sort of trade that outraged Steinbrenner's critics—a prospect for an established star, the future for the present. In this case, it was even worse because the established star wasn't a star at all, but a part time never was. Buhner went on to hit over 300 home runs and drive in nearly 1000 runs over fourteen seasons in Seattle. Phelps played a total of 131 games for the Yankees, batted .240 and was traded to Oakland for a minor league pitcher who never made the majors. Phelps, post-trade, was .1 WAR for the rest of his career. Buhner had 23 WAR. Frank Costanza was right: The Yankees lost the trade.

But Steinbrenner was also right, sort of. Steinbrenner, famous as a control freak, acknowledged that he listened to his "baseball people." In this case they were wrong, but for a good reason. I long ago lost my Bill James Baseball Abstracts from the mid 80's but I remember the general tone of their comments about Phelps. He was underused and underappreciated. With Seattle from 1986 through 1988, Phelps batted only .260 but he drew walks and hit home runs, precisely the skills that analytic types now see as prime virtues. Phelps' On Base Average was comfortably over .400, his OPS above .950 and his OPS+ above 150. I can't remember if James actually called

Phelps the Great White Whale of sabermetrics or joked that he was organizing a free Ken Phelps movement. That was the tone. Steinbrenner's "baseball people" were actually listening to the analytic types early on, maybe earlier than anyone else.

They, the analytic types, did get Phelps wrong. I'm not sure why. It may be that early analytics did not do a good job of measuring defense. It may be that they didn't take age sufficiently into account. Thirty-three years old is the downside of most players' careers. It might be that the Yankees did not take into account how much better Phelps, a left-handed hitter, was against right-handed pitchers than lefties (a lot). It might be that Phelps declined, the way a lot of players do, for no obvious reason. The analytic types got Phelps wrong but the underlying principles were right. And those principles became an important part of the Yankees' resurgence in the mid-nineties when Steinbrenner's "baseball people" were running the show.

The Yankees and Analytics

In most discussions of the coming of analytic methods in baseball management, pathbreaker credit goes, first, to Billy Beane, the General Manager of the Oakland A's who is the hero of *Moneyball* and, second, to John Henry, who bought the Red Sox from Tom Yawkey's estate, tried to hire Beane away from Oakland and even hired Bill James himself as a consultant. The Yankees do not play a part in this account. Although the Yankees now have a large analytics department, the conventional wisdom is that didn't start paying attention seriously until after the "sabermetric" savvy Red Sox won the 2004 World Series.

It's a good story. It helped that Michael Lewis' *Moneyball* was a best seller and that Brad Pitt played Billy Beane in the movie version. I don't believe it.

Consider the evidence. As Alan Schwarz shows in his *Numbers Game*, baseball analytics, not just baseball statistics, have been around for a long time. Branch Rickey, the General Manager of the Dodgers, hired Allan Roth as a full-time statistician in 1947, the same year Jackie Robinson integrated Major League Baseball. Bill James started self-publishing his Baseball Abstract in 1977. It has become the stuff of legend—a classic American Horatio Alger story—that James' first Abstract sold something like 75 copies and the second sold under 300. Fair enough, but by 1978 James was writing an annual preview for *Esquire*, at a time when people still read magazines. In 1982, Ballantine Books started publishing the Abstract. I bought a copy at a Walden's or Dalton's at the Smith Haven Mall on Long Island. John Thorn and Pete Palmer published the first edition of their massive *Total Baseball* in 1989, filled with On Base Averages and Total Player Ratings, a very direct forerunner of WAA and WAR. These were not obscure publications. Do you mean to tell me that nobody in the baseball business was aware of these books, that nobody read them, that nobody was influenced by them? I doubt it.

And the Yankees? In *The Numbers Game,* Schwarz tells the story of Matt Levine and Dick Cramer. Levine and Cramer were the founders of STATS INC, now a consulting company with some 1600 employees, then pretty much just Levine and Cramer. They—mostly Cramer with the help of Pete Palmer—developed a data analysis system for Apple Computers. They called it Edge 1.000 and sold its use first to Oakland, which used it mostly to enhance their broadcasts, and then to the

White Sox who used it to help set strategy. Here's Schwarz's account of what happened next:

> STATS knew that the Edge 1.000 system would appeal mostly to a hands-on, meddlesome, owners so it was just a matter of time before Levine approached George Steinbrenner. [I]n the summer of 1982, … 25 club officials crammed into a room in the bowels of Yankee Stadium. … Levine got two syllables into his presentation before Steinbrenner interrupted, 'Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" he said. Steinbrenner pulled an envelope out of his pocket, opened it, unfolded a list he had prepared. 'I want to know whether your system can do these 10 things. If it can do these 10 things, we'll buy it.'

As it turned out, Edge could do nine of the ten items on Steinbrenner's list—data on how to position fielders, batter vs. pitcher breakdowns, pitch counts and more. By Schwarz' account, which came from Levin, Steinbrenner sat silently for ten seconds, turned to the team treasurer, said "Buy it," and left the room. Remember, this was 1982, two decades before *Moneyball.* Notice also, that there were 25 people in the room, including the team treasurer as well as Steinbrenner. This was not a casual event in some obscure corner of the organization. You still think the Yankees weren't paying attention?

I've written, just above, about the Ken Phelps trade. There's much more. Just about the first principle of analytics, in its early days through *Moneyball*, was that On Base Average mattered more than batting average. Well, I remember Gene Michael, then the Yankee General Manager, talking about a "long chain offense"—which is to say, emphasizing OBA—in the early 1990s. Let me confess that I can't find that particular phrase, despite searching both the *Times* archive and the

internet as a whole. Mostly, I get hits about Jewelry. But I did find this account in Joel Sherman's tribute in the *New York Post* after Michael's death.

> Late in that 1990 season — my second year as the Yankee beat reporter for The Post — Stick brought me into his office at the old Stadium. He started to point to numbers next to names: .257 for Oscar Azocar, .258 for Alvaro Espinoza, .259 for Bob Geren, .272 for Mel Hall and so on.
>
> I was not sure what he was showing me. They were on-base percentages. I am sure Stick never read Bill James, and this was more than a decade before "Moneyball" would be published. But something sat wrong in his baseball soul. "Our offensive innings go too fast, we make it too easy on the pitcher, we have to have better at-bats."

I believe Sherman that Michael had never read Bill James. He knows much better than I do. But it seems pretty likely that someone with the Yankees had. And, even if nobody had, the Yankees were clearly adopting a key finding from analytics. It would pay off.

PART IV: THE SECOND EMPIRE

CHAPTER 16
REVIVAL: 1993-1997

1993 was the first of a long stretch of winning seasons for the Yankees—now 31 consecutive years and counting, already easily the second longest streak in the history of the sport.

There is a conventional wisdom about the Yankees' return to glory beginning in 1993. The first pillar of that wisdom is that Steinbenner's suspension for the Winfileld/Spira business allowed the "baseball people" to run the show. The second pillar is that the "baseball people" stopped trading away prospects for mediocre veterans, opening the way for Bernie Williams and Derek Jeter and Mariano Rivera and Jorge Posada and Andy Pettitte, all developed in the Yankees' minor league system. The first pillar is sturdier than the second.

After four consecutive years below .500, the Yankees were expected to contend in 1993. Why? In his preview of the season in *The Times*, Jack Curry wrote:

> Listen closely and hear the optimism: Players are freely talking about challenging for the American League East. Management is bragging about selling more season tickets than last year. And the owner, George Steinbrenner, is predicting greatness for a team searching for its … first hint of October fun in a dozen years.
>
> …
>
> And why not let the owner bluster? After trudging to a 76-86 record in Buck Showalter's first season as manager, the Yankees opened their checkbook and persuaded

[Wade] Boggs, [Jimmy] Key and Spike Owen to sign up with New York for $35 million while trading for [Jim] Abbott and Paul O'Neill."

There were hopes for Bernie Williams, who had moved into the starting lineup in 1992, and hope that Mattingly would return to form. But, for the most part, the optimism rested on free agents and trades.

The Yankees did contend in 1993. They were tied for first with Toronto as late as September 5, before fading to 10-14 for the rest of the month, ending seven games behind the Blue Jays. Each of the top five players on the Yankees by WAR (Key, Mike Stanley, Boggs, Mike Gallego, and Jose Tartabull) had come to the Yankees as free agents. In fact, roughly 60% of the team's value (measured by WAR) came from free agents, the highest in the team history, before or since.

1994 was even better—as long as it lasted. The Yankees took over first from the Red Sox on May 9. They stretched their lead to ten games in early August, went into a mini-slump but were still 6 ½ ahead of Baltimore on August 11 when the season ended. The issues that led to the players' strike were complicated, which is, of course, a hedge term for acknowledging that I'm not interested enough to think them through. In any case, the strike was and is the longest in baseball history. There was no World Series for the first and only time since 1904.

It was a pity. Plenty of mostly metaphorical tears have been shed for the Montreal Expos, who had the best record in the National League when everything stopped. There is even some speculation that, if there had been a World Series and the Expos had won it or even appeared in it, the whole history of baseball in Montreal might be different, that the team might

still be there rather than morphing into the Washington Nationals. The Yankees, of course, were never in danger of leaving the country but they were on track to win 100 games. They had the best record not just in their division but in the entire American League.

1994 was the first year of an offensive explosion that would last for two decades. American League teams averaged 5.23 runs per game, an average that was the highest since 1938 and an average that has been topped only twice since. The Yankees were part of this explosion. They averaged 5.93 runs per game, second best in the league, their best rate since 1939. But they did not do it like the old fashioned "Bronx Bombers." They were only tied for fourth in the league in home runs, but they led in On Base Average by a large margin, the mark of an analytically savvy team before most baseball people knew about analytics. The 1994 team did not rely on free agents quite so thoroughly as the 1993 team but free agents, by my count, were still accounting for more than half the team's WAR. The "Core Four" were still just a glimmer in Gene Michael's eyes.

1995 was a step backwards. The strike was still on and the season delayed. The season did eventually start. As the owners were planning to use replacement players, the players sued the owners for unfair labor practices. When Yankee fan—and future Supreme Court Justice—Sonia Sotomayor, then a US District Judge, ruled against the owners, the players agreed to go back under the terms of the expired collective bargaining agreement.

With the season cut back to 144 game schedules, the Yanks got off to a fast start, with a 12-2 win over the Red Sox putting them in first place with a 10-5 record. The Yankees

proceeded to lose 20 of 26 to drop to fifth and last in the Eastern Division. The Yankees rallied in the second half of the season and won 10 of their last 11 to qualify as the American League's first wild card just ahead of Kansas City, California, and Texas. It was the first of fourteen straight years the Yankees would appear in the post season, the longest streak in Major League history (unless you count the Atlanta Braves streak, also 14 years if you ignore that there was no postseason in 1994).

The playoffs, against Seattle, were heartbreaking. The Yankees won the first two. Seattle won the next two. The fifth and final game was Don Mattingly's last. The Yankees were leading 4-2 going into the bottom of the eight. Ken Griffey hit a home run and David Cone walked the tying run home on his 147th pitch of the game. The Yankees took a 5-4 lead in the top of the eleventh on a single by Randy Velarde. Then in the bottom of the eleventh, Joey Cora and Griffey both singled and Edgar Martinez drove them both home to end the Yankees' season and Mattingly's career.

1996 had a happier ending, with the Yankees first World Championship in 18 years. The 1996 team was the first to include what would later be known as the "core four." Andy Pettitte and Mariano Rivera had both been rookies in 1995. In 1996 Pettitte won 21. Rivera had one of the greatest seasons of any middle reliever ever and finished third in the vote for the Cy Young award. Derek Jeter also joined the Yankees at the end of 1995. In 1996, he was rookie of the year. And Jorge Posada made his debut late in the season as a backup catcher to future manager Joe Girardi. (I've never understood why Bernie Williams, another product of the Yankees' minor league system, wasn't included in the "core four." I understand that "core five" doesn't have the same ring but they could have been

the "strive five" or the "revive five" or even the "fab five.") The 1996 team had the highest proportion of its value from graduates of the Yankees' minor league system in a decade.

The 1996 team was not great. They had good pitching but an almost exactly average offense. They took over first place at the end of April and stretched their lead to 12 games by the end of July. But they wobbled home, losing 30 of their last 59. Their final record was 92-70 but their "Pythagorean" won/lost was only 88-74. They finished four games ahead of the Orioles in their own division but seven behind Cleveland for the best record in the league.

The postseason was a series of unlikely events. The Yankees lost the first game of the Division Series to the Rangers then won Game 2, 5-4, in twelve innings with Jeter scoring the winning run on a wild throw by Ranger third baseman Dean Palmer. They won Game 3, with two runs in the top of the ninth on three singles and a sacrifice fly. They won the fifth and final game 6-4, behind two homeruns from Bernie Williams and 6 innings of 1 hit relief from David Weathers, Mariano Rivera, and John Wetteland.

In the ALCS they took on the Baltimore Orioles, who had upset Cleveland in their ALDS. The Yankees were trailing 4-3 in the bottom of the eighth when Derek Jeter hit a fly ball to deep right field. Tony Tarasco, the Orioles right fielder seemed to be lined up to catch the ball when a fan—12-year-old Jeffrey Maier--reached over the railing to catch the ball before it hit Tarasco's glove. Although it's pretty clear in retrospect—you can see it on YouTube—that it was fan interference, the umpire ruled it a home run. The Orioles protested, adamantly, but there was no official replay in those days and the call stood. It was Jeter's first post season home run and a key moment in

the creation of the mythos around Jeter. The Yankees won in the bottom of the twelfth on a walk off home run by Williams. The Orioles came back to win Game 2. The Yankees won Game 3, 5-2, with four runs off future Yankee Mike Mussina. Games 4 and 5, both Yankee wins were less dramatic, and the Yankees were of to the World Series for the first time in fifteen years

The Yankees' opponent was the Atlanta Braves, the defending World Series champs, the team with the best record in the National League, featuring one of the greatest pitching staffs of all time (Greg Maddox, John Smoltz, Tommy Glavine, all future first ballot Hall of Famers). The Braves were heavy favorites. They won Game 1, 12-1, behind Smoltz and Game 2, 4-0, behind Maddox. It seemed a matter of mere formalities before the Braves would wrap it up. But the Yankees won Game 3, 5-2, behind David Cone and another Bernie Williams home run in the top of the eighth. In Game 4, the Braves seemed back on track, taking a 6-0 lead through five innings. But the Yankees rallied for three runs in the top of the sixth. In the eighth, still trailing 6-3, the Yankees opened the inning with two singles and a ground out. That brought up Jim Leyritz, the backup catcher, in the game only because Torre had already pinch hit for starter Joe Girardi. On the sixth pitch of his at bat, Leyritz homered deep to left. Game tied. In the top of the tenth the Yankees scored twice with two out—three walks, a single, and an error on a pop fly. Series tied. The Yankees won Game 5, 1-0, with Andy Pettitte giving up just 5 hits over 8 1/3 innings. And they won Game 6, 3-2, with light hitting Joe Girardi's triple off Maddox the key hit. It was the single least likely World Series win in Yankee history.

The most important hit of the entire series was the Leyritz home run. According to Baseball-Reference, it did more than any other hit not just to improve the Yankees' chances of winning the game but also their chances of winning the series. I think it may have been the most important hit in Yankee history. If Leyritz had not homered when he did, the Yankees would have trailed three games to one with short odds of coming back. If the Yankees had not come back, Joe Torre would not have had the extra security that came with winning the World Series. I know that I am reaching into the realm of "butterfly effects." But it is certainly possible the Yankees would not have won again in 1998 and 1999 and 2000. Leyritz is an odd hero. He was never more than a backup. After baseball, he had a series of legal troubles, including a charge of vehicular homicide while driving under the influence. But none of that should take away from what he did in the eighth inning of Game 4 in Atlanta on October 23, 1996.

In 1997, the Yankees actually had a better record than in 1996. They won 96 games, four more than the year before. But the Yankees had two problems. One was that the Orioles improved even more than they did, winning 98 games in a pennant race that was nowhere as close as the final standings made it seem. The Yankees did not spend a single day in first place all season and came as close to the Orioles as they did only because they won eight of their last nine games at a point when everything had already been settled. The Yankees other problem was that they lost the Divisional Series to Cleveland. After leading two games to one, the Yankees lost the next two, 3-2 and 4-3. Close but no cigar.

CHAPTER 17
THE GLORY YEARS: 1998-2001

The myth is that the 1998-2000 Yankees were a juggernaut—the German army marching through Belgium, Amazon against your corner bookstore, Donald Trump against the truth—a massive, overwhelming force sweeping away everything in its path. It's a good story but it's not true. The 1998 team *was* an overwhelming force. They started the season 1-4, then went on what I would call a long winning streak if it hadn't lasted most of the season. The Yankees won 91 of their next 117 games (a pace to win 126 games) and led the Red Sox by 20 games in mid-August. The Yankees followed their peak with the closest thing they had to a slump all season, losing 18 of 33. They finished with 7 straight wins to set a (then) American League record of 114 wins. The postseason was almost as easy, a 3-0 sweep of Texas in the ALDS and a 4-0 sweep of San Diego in the World Series. The closest the season came to any drama was the ALCS against Cleveland when the Indians took a 2 game to 1 lead. The Yankees swept the final three games by a combined score of 18-8, scoring in the first inning of every game and had a lead at the end of every inning. That was it.

1999 was different. The Yankees took over first in June and led comfortably most of the season. But the Red Sox swept a three-game series in New York in mid-September to make it close and evoke fears of the 1978 Boston Massacre in reverse. The Yankees finished with 98 wins, four games ahead of Boston in the Eastern Division, one game ahead of Cleveland for the best record in the league. That's good but the 16-game decline in wins was the biggest since the end of

dynasty drop off (22 games) in 1965 and the second biggest in team history since 1925. The postseason was even easier than 1998, a three-game sweep of Texas, again, a 4-1 in over Boston in the ALCS and a sweep of Atlanta in the World Series. My guess is that the Yankees' success in the postseason created the impression that the Yankees were just going through the motions, waiting for the postseason to turn it on. I guess that could be, but baseball doesn't usually work like that.

If the 1998 season had been like the Germans marching through Belgium, the 2000 season was more like Bonaparte's retreat from Russia. Through most of the year the Yankees were in and out of first place, never more than four games ahead, never more than four games behind. Then in late August the Yankees won 14 of 18 to run their lead to nine games with 19 to go. The season should have been over, except that the Yankees lost 15 of their next 18, including two separate seven game losing streaks. Over those 18 games, the Yankees gave up 148 runs, an average of over eight a game. The Yankees did manage to hold and won the division by 2 ½ games over Boston. Their final record was 87-74, a winning percentage of .540. It was the fifth best record in the American League. It was also the lowest won/lost record of any of the Yankees' 48 first place finishes, 5 wins short of the 1996 Yankees, the previous holder of that odd distinction.

The Yankees made it through the playoffs, beating the A's three games to two and the Mariners four to two. The World Series was against the Mets, the first "subway series" since 1956. The individual games were all close, decided by one or two runs. But the series was not. The Yankees won four games to one.

The Yankees had won their third straight World Series, for the third time, something only one other franchise (the Oakland A's) has achieved even once. But these were not the 1936-1939 Yankees, who really were a juggernaut. They weren't even the 1949-53 Yankees, who were in several close races, but never had a collapse equivalent to the 2000 Yankees. The 1998 team was great. The 1999 team was good. The 2000 team was below average for the Yankees, one of the weakest World Series winners ever. A juggernaut? The Yankees won three consecutive championships. Who had the best record in the majors for those three years? That would be the Atlanta Braves.

Depth

There was a standard take on the 1998 team—that it lacked big stars, Hall of Fame types, but made up for it with incredible depth. Well, the first part of that take turned out to be wrong. In 1998, Rivera and Jeter were just starting out on long careers. As soon as they became eligible for the Hall, they were virtually coronated. But what about the other part of the take? How deep were the 1998 Yankees?

That's another one of those questions—there have been a bunch along the way—that's hard to answer because it's hard to know what it means. It could just mean the team with the most total talent, but that wouldn't be very interesting because "deepest" wouldn't mean anything different from "best." It could mean that the ninth man in the batting is better than the ninth man in any other lineup. Or that there are several subs who play a lot and play well. Or that the fifth starter is almost as good as the first starter. Or that there are several reliable relievers.

The basic idea, though, is pretty simple—that there are a lot of players contributing to making the team good. One way

of measuring this is to count up the number of players above a certain level—20 or 30 home runs hitter, 10 or 15 wins for pitchers. But I think the spirit of talking about depth involves a recognition that contributions can take different forms. And this is exactly what WAR and WAA were invented for.   Either one would make sense, but WAA seems closer to the claims about the 1998 team. It's not just that they had a bunch of players who were better than minor leaguers (the standard for WAR) but a lot of players who were better than average major leaguers. That's WAA. So, I did a search for how many players different Yankee teams had with a WAA above one.

The 1998 Yankees had six position players who meet my standard.   But so did 40 other Yankee teams, including five (1931, 1952, 1954, 1958, and 1989) with eight or more. The 1998 Yankees also had six pitchers with 1+ WAA. Only twelve other Yankee teams meet this standard—all but one since 1982 as "modern" pitching staffs tend to spread out innings much more in the past.

That leaves the Yankee 1998 total at 13 players with 1 win or more above average. In addition to six position players with a WAA above one (Jeter, O'Neill, Williams, Brosius, Posada, Martinez) there were four more above .5 WAA (Spencer, Curtis, Knoblauch and Bush). Four of the five primary starters (Wells, Hernandez, Cone and Irabu) were at one or more WAA. The only starter who missed was Andy Pettitte (still above average at .3 WAA). Two relievers (Rivera and Mendoza) were also above one WAA and two more (Lloyd and Holmes) were above .5 WAA. That was a deep team. The only other Yankee team with 13 players at one WAA or above— pitchers and position players—was the 1939 team. But that team also had one player with 0 WAA (Crosetti) and another (Dahlgren) at -

2.7. The 1998 team was deep, probably the deepest in Yankee history. That they also had a couple of stars was a bonus.

A Note on Derek Jeter

I would not have thought it useful to add a single word to the massive number of words already written about Derek Jeter. I thought it was all pretty much settled. He was a class act, a team player who always hustled. He had the good fortune to play for the Yankees at a great moment in a great team's history. He was a very good hitter, especially for a shortstop. But he was a very poor fielder, also especially for a shortstop. He played for a very long time, longer than anyone else in Yankee history. I have read so many articles and comments, almost all from analytics types, about Jeter's bad defense that I was prepared to entertain the possibility that he was actually underrated. (See, for just one example, Bill James' absolutely blistering article in *The Fielding Bible*.) And the clincher, for me, was the MVP vote, which Jeter never won. Even in 1999, Jeter's best year, a year the Yankees lead the entire AL in wins, won the AL Championship, and won the World Series, when Jeter led all AL position players in WAR and finished second to Pedro Martinez in WAR for all players, Jeter finished sixth in the MVP vote and drew a single first place vote from the 28 voters. Well, if I thought Jeter was underrated, I was dead wrong.

Let me make it clear that I am a Jeter fan. Among much else, I have read several times that Jeter's father has a PhD in sociology (as do I). As it turns out, his degree is actually in something closer to social work but I'll take what I can. Sociology? Social work? Socialism? What's the difference? I am also very impressed by the many tributes to Jeter's character—about which more to follow—both as a player and

since his retirement.   But that is not what I see as at issue. There are, I think, three different questions about Jeter. One is how good he actually was. A second is how he was and is evaluated. And the third is why there is a difference between how good he was and how good he was taken to be. I address each in turn.

So, how good was Jeter? Pretty good. Start with the counting stats (the "how many" type stats) rather than the rate stats (batting average, slugging average) and Jeter looks especially good because he played so long. Jeter is 6th all-time in hits and 12th all-time in runs scored. That's impressive, all the more so for a player at a key defensive position. Jeter is *first* all time among shortstops in hits and runs. Although Jeter was not noted as a power hitter, even his 260 home runs rank him fourth among shortstops. (For the record, I am specifying shortstop as someone who played at least half his games at the position. This excludes both Alex Rodriguez, who would otherwise lead in runs as well as HRs and RBI, and Ernie Banks, who also hit a lot more HRs than Jeter.)   He does equally as well on Yankee team leaderboards: first in games and hits and stolen bases. Ahead of Ruth, Gehrig, Mantle, DiMaggio, Berra and all the others.   He's second on the Yankees in runs scored, a mere 36 behind Ruth but ahead of everybody else. He's even 6th all-time in RBI and 8th in home runs. Should Jeter be a Yankee icon? Absolutely.

If we look at broader measures of offense, Jeter doesn't rank quite as high, but the numbers are still impressive. In *offensive* wins above replacement. Jeter is second only to Hans Wagner among shortstops and, among Yankees, 4th to Ruth, Mantle and Gehrig. That is also to say he's ahead of Cal Ripken, Robin Yount, Luke Appling among shortstops and

ahead of DiMaggio and Berra and Bernie Williams among Yankees. Of course, offensive wins above average does *not* include defense. And there's the rub. When we look at overall WAR, which does include defense, Jeter drops to 9th among shortstops, just ahead of Alan Trammel and Barry Larkin, but behind Wagner, Ripken, Yount, Appling, Arky Vaughan, George Davis, Ozzie Smith, and Bill Dahlen. If all those names are not familiar… well, that's the point. Among Yankees, he drops behind DiMaggio as well as Ruth, Mantle and Gehrig. Remember, of course, that DiMaggio played in less than 2/3 as many games as Jeter. Among all position players, Jeter is 61st. Among all players, including pitchers, he's 91st. It gets worse if we look at WAA, wins above average rather than wins above replacement. Remember the difference? WAR, wins above replacement, gives credit for anything a player does that would lead (with a team of 9 players of equal performance) to a winning percentage above .300. WAA, wins above average, gives credit only for what a player does that would lead (with a team of 9 players of equal performance) to a record above .500. The difference then between WAA and WAR is roughly equivalent to the (prorated) difference between winning 48 games (.3 X 162 games) and winning 81 games (.5 X 162).

Earlier on, I used Jeter as my prime example of a player who ranks higher by WAA than by WAR. Jeter in his last five years was a below average player. For most of that time—not all—he was still better than a freely available replacement, which is to say that he was above "replacement level." For the years Jeter was above replacement level but below average, WAR continues to credit Jeter with value. WAA, in contrast, subtracts value from anything below average even if it is above replacement level. Which is a better measure? Like almost

everything else, it depends. WAR makes sense if you want to give credit for longevity. WAA makes sense if you want to think about what gets a team to excellence. For a team like the Yankees, who are generally contending, WAA may make sense more often than not. And what about Jeter's WAA? Among Yankees, it drops to 10th, after Berra, Dickey, Rodriguez and Randolph, and just ahead of Charlie Keller. all of whom played significantly fewer games for the Yankees than did Jeter. Among shortstops, Jeter drops from 9th to 18th, behind Peewee Reese, Joe Tinker, and Joe Cronin among others. He is not even very far ahead of Phil Rizzuto, ranked 27th. Among all position players, he's 127th. Among all players (including pitchers), he's 194th. Whether you prefer WAR or WAA—and you could make a case for either one—Jeter's drop in rankings from his offensive statistics is based on measures of Jeter's dismal defense.

Measures of defense are notoriously unreliable. In Jeter's case, however, we have three kinds of measures of defense—more or less traditional measures, analytic measures based on traditional data about assists, put outs, double plays and errors, and more recent measures based on observational data. What's striking is not that Jeter does badly on one of these measures. What's striking is that he does really badly on all of them. Do remember that Jeter was a shortstop, by almost any account the most important position on the field. In fact, Jeter never played so much as a single inning on the field at another position. (The only other Yankee greats for whom this was also true seem to be Bill Dickey at catcher and Rizzuto at shortstop. Ruth moved back and forth between left and right and even played a few games at 1st and pitcher. Gehrig played a few games in the outfield. DiMaggio started as a left fielder before

moving to center and even one unhappy game at first. Berra, of course, played a couple of hundred games in the outfield over several years. Mantle, like DiMaggio, started at left before moving to center and ended his career playing 1st with cameos along the way at 2nd, short, and 3rd. Don Mattingly played nearly 100 games in the outfield and, famously, even three games as a left-handed throwing third baseman.) Jeter gets credit—not just from me but in most analytics systems—for playing a difficult position. To say that Jeter was a lousy fielder is not to say, for example, that he was worse on defense than Jason Giambi or Ron Blomberg or even Alfonso Soriano, all of whom played less difficult positions (and played them badly).

Start with the new standards—not fielding percentage but range. Jeter started at shortstop for the Yankees for 18 years. For 14 of those years, he was among the top five in the league in games played at shortstop. He finished in the top five for putouts as a shortstop 8 times, among the top five in double plays 4 times. In what is almost certainly the most important counting statistic for shortstops, he finished in the top 5 in assists twice. The best summary figure for data of this sort is range factor, which is simply the total of put outs and assists divided by games played. Jeter finished in the top five in the league in RF exactly once, in 2005, when he finished fourth. Over his 18 years as the Yankees' starting shortstop, Jeter's range factor topped the league average only once (2005 again) and then barely. Through 2002, Jeter's 8th year as a starter, both Baseball-Reference and Fangraphs use Total Zone Rating (TZR) to measure defense. Like Range Factor, TZR is based on box score data, with all the adjustments I discussed earlier. TZR for any one player is then compared to league average. This, in turn, becomes the basis for calculating runs

saved (or lost) in much the same way batting events are converted into runs scored. And how does Jeter do? Well, for 1995-2002, 8 years into his career, 7 years as a starter, Jeter is 89 runs *below* an average shortstop. He had one year above average, by a grand total of 2 runs. Since 2003, both Baseball-Reference and Fangraphs have shifted to systems that rely on direct observation of where balls were hit and aspects of how they were hit. While the raw data that Baseball-Reference and Fangraphs use come from the same source, they analyze the data somewhat differently. As best I can tell—again—B-R (defensive runs saved) considers the context of a play (men on base, number of outs) to calculate the value of a defensive play and Fangraphs (Ultimate Zone Rating) does not. There are also slight differences in the way they make and present positional adjustments. Not surprisingly, given that they are based on the same data, they generally agree. Jeter is actually a rare case where there is substantial disagreement. But do not be deceived. It is not a disagreement over whether Jeter was good or bad. It is a disagreement over *how bad* he was. In addition to 89 runs below average through 2003, Jeter was an additional 165 runs below average from 2003 on by the presumably more precise Defensive Runs Saved. By Baseball-reference's count, Jeter, as a fielder, was 253 runs below average for his career. This is the lowest (remember it's a negative number) ever, not just in the history of the Yankees or of shortstops. It's the lowest number ever, of everyone. Just behind (ahead of?) Jeter are Gary Sheffield, Adam Dunn, and Michael Young. It's a Hall of Fame of bad fielders. Now, none of this is quite fair to Jeter. The 253 runs below average is, in a weird way, testament to the strength of his hitting. Otherwise, he would not have stayed in the lineup. It's also not quite fair

in that it is runs saved below what an average shortstop would have done and does not adjust for the difficulty of the position. If you use instead Baseball-Reference's Defensive Wins Above Replacement, which does adjust for position, Jeter is still last among all shortstops ever but moves up to a mere 4th lowest defensive wins among Yankees, ahead of Dave Winfield, Mickey Mantle, and Bernie Williams. Great. Fangraphs also makes positional adjustments and, for whatever reason, treats Jeter more generously than does Baseball-Reference. He is merely 41st from the bottom among the roughly 600 shortstops who came to bat more than 1000 times and all the way up to 55th worst among the 181 Yankees who meet the same criterion (but still lowest among all Yankee shortstops). And that's as good as it gets for Jeter's fielding. I am not claiming that fielding data is infallible or anything close. I am not claiming that it is precise. I also think it's pretty interesting that the Yankees, who by this point were pretty savvy about analytics, chose to keep a bat first player at a position that's usually thought of as glove first. But the evidence is overwhelming that Jeter was not a good fielder.

I would be happy to leave it at that. But this is Derek Jeter we're talking about. Even Baseball-Reference, which usually keeps to the facts, lists Jeter's nicknames as "Mr. November" and "Captain Clutch." Now, I do not take these nicknames too seriously. I can't quite imagine a conversation that went like this (at least not outside a badly written Marvel comic book):

Jeter: "Hey, Jorge, what's up?"

Jorge: "Hey, Captain Clutch , not much."

No matter: The perception that Jeter is one of the all-time great clutch players is pervasive.

Consider, for example, a commercial for Capital One, still running ten years after Jeter's retirement.

Narrator: "Banking with Capital One is the easiest decision in the history of decisions, even easier than this …"

Cut to what looks like a rec league ballpark., Manager: "We need a clutch hit. Derek…"

A nondescript player starts to stand up. Then Jeter stands up behind him

The manager again: "Derek Jeter!"

Jeter to nondescript player: "Hang in there, rookie."

Cut to baseball clearing the left field wall.

Or, for example, here is Jayson Stark, in a book that is entertaining even when it is wrong, which is often. Stark picks Jeter as the second most *underrated* shortstop of all time.   "We all need to recognize," Stark writes "that there are elements of greatness which numbers can't quantify. And the essence of Jeter's greatness can't' be measured by his zone rating, his OPS or any of the other stuff his critics keep grumbling about. What makes Derek Jeter great is that he's one of those special human beings who lives for the Big Moment and knows precisely what that moment looks like when he sees it materializing beneath the light towers. (Think it's a coincidence that this man has hit .400 or better in eight different postseason series?)"   First, this is sloppy thinking.   Stark does not distinguish between intangibles (which I'll come back to later) and performance in the clutch which is in no sense intangible. Second, after insisting that clutch performance can't be quantified, Stark tries to do exactly that (8 postseason series where he hit better than .400). Third, and most important, Stark is wrong, both about the ability to quantify performance in the

clutch and about Jeter's ability to rise to the moment. Jeter obviously had his share of iconic moments in the postseason. He had several big hits, as a rookie, in the Yankees comeback win for their first World Series win in 18 years. In 2000 he had home runs in both games four and five of the World Series against the Mets. And in the 2001 playoffs against Oakland, he had a much-celebrated moment in the field, seemingly coming out of nowhere to grab an offline throw from the outfield and flip it backhand to Jorge Posada who then tagged out Jeremy Giambi, preserving a 1-0 lead. I'll even give Jeter credit for his greatest non-home run home run, the fly ball that a fan almost certainly interfered with but was called a home run and tied up the first game of the 1996 championship series against Baltimore, a game the Yankees went on to win in extra innings. I not only grant all these moments. I celebrate them. Some are among my favorite baseball memories of 60+ years of rooting for the Yankees. But notice that I said Jeter had his "fair share" of such moments. I am not sure it was any more than that. Remember that Jeter played in 158 postseason games across 33 series, the equivalent of a full season, more by some distance than any other player ever. It's no surprise Jeter had some big moments. He had a lot of chances. In baseball, as in life, being there is half the battle. But was Jeter any better in the postseason than he was in the regular season? Jeter's lifetime stats were .310/377/440 (BA/OBP/SA). His postseason stats were 308/374/465. That's not bad. I suspect, although I have never seen the data, that offense generally goes down in the postseason (better pitchers, colder weather). Holding your own in the postseason is an accomplishment but it hardly meets the image. There were some great performances in the postseason, but they were mixed in with

some clunkers. I count 12 postseason series in which Jeter hit better than .400 (with four of those series coming after Stark made his count). But I also count 12 postseason series in which Jeter hit .250 or below. That strikes me all as normal variation for small sample size short series. OK, so that's Jeter's record in big games, but what about his record in key situations? Jeter's lifetime OPS (OBP+SA) is .810. With runners on base, it was .806. With runners in scoring position, it was .810. with two outs and a runner in scoring position, it was .816. In "late and close" situations, it was .776. That is a record of remarkable consistency. It is not, however, evidence of any "clutch gene."

And what about the other intangibles—character, courage, perseverance, leadership, inspiration? Well, I like my intangibles—how to say it—tangible. An "intangible" is something that has no physical presence. An intangible asset in business includes such things as goodwill and reputation. Notice, though, that goodwill and reputation can be measured just by asking people what they think. Notice, too, that although goodwill and reputation might not have a physical presence, they may have tangible consequences. Driving down some country road late at night and faced with a choice between staying at a previously unseen Motel 6 and a previously unseen Holiday Inn, I'll take the Holiday Inn based on reputation alone (unless I'm really short on cash). That's a very tangible result of an intangible asset. Same thing in baseball: I do not deny there are such things as character and leadership. But I want to see results. There may be some but aren't they already built into the stats? Jeter got more than 3000 hits. Some of that surely had to do with perseverance but that is to say we've already counted that in. What we don't know is what the

consequences were of Jeter's leadership or inspiration. Well, do we know that players got better when they joined the Yankees and worse when they left? If they did, do we know that it was the result of Jeter's leadership rather than Torre's or even better coaching? If somebody can show me that Jeter's intangibles actually made a tangible difference, I will happily, as Jeter used to say, tip my cap. Until that happens, I'll continue to root for Jeter but I won't rate him any better than the 61st best position player of all time.

OK, enough already. I hope at this point we can all agree. Jeter was a very good player, better as a hitter than as a fielder, one of the dozen or so greatest Yankees, one of the 10-15 greatest shortstops. That's pretty much where I started this note, far too many words ago. That's a pretty good career, even a glorious one. The surprise to me is that some people imagine him as even better than he was. The mildest surprise, for me, is the MVP vote. In 1999, as I noted above, Jeter finished 6th and probably deserved better. It was the only time. Jeter also finished 3rd in the 1998 vote, 2nd in 2006, 3rd in 2009, and 7th as a 38-year-old shortstop in 2012. The 1998 vote was about right. Jeter was third in the league in WAR (to future teammates Roger Clemens and Alex Rodriguez) and third in the MVP vote (to Juan Gonzalez and Nomar Garciapara). Jeter was the best player on a dominant team. Rodriguez probably lost votes because his Mariners were a sub .500 team. Clemens' Blue Jays did much better but still finished far behind the Yankees, plus Clemens was a pitcher, which didn't disqualify him, by any means, but probably made it harder for him. Garciapara played the same position as Jeter and his batting average was a single point lower than Jeter's, but he hit 35 home runs (to 19 for Jeter) and drove in 122 (to 84 for Jeter).

Given the data available in 1998, a vote for Garciapara might not have been right but it certainly wasn't nuts. As for Gonzalez, he also played for a division leading team (the Rangers) and led the league in RBIs, which MVP voters at the time took more seriously than they do today. In 2006, Jeter finished 2nd to Justin Mourneau of the Twins. Mourneau was almost certainly a bad pick. He also had a lot of RBI but wasn't in the top 20 in WAR. Jeter wouldn't have been a much better pick and still not a good one. He finished 9th in the league in WAR, behind Johann Sanatana, Grady Sizemore, David Ortiz, and his teammate, pitcher Chien-Ming Wang among others. Overrated. In 2009, Jeter finished 3rd in the MVP vote, behind Joe Mauer and his teammate Mark Texeira. Jeter finished 6th in the league in WAR. Overrated. 2012 is the kicker. Jeter, by then 38 years old, finished 7th in the MVP vote, even though his fielding, never good, had deteriorated even more. I have to assume much of this was a sentimental vote for an aging athlete. Jeter was 67th in the league in WAR among position players. He was 8th just on the Yankees. Overrated

If Jeter's success in the MVP voting is a mild surprise, his success in Gold Glove voting, for the best fielder at his position, is ludicrous. Although, as shown in excruciating detail above, Jeter was a below average fielder, he won 5 Gold Gloves. The only American League shortstops who have won more are Omar Vizquel, Mark Belanger, and Luis Aparicio.

And what about Jeter's career as a whole? When Jeter became eligible for the Hall of Fame, he got 396 of 397 votes, the second highest percentage ever (behind teammate Mariano Rivera, the only unanimous choice). Jeter hasn't been retired long enough to appear on most of the lists of greatest ever. He has appeared on some. Some of these are sober.

Joe Posnanski picks Jeter as the 79th best player ever. That seems to me a little generous but not insane. In 2013, *Sports Illustrated* published the results from a "panel of experts" in a book called *Baseball's Best.* They ranked Jeter as the third best shortstop ever, behind just Hans Wagner and Cal Ripken. In 2022, ESPN published the results of a similar poll. They also rated Jeter the third best shortstop ever, behind Wagner again and Rodriguez (if you're counting Rodriguez as a shortstop). They ranked him the 28th best player ever. That's including pitchers. In the off season after the 2023 season, the excellent website, Pinstripe Alley polled twelve of its staff, plus gave one vote to a reader's poll and one "vote" to a ranking by WAR. They had Jeter fourth, after Ruth, Mantle and Gehrig. I will not belabor the point because I have already had my say about DiMaggio and follow this section with a different sort of comparison between Jeter and DiMaggio. But rating Jeter ahead of DiMaggio is, simply, nuts. Jeter played about 40% more games than Jeter and, as a result, tops him in counting stats like hits and runs. By any other measure DiMaggio comes out ahead. DiMaggio was a better hitter and a better fielder. Jeter was a winner? Sure, but the same applies to DiMaggio even more powerfully. And, despite playing far fewer games, DiMaggio tops Jeter in both WAR and WAA. Was Jeter overrated by the 11-year-olds in the Stadium bleachers wearing Yankee jerseys with the number 2 on back? Absolutely. I can forgive them. I would have done the same if I had been born 40 years later. But writers and editors at SI and ESPN and Pinstripe Alley? They should know better.

It's easy to explain why Jeter was overrated. He played in New York. He played with winners—four World Series winners in his first five years. He played a key defensive position (even

if he didn't play it well). He seems to have cultivated his public image very carefully: He seems to have been famous among writers for his good-natured insistence on answering questions with the sort of cliched answers—about team, about effort, about respect for the other team—that could offend no one. He was good looking. And he dated celebrities. What strikes me about all this is how easily almost exactly the same words would apply to DiMaggio, another Yankee icon who was, in my view, better than Jeter but not quite as good as his admirers made him out to be. Like Jeter, he never played for any other major league team besides the Yankees. Like Jeter, he was a World Series winner in four of his first five years. Like Jeter, he played a key defensive position. DiMaggio also carefully cultivated his public image. Jeter, to *Sports Illustrated*: "You have to assume that everything you do is public knowledge." DiMaggio, answering why he played hard: "Because there might have been somebody in the stands today who'd never seen my play before, and might never see me again." (I do not mean to say that Jeter and DiMaggio were exactly alike in this. Behind Jeter's public façade, there seems to have been a genuinely decent person. Behind DiMaggio's façade, by Ben Creamer's account in *Life of a Hero* as well as the testimony of several former teammates, there was a jerk.) Both were good looking and both dated celebrities. (I'm waiting for some ambitious sabermetrician to come up with a formula that tells me how many dates with Jessica Alba, Jessica Biels, Minka Kelly, Mariah Carey and Adriana Lima equal one marriage to Marilyn Monroe.) It's a simple formula: Play for a winning team, play hard or at least appear to play hard, be careful about what you say to the media, and date movie stars.

I do think that, though, that the parallel between DiMaggio and Jeter runs deeper. It deserves a separate section.

Jeter, DiMaggio, Ethnicity, Race and the Yankees

When I started to write about the Yankees, I thought there would be a few places where I would have to say something about race—certainly in discussing Elston Howard, the Yankees' first Black player, certainly if I wrote about Ben Chapman and his several racist incidents, maybe a couple of other places. I've mentioned race more than I expected to, not because I was going out of my way to talk about race, but because it was unavoidable. It's pretty clear that the Yankee regime through the Topping/Weiss years was racist by current standards. By this, I do not mean that they necessarily harbored explicit prejudice (of the sort that seems to have characterized Tom Yawkey of the Red Sox among many others). Their racism seems to have been more of the so-called "rational" type—possibly based on a calculation that by keeping the team white they would better attract Southern prospects or what they might have imagined to be the right kind of fans. Neither do I think George Steinbrenner was an explicit racist. According to Don Baylor, one of the Yankees' Black stars in the 1980s, Steinbrenner was "an equal opportunity abuser." Still, the Yankees have hardly been leaders on racial issues in baseball and, whatever the intentions of their owners, they operate with all the constraints of any American sports team. Until recently, the Yankees have not been neither a welcome nor welcoming destination for Black players.

Since Steinbrenner took over, the Yankees have had roughly their fair share of Black players and probably slightly more than their fair share of Latinos. The point I want to make

isn't about employment or pay. It's about what it means to be a hero.

In 2011, Bleacher Report ran a list of the Yankees "biggest fan favorites." There was nothing scientific or even pseudo-scientific about the list. As far as I can tell, the author consulted a couple of friends, some other people at Bleacher Report, and his own whims. Still, the list is telling. Here are the top 22:

Thurman Munson, Derek Jeter, Mickey Mantle, Mariano Rivera, Don Mattingly, Yogi Berra, Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Paul O'Neill, Phil Rizzuto, Joe DiMaggio, Billy Martin, Jorge Posada, Bernie Williams, Bobby Murcer, Andy Pettitte, Whitey Ford, Reggie Jackson, Tino Martinez, Bucky Dent, Craig Nettles, and Scott Brosius.

Notice anything about the list? Rivera was born in Panama; Williams and Posada are both from Puerto Rico. Martinez' background is more complicated. He was born in Tampa with a mix of Cuban and Spanish background and spoke Spanish before he spoke English. That's four of the twenty-two. Sixteen are US born Whites. Jeter and Jackson are the only identifiably Black players on the list. There's a huge "recency" bias on the list, which just means that more recent players are overrepresented … but that should increase the representation of Black players. I understand why Mantle, Berra, Ruth, and DiMaggio are on the list. O'Neill, Rizzuto, and Murcer have all announced Yankee games on TV, so that could be why they're on the list (although their whiteness might also be one of the reasons they were announcers). But where is Elston Howard, a former MVP, who integrated the Yankees with great dignity? Where is Chris Chambliss, the son of a Navy Chaplain, a mainstay of the late 70's champions who hit a walk off home run against Kansas City to put the Yankees in

the World series for the first time in a dozen years? Where is Willie Randolph, as solid a citizen as you could find, a team captain, a New York native, and later a manager of the Mets? Where is Roy White, another solid citizen and a lifetime Yankee? Where is Dave Winfield or Rickey Henderson, both Hall of Famers? As Winfield reports in his *Player's Life*, "Willie Randolph … told me when I joined the team that you can be a "good" Yankee and a well-respected one … but as a Black man, you're never going to be a "true" Yankee."

Reggie Jackson is on the list but probably doesn't belong. Reggie was hard to ignore but as many fans despised him as admired him. I say all this because it makes Jeter's position at the top of the list—I think he is much more a fan favorite at this point than Munson—all the more remarkable. If Bleacher Report were to make an equivalent list today, Aaron Judge would probably replace Jeter in the top spot but Jeter would easily lead the retired players and Judge is very much following a path set by Jeter.

To understand what Jeter meant to the Yankees and race, we have to go back to the comparison with DiMaggio. It's hard to imagine now—after World War II, after the integration of baseball and all other sports, after the Civil Rights Movement, after boycotts of apartheid South Africa, after the Black Lives Matter movement—but when DiMaggio arrived in New York in 1936, Italian Americans were still perceived as not quite American. A famous—or, better, infamous—1939 article on DiMaggio in *Life Magazine* described him thus:

> Although he learned Italian first, Joe, now twenty-four, speaks English without an accent and is otherwise well adapted to most U.S. mores. Instead of olive oil or smelly

bear grease he keeps his hair slick with water. He never reeks of garlic and prefers chicken chow mein to spaghetti.

The language is crude and, to 21st century ears, offensive. We would not, these days, call DiMaggio "the Dago" as even his friends did at the time. But the *Life* article is also, in its own ass backwards way, celebratory, announcing Italian American immigrants' passage from immigrants to "real" Americans.

Let me put that a little differently. DiMaggio could become an Italian-American hero precisely because he was not too Italian. We can say something similar about Jeter. Jeter could become an African-American hero precisely because he was not too black. I certainly knew—as I assume most other Jeter fans knew—that Jeter had a Black father and a white mother. Jeter was obviously aware of his own background but never made a big deal about it. In *The Life You Imagine*, part autobiography, part self-help book, Jeter himself says, "I didn't really dwell on race unless someone else made it an issue because a white mother and a black father is the only family I knew. To me, it was and still is normal." Similarly, Aaron Judge, a light skinned Black man, is the (adopted) child of two white school teachers. Jeter and Judge both *seem* to have made race irrelevant, but I think that isn't quite right.

I cannot imagine anyone today talking about Jeter today in terms comparable to what *Life* used to talk about DiMaggio in 1939.   We are, for better and for worse, more careful these days in how we talk about race and ethnicity. Jeter was no more the first Black player in major league baseball than DiMaggio was the first Italian. But race is inescapable in American life. Jeter is a Mister Clean type, well spoken, polite, mannered. So is Aaron Judge. Although nobody is willing to say it out loud any more, there's at the very least an implication

that there's no olive oil or bear grease (or racially coded equivalents) for them either.

So, to celebrate Jeter is also to mark the passage of African Americans from "other" to real (middle class) Americans. We could say the same about the celebration of Aaron Judge. I think this is all in all a good thing. But there is also a fair amount of condescension in this sort of celebration, especially when it's accompanied by much less tolerance of acting the "other." Neither do I like the hints of self-congratulation that are undertones in the celebration of Jeter and DiMaggio: "Look at us, see how tolerant we are." I wish New York had been able to embrace a militant like Elliott Maddox as well as a Rickey Henderson or a Mickey Rivers who did not fit so closely to middle class standards of decorum.

Did "social desirability"—a term borrowed from survey research to explain the process by which respondents give answers they expect interviewers to approve of--contribute to overrating DiMaggio and Jeter? Probably. They were both, at least by appearances, the sort of players we wanted to be heroes and the sort of heroes who confirmed our deepest fantasies about inclusion in America. Despite my qualifications, they may have contributed to making America a (very) slightly better place even while illustrating the limits of racial inclusion in the United States. But none of this, of course, made DiMaggio or Jeter any better (or any worse) on the field.

Postseasons

From 1996 up to the 2001 World Series, the Yankees won 14 of 15 postseason series. From 1998 through the 2001 World Series, they won eleven consecutive postseason series. Although there has been seemingly endless praise heaped on the 1998 Yankees, I think the postseason streak has probably

received less attention than it deserves. Because the streak ended in agony, with the awful loss to the Diamondbacks in the seventh game of the 2001 World Series, the ending may have taken on more meaning than the streak itself. Because the 1999 and 2000 Yankee teams were nowhere nearly as dominant as the 1998 version of the team, the streak might seem fluky. Because the three-round format of the postseason was still new (just in its second year in 1996), it was hard to see the enormity of the Yankee accomplishment. Since the Yankees won three consecutive postseason tournaments and missed a fourth by only a few outs, no other team has even won two World Series in a row with that format. Here is the Yankee streak.:

    1996   Won ALDS over Texas, 3 games to 1
    1996   Won ALCS over Baltimore, 4 games to 1
    1996   Won World Series over Atlanta, 4 games to 2
    1997   Lost ALDS to Cleveland, 2 games to 3
    1998   Won ALDS over Texas, 3 games to 0
    1998   Won ALCS over Cleveland, 4 games to 2
    1998   Won World Series over San Diego, 4 games to 0
    1999   Won ALDS over Texas, 3 games to 0
    1999   Won ALCS over Boston, 4 games to 1
    1999   Won World Series over Atlanta, 4 games to 0
    2000   Won ALDS over Oakland, 3 games to 2
    2000   Won ALCS over Seattle, 4 games to 2
    2000   Won World Series over N.Y. Mets, 4 games to 1
    2001   Won ALDS over Oakland, 3 games to 2
    2011   Won ALCS over Seattle, 4 games to 1

It all adds up, in my opinion, to the most impressive streak in postseason history. The Yankees overall record in their 11 straight series wins was 38—11, not quite as impressive as the

Yankees' 32-4 record across 8 World Series from 1927 through 1941. But this record was accumulated in consecutive seasons—no sitting out the postseason with what, for the Yankees, passes for off years. The same consideration separates it from the Yankees' seven consecutive World Series wins over 11 years in the forties and fifties and from the San Francisco Giants' every other year World Series' wins from 2010 to 2014.

Aside from 1998, these Yankee teams were not powerhouses. In the last six series, every team the Yankees faced had a better regular season record than the Yankees. The Yankees did it with an ensemble cast rather than superstars. In the 1998-2001 postseasons, the Yankees' top five hitters (Jeter, Martinez, Posada, Williams, and O'Neill) all had OPS (OPSes?) between .750 and .800, okay but nothing great. At first glance, the pitching looks better: Orlando Hernandez was 9-2. Pettitte was 8-4, The Davids, Cone and Wells, were both 4-0 as was Mike Stanton. But won-lost records are an indicator of team success as much as a cause and none of the pitchers (except Rivera) had outstanding ERAs. Like most postseason records, the Yankees' accomplishment is much easier to describe than explain.

To top the Yankees, we have to look beyond baseball. Neither the Packers nor the Patriots nor the Cowboys nor the Bears have done in the NFL what the Yankees have done in Major League Baseball. The only equivalent I can find in American professional sports is what the Boston Celtics did from 1958 through 1967. Over that span the Celtics won 18 consecutive postseason series including 8 consecutive NBA championships, all with Bill Russell playing center. (And if Bill Russell had not been hurt for the last couple of games of the

1957 finals, that streak might have been 22 series and 10 championships.) And the UCLA Bruins won 38 consecutive *games* in the NCAA tournament from 1964 through 1974 (then lost one—the famous overtime loss to North Carolina State-- and followed with ten more wins in a row). The Yankees can't match those streaks, which probably just shows that upsets are less common in basketball than baseball.

Just How Good Was Mariano Rivera?

I cannot in good conscience argue that Mariano Rivera was underrated. He was the first and only player elected unanimously to the Hall of Fame. He is almost unanimously acclaimed as the greatest relief pitcher ever. And I add the "almost" only to be careful. Goose Gossage, most notably, in a 2017 interview with something called New Jersey Advanced media insisted that Rivera shouldn't be taken seriously because he, unlike Gossage, rarely pitched more than an inning. (NJAM: "So when people say Mo is the greatest reliever .... Gossage "(Bleep). That's bullshit. Do what I did and we'll compare apples to apples.")   There may even be somebody in Chicago who agrees with Gossage and there are several million people in Guangzhou who don't give a damn one way or the other. But that's it. I think there may even be less disagreement about Rivera as the best at his position than there is about any other player—including Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Johnny Bench and Honus Wagner—as the best at his position.

Rivera never won a Cy Young Award as the best pitcher in the American League. But I wouldn't make too much of that. Only nine relievers (including the Yankees' own Sparky Lyle) have ever won the Cy Young and that's out of 121 in all. And some of those won in large part because no starter had an

outstanding year. Rivera didn't win the Cy Young award but he finished in the top five five times, as many as any other reliever ever.

I can't claim that Rivera was underrated as a reliever because he was and is rated the best ever and I don't see how you can do any better than the best. But I want to claim more than that Rivera was the best relief pitcher ever. I want to claim that he was the best Yankee pitcher ever, starter or reliever, and that he is arguably among the ten greatest pitchers ever. Those are more controversial claims.

Do an internet search for "best Yankee pitcher." You'll get a lot of results, some well thought out and some the sort of thing you worry might have a virus hidden in the accompanying ads to see unexpurgated pictures from the wild sixties or the most beautiful women in Thailand. It's hard to count them all up because I don't know if they're all worth counting (and because there are some I'm worried about clicking on at all). My rough sense, though, is that Whitey Ford is the most frequent pick for the Yankees' greatest pitcher ever, followed by Rivera, with Red Ruffing a very occasional pick. The logic, I think, has to be that, as great as Rivera was, a pitcher, a reliever who pitches in at most 80 innings a year can never be as valuable as a starting pitcher who, at least in the old days, could pitch as many as 300 innings in a year. Even Ford, notorious for not finishing games, pitched 291 innings as late as 1961, a total topped since twice each by Mel Stottlemyre and Catfish Hunter and once by Ralph Terry just among Yankees. Shades of Goose Gossage. We aren't comparing apples to apples. We aren't even comparing apples to oranges. We're comparing shiny, bright Macintoshes to underpowered Chromebooks.

I beg to disagree.

Let's start with WAR, a statistic that combines elements of a counting stat and a rate stat but very clearly rewards quantity (of innings, at bats or anything else) as well as quality. Rivera is already at the top of the list, even though the other pitchers on the list all pitched roughly two to two and a half as many innings. Then look at WAA, a statistic that still combines elements of a counting stat and a rate state but with more emphasis on excellence (or at least above averageness) than on simple inning eating. Rivera extends his lead, in some cases quite considerably.

	Innings	WAR	WAA
Rivera	1283	56.3	32.5
Ford	3170	53.6	28.6
Pettitte	2796	51.3	24.6
Guidry	2392	47.9	26.3
Ruffing	3168	46.5	17.7
Gomez	2498	43.4	19.8

Still, even WAA significantly understates what Rivera did. The point about relief pitchers is that a good manager holds them in reserve for when they are most needed. This isn't a matter of claiming relief pitchers are great because they're great clutch pitches, although they might be. It's the reverse. Because they are great pitchers to start with, they're used in the clutch. WAR and WAA are both context independent. An out is an out is an out whether it's in the third inning with two out, nobody on base and a seven-run lead or in the bottom of the ninth with your team up one, the bases loaded and nobody out. To measure what a relief pitcher does we need just about the opposite of WAR and WAA. We need a context *dependent*

statistic, where the middle of the third doesn't equal the bottom of the ninth. That statistic is WPA or Win Probability Added. (If you don't remember or skipped over it and you want to understand WPA, go back to my discussion under the heading One Number to Rule Them All.) Here are the top six Yankee pitchers by that measure. Next to that list is a list of the top six best pitchers by WPA for any team ever.

Mariano Rivera	56.6	Lefty Grove	83.8
Whitey Ford	37.0	Roger Clemens	77.7
Red Ruffing	35.4	Greg Maddux	59.5
Lefty Gomez	25.5	Warren Spahn	57.7
Ron Guidry	23.5	**Mariano Rivera**	56.6
Herb Pennock	21.0	Tom Seaver	56.4

It's not just that Rivera leads the Yankee pitchers, it's that it isn't even close. It's not just that Rivera leads the Yankee pitchers, it's that he's fifth all time in the major leagues, third all-time in the American League.

You might not think WPA matters as much as WAR. It's a reasonable position. But consider this. In general teams fluctuate from their Pythagorean Theorem projections pretty randomly. The only thing I know of that predictably overcomes that randomness is good relief pitching. Of the 16 years when Rivera was the Yankees' closer, they bettered their "Pythagorean Won/Lost" 12 times.

When we look at rate stats—statistics that do not depend on the quantity of innings pitched but the quality—Rivera is even better. He is among the Yankee leaders for fewest walks per nine innings but he is also among the highest for strikeouts per nine innings. Little wonder, then, that he is third all-time in strikeout to walk ratio at 4.1 to 1 (behind, much to my surprise,

Michael Pineda and Masahiro Tanaka) among 87 Yankee pitchers with more than 400 innings pitched. From 1997 through 2011 he saved 28 or more games every year. From 1996 through 2013, Rivera's ERA was below 2 eleven times, below three 6 more times, and only once topped 3, that barely in 2007 (at 3.15). His career ERA+ was 205, which is to say less than half of ballpark corrected league average. That's among the 120 or so Yankees pitchers with 200 or more innings pitched. Gossage, of all people, is second, but fairly far back at 179. And there's still more: Among all pitchers ever, American League and National, Rivera's ERA+ is the single highest. The other leaders are also relievers, all since 1995, beneficiaries—yes Goose—of going all out for shorter outings and not being charged for inherited runners who score. But Rivera is still the best of the bunch and even after applying a "penalty" for his role as a reliever still ahead of any starter.

    And then there's the post season. I argued, just a few pages ago, that Derek Jeter was the beneficiary of what we might call, well, the Jeter effect. Play in enough post season games—nearly a full season's worth for Jeter—and you're bound to have some stand out moments. For hitters these standout moments are generally positive. Since hitters make outs roughly two-thirds of the time we can't reasonably expect them to get hits all the time but, *when they do*, those hits stand out. For fielding the memorable plays are mixed. Most fielding plays are uneventful. With very rare exceptions, we don't celebrate the second baseman who throws out a runner on a soft ground ball or, for that matter, the first baseman who catches the throw. Both are routine. We do, however, remember the unusual plays, both good (Jeter's flip, Willie Mays' catch in the 1954 World Series) and the bad (Kubek

getting hit in the throat by a bad bounce ground in game seven of the 1960 World Series, Bill Buckner of the Red Sox letting Willie Wilson's grounder squib through his legs in the 1986 World Series against the Mets). For pitchers, though, the situation is the reverse of for hitters. We expect pitchers to get batters out and to pitch scoreless innings and they reward our expectations by doing just what we expect most of the time. What we remember best about pitchers are the times they fail. Well, Rivera pitched in 96 post season games, more than anyone else. (Kanley Jansen is second with 57.) And Rivera pitched more innings in the post season than all but ten pitchers, all starters. (Andy Pettitte is first with 276.) In the post season, Rivera pitched roughly the equivalent of two full seasons for a reliever. Probably the games Rivera is best remembered for are his very few failures, all the more because Rivera was almost always pitching at the most critical moments of the game. This is the *reverse* Jeter effect. We remember Rivera's failures but what seems to me remarkable is how few of them there were. Remember that Rivera appeared in 96 postseason games. He was credited with the win in eight and with one loss. He was also credited with 42 saves and only fives blown saves (including the game he lost). Let's look at those blown saves:

1)   1997 ALDS, game 5 against Cleveland: Rivera comes in for the eighth inning with the Yankees leading 2-1. Rivera gives up a game tying home run to Sandy Alomar. The Yankees lose in the 9th with Ramiro Mendoza pitching.

2)   2001 World Series, game 7 against Arizona. I've already discussed this game earlier. I rated it the second

most painful loss in Yankee history. It was Rivera's only postseason loss as well as one of his five blown saves.

3) 2004 ALDS, game 2 against Minnesota. Rivera comes in in the eighth with men on first and second and one out and the Yankees leading 5-3. Rivera gives up a single and a double. The Twins tie the game. Rivera gets a strikeout and ground out to end the inning, then gets all three men he faces in the 9th. The Yankees win the game in the twelfth.

4) 2004 ALCS, game 4 against Boston. Rivera comes in in the eight with the Yankees ahead 4-3. He gives up a lead off single but gets the next three batters. In the ninth, he gives up a lead off single to Kevin Millar. Dave Roberts, pinch running, steals second. Bill Mueller singles him home to tie the score. The rest of the inning is a little messy but Rivera ends the inning by getting Dave Ortiz to pop out. The Red Sox win on a walk off home run by Ortiz in the bottom of the twelfth. At the time I think we all thought it was just putting off the inevitable Yankee win by a day.

5) 2004 ALCS, game 5 against Boston. Rivera comes in in the bottom of the eighth with the Yankees ahead 4-3. There's nobody out and there are men on first and third. Rivera gives up a sacrifice fly then gets a ground out and strikeout. He faces three men in the ninth and gets them all out (including a caught stealing of Johnny Damon). The Red Sox win in the bottom of the 14th, this time on a run scoring single by Ortiz. I still wasn't worried. I should have been but it's hard to blame this game on Rivera.

And that's it. Five games stand out. In one, the Yankees won anyway. In two of them, the games against Boston, the Yankees themselves had plenty of chances to score in extra innings. In none of them was Rivera hit hard. And even in those five games, arguably the worst of Rivera's entire post-season career, he only gave up ten hits, 4 runs, and 3 earned runs in 7 2/3 innings. He struck out 7 and walked only two. And, I repeat, those were arguably the five worst games of his career. In the other 91 games Rivera did what he had to. For his 96 postseason appearances, Rivera had an Earned Run Average of 0.70. Of the 96 games in which he appeared, Rivera gave up no hits in 39. He gave up no runs in 85 and the Yankees won 78. You remember that Rivera leads the Yankees in Win Probability Added and that he's fifth among all pitchers? In the postseason, Rivera's WPA is 11.7. That's the best all time. Curt Schilling is second all-time with 4.1, just a bit more than one-third of Rivera's total. Pettitte is second among Yankee pitchers with 3.5. Whitey Ford can't match what Rivera did. Neither can Red Ruffing or Ron Guidry or anyone else who pitched for the Yankees. It's still hard to call Rivera underrated but he just might be.

CHAPTER 18
FRUSTRATION: 2001-2007

From 1996 through 2000, the Yankees finished first four years out of five and won 60.2% of their games. From 2001 through 2006, the Yankees finished first each year and won 61.1% of their games. The difference? In the first five years, the Yankees won four World Series. In the next six years, the Yankees made only two World Series and lost them both.

The pennant races felt like Bill Murray's version of ground hog day. In 2001, the Yankees led the Red Sox by three games in late August. But in this season, it was the Sox who cratered down the stretch, losing 23 of their last 34. The Yankees won the division by 13 games. In 2002 the Yankees took over first in June and finished the season 10 ½ games ahead of the Red Sox. The Yankees' record of 103-58 was the best in the league. In 2003, the Yankees led the entire season except for a week and a half in late May and finished six games ahead of the Red Sox. Their 101 wins was the best in the league. In 2004, the Yankees took over first on June 1, led by 10 in mid-August, and ended 3 games ahead of the Red Sox, again, and the Yankees finished with the best record in the league, again. 2005 was just a little different. The Yankees started the year 12-19 and trailed the Red Sox most of the year. But the Yankees won 34 of their last 49, wound up with the same record as Boston, and were declared division winners because they won the season series against Boston. It was the eighth consecutive year the Yankees had won the Eastern Division and the Red Sox finished second. In 2006 the Yankees moved past the Red Sox into first place on August first. They finished the season 10 games ahead of Toronto and 11 ahead of the Red Sox who fell

to third by going 24-35 over the last third of the season. In 2007, the Red Sox finally finished ahead of the Yankees, breaking the Yankees' streak of nine straight first-place finishes (the longest in American League history). The Yankees didn't go over .500 until their 89th game of the season. But they went 52-24 over the second half of the season to close within two games of Boston and easily qualify for the playoffs as the wild card. It was their 13th consecutive year in the postseason, also an American League record. After the season, Torre wasn't exactly fired but the Yankees made him an offer he couldn't accept and, after a dozen years, he was gone.

The Yankees already had Derek Jeter, Jorge Posada, Bernie Williams, Alfonso Soriano, Roger Clemens, Andy Pettitte, Orlando Hernandez, and, of course, Mariano Rivera to carry over from 2000. In 2001 they added Mike Mussina. In 2002, they added reigning AL MVP Jason Giambi and David Wells, back for his second tour of duty with the Yankees, and future Hall of Famer Randy Johnson. In 2003 they added Hideki Matsui. In 2004, they added Gary Sheffield, Kevin Brown, and one Alex Rodriguez. In 2005, they brought up Robinson Cano and Chien-Ming Wang, who was terrific for a few years before he got hurt.

They were glorious years—except for the postseason.

2001: Beat Oakland three games to two in the ALDS. This is the series that featured Jeter's famous flip play to get Jeremy Giambi (Jason's younger brother) at home plate to preserve a 1-0 lead in the bottom of the seventh. Beat the Mariners, who had set a league record 116 games in the regular season, in the ALCS four games to one. The last game was a 12-3 rout. A fourth straight world championship seemed inevitable, except it wasn't. The Arizona Diamondbacks, in just their fourth year,

in their first World Series, beat the Yankees, four games to three in one of the most dramatic World Series ever. I've described the Yankees seventh game loss elsewhere as the second most painful in Yankee history. If you're a masochist, feel free to go back and read it again or for the first time. I have no interest whatsoever in revisiting it.

2002: Lost to the Anaheim Angels three games to one in the first round of the playoffs. Lost the final game 9-5, after giving up 8 runs (all charged to Wells) and ten hits in the bottom of the fifth.

2003. Beat the Twins three games to one in the ALDS. Beat the Red Sox in seven games in the ALCS. Tied the game on a two-run double by Posada in the bottom of the eighth. Won game seven on a walk off home run by future manager Aaron Boone in the bottom of the twelfth. That was fun. The World Series wasn't. The Yankees, heavy favorites against the Miami Marlins, won games two and three, both by 6-1 scores, to take a 2 game to 1 lead. In Game Four, the Yankees tied the score with two runs in the top of the ninth then lost in the bottom of the twelfth on a home run by Alex Gonzales off Jeff Weaver. They lost Games Five and Six, 6-4 and 2-0. Series over.

2004: Won the ALDS over the Twins, again, three games to one, again. It was, however, pretty dramatic. In Game Two, Torii Hunter hit a home run in the top of the 12th to put the Twins ahead 6-5. In the bottom of the ninth Rodriguez doubled with one out to tie the score and send Jeter to third. An intentional walk to Sheffield and a sacrifice fly by Matsui and the Yankees were winners. In Game Four, the Yankees rallied for four runs in the top of eight to tie the game 5-5. The big hit was a three-run home run by Reuben Sierra. In the top of the 11th, Rodriguez doubled, stole third, and scored the lead run on a

wild pitch. Mariano Rivera got the Twins in order in the bottom of the fifth and it was on to the ALCS. This was the last happy outcome for the Yankees in the post season for several years. I have already written more than I wanted to about the ALCS against the Red Sox. Suffice it to say here, that the Red Sox became the first team to come back from a 3-game deficit to win a post season series in Major League history. The 12-3 loss to Boston in Game Seven was at the top of my list, several pages ago, of the worst losses in Yankee history. I'm not revisiting this one either.

2005: Lost the ALDS to the Angels, now called the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim. The score in the final game was 5-3. The Yankees left 11 men on base.

2006: Lost the ALDS again, this time to Detroit, 3 games to 1.

2007: Another 3 games to 1 loss, this time to Cleveland.

In his *The Yankee Years*, Joe Torre has an explanation. (At least I think it's Torre. The authors are listed as Torre and Tom Verducci but the book is written in Verducci's voice and refers to Torre in the third person.)   In any case, Verducci quotes Torre about the 2002 team, "

It was just not an unselfish team. … When you look at the guys who were no longer there: O'Neill, Tino, Brosius, Knoblauch . . . You try to figure out why in 2002 that ferociousness wasn't there, the refuse-to-be-denied stuff. It wasn't there. The team wasn't tough enough. … What changed was a number of players out there are trying to do the job to their own satisfaction, instead of getting the job done. A lot of those players are more concerned about what it looks like as opposed to getting dirty and just getting it done. Those other teams, they were ferocious.

Maybe, but I doubt it. What Torre was saying, in effect, was the 1996-2000 teams won because they had a characteristic of winningness and the later teams lost because they didn't have it. If you like this sort of explanation, I can't stop you but to me it doesn't add up to saying anything more than that they won because they won and they lost because they lost. This is a prime example of what social psychologists call the Fundamental Attribution Error, about as portentous a name as you'll ever find for an idea from the social sciences. The Fundamental Attribution Error refers to the tendency (at least among Americans in the 20th and 21st centuries) to attribute events to internal states of mind (personality, character) rather than to circumstances or, even more, chance. I have another explanation: The pitching or the pitching and defense weren't as good.

Look at the Yankee hitting in the post season for the ten seasons from 1998 through 2007.

Year	Result	Games	OPS	Runs per Game
1998	Won WS	13	.755	4.8
1999	Won WS	12	.723	4.8
2000	Won WS	16	.733	4.3
2001	Lost WS	17	,647	3.4
2002	Lost ALDS	4	.834	6.3
2003	Lost WS	17	.713	3.9
2004	Lost ALCS	11	.828	6.0
2005	Lost ALDS	5	.742	4.0
2006	Lost ALDS	4	.692	3.5
2007	Lost ALDS	4	.794	4.0
TOTAL 1998-2001		58	.712	4.2
TOTAL 2002-2007		45	.756	4.6

Now look at run prevention

Year	Result	Games	ERA
1998	Won WS	13	2.42
1999	Won WS	12	2.39
2000	Won WS	16	3.42
2001	Lost WS	17	3.52
2002	Lost ALDS	4	8.21
2003	Lost WS	17	2.73
2004	Lost ALCS	11	4.64
2005	Lost ALDS	5	4.40
2006	Lost ALDS	4	5.46
2007	Lost ALDS	4	5.89
TOTAL 1998-2001		58	3.02
TOTAL 2002-2007		45	4.38

The 1998-2001 teams did outperform their Pythagorean won/lost record and the 2002-2007 teams did slightly underperform. You could call this "clutch." You could also call it luck. I have no way of distinguishing them. But the bigger difference between the 1998-2001 teams and the 2002-2007 teams is that 2002-2007 teams gave up 1.36 more runs per game while actually scoring more. The four players Torre named who were absent for the later years (Chuck Knoblauch, Scott Brosius, Tino Martinez, and Paul O'Neill) were all hitters, but they did not themselves hit very well during the post season (a combined OPS lower than the team average.) And Chuck Knoblauch? Torre couldn't have been serious. This is the same Chuck Knoblauch who got traded out of Minnesota

because his teammates couldn't stand him, who developed the "yips," couldn't throw to first base and had to be moved to left field, who admitted to steroid use, who was arrested for assaulting one of his three ex-wives, and whose most famous play as a Yankee was a mental error that created one of the few moments of drama in the 1998 season. The play has earned a description in Wikipedia:

> In game 2 of the 1998 American League Championship Series against the Cleveland Indians, Knoblauch was involved in an infamous defensive play. In the 12th inning with the score tied 1–1, Indians batter Travis Fryman bunted, and Knoblauch covered first base for a possible putout. Jeff Nelson's throw hit Fryman and rolled away, but instead of retrieving the ball, Knoblauch argued with the first-base umpire interference should have been called, while the ball was still live at which Indians baserunner Enrique Wilson was able to score from first base on the play, giving Cleveland the lead in an eventual 4–1 victory. A New York newspaper called Knoblauch a "Blauch-head".

That was pretty bad but the problem wasn't the fielding or the hitting. It was the pitching.

Well, you might still want to argue that the reason the later teams gave up more runs was precisely because, in Torre's words, "the ferociousness wasn't there." I suppose it's conceivable, but it doesn't seem likely. Pettitte was on the team 1998 through 2003 and again in 2007. Orlando Hernandez was on the team from 1998-2004. Roger Clemens was there 1999-2003 and again in 2007. Mussina was with the team from 2001 on. Rivera was there the whole time. Do you really want to argue that they were better because O'Neill and Knoblauch

were rooting them on? Do you really want to argue that Rivera somehow lost his "ferociousness" after 2001? Or that Mussina didn't want to win? Or that Randy Johnson, who was with the team in 2005 and 2006, wasn't ferocious? Or that Pettitte and Clemens lost their ferociousness? From what I know of him, I don't like Clemens but I can't imagine anybody saying he wasn't competitive. The bigger issue seems to me that both Pettitte (who was very good in the post season) and Clemens (who was good enough) were missing from the team altogether for three years.

Playoffs

I've never been able to decide what I think about baseball's playoffs. The playoffs started in 1969, when MLB added four new teams (the Kansas City Royals, the Seattle Pilots, soon to become the Milwaukee Brewers, the San Diego Padres, and the Montreal Expos who are now the Washington Senators). With 24 teams, MLB divided each league into two divisions and had the divisional champions meet for the league championship and qualify for the World Series. Aside from 1981, the strike year that added an extra round of playoffs, the 1969 system stayed in place through 1994. Nothing happened in the 1994 postseason, because another strike ended the season before it could happen. In 1995, now with 30 teams, MLB divided both leagues into three divisions. Each division winner qualified for the playoffs and were joined by a fourth team, a "wild card" team, the second-place team with the best record. That made for two whole rounds of playoffs before the World Series. In 2012, MLB added a second wild card team in each league, with the two wild card teams meeting in a single game that qualified them for the next round, the League Divisional Series, which gave them a chance to qualify for the

League Championship Series, which gave them a chance to qualify for the World Series. In 2022. MLB added yet another wild card team, with the three wild cards teams and the division winner with the worst record in the league all to meet in an expanded first round, followed, in turn, by four divisional series and two championship series before the World Series. Pretty soon MLB won't be all that different from the NBA, where more than half the teams make it into the playoffs.

On the one hand, it's easy to see why MLB likes a playoff system. It adds a bunch of high stakes, high drama games with good attendance and, I assume, good TV ratings. It also keeps the regular season interesting for teams that would otherwise just drag through August and September. With only two pennant races, both could be over by the end of August (and sometimes were). With four or six divisional races, plus races for the wild card, there's almost certain to be some late season excitement before the playoffs even begin. That's all good.

On the other hand, the playoffs cheapen both the regular season and the World Series. You're 22 games out of first, as the Red Sox were in 1998? Who cares, as long as you're 4 games ahead for the Wild Card, as the Red Sox also were. In 1978, the Yankees and Red Sox staged one of the greatest pennant races in history. Every game mattered. In 2005 the Yankees and Red Sox staged another great race. For the last two weeks of the season neither team led by more than a game. The Red Sox beat the Yankees in two of three games in Boston to create a tie. Who remembers? Who cared? The Yankees were awarded first place on the basis of a better head-to-head record but both teams qualified for the playoffs. 2010: This time it was the Yankees and the Rays. Neither led by more than 2 ½ games through August and September.

Going into the last day of the season, they were tied. In the final game of the season, manager Joe Girardi started Dustin Moseley, a journeyman who had pitched only 60 innings all season. Moseley gave up four runs in five innings. The Yankees lost 8-4. Who cared? Girardi didn't. Both teams had already clinched a wild card. Girardi decided it was more important to give his pitchers an extra day of rest than to finish first.

In the regular season, the wild card giveth and the wild card taketh. My guess is that it creates more excitement than it precludes. What I really don't like is what the playoffs do to the World Series. The better team—as measured by its regular season record—wins the World Series only a little bit more than half the time. But, since 1969, the first year of the playoffs, the team with the best record in the league hasn't always made it to the Series. Through 1968, the team with the best record in the majors was in the World Series every year and won 35 of 62 World Series. (I'm not counting seasons when the two World Series' teams had the same record.) From 1969 through 1994, when there was one round of playoffs, the team with the better record won the league championship series 32 of 52 times but the team with the best record in the majors won only seven of 24 World Series. Since the coming of the wild card in 1995, the team with the best record has also won 7 World Series but out of 28. I'm surprised it's that high. Indulge me in a very little math.

Over the last decade the team with the better record has won 51 of 89 playoffs series. That's 57%. Let's round that up and say the chances of the better team winning a postseason series is about 60%. I doubt it's really that high but that seems to be more or less the historical average. That means if there's

only one round, the better team will win more than half the time. But look what happens when you add rounds. In a two-round system, the better team will win its first round 60% of the time and then the second round 60% of that 60%. That's 36%, a bit more than a third, just a bit higher than what happened 1969-1993. Make it three rounds and you have to take 60% of that 36%. That's 21.6%, a bit more than a fifth, just a little lower than what happened 1995-2021. Given how seriously, we—that's we baseball fans—take a championship, do you really want the best team to lose 80% of the time?

The issue is particularly acute in baseball. Compare the baseball playoffs to the NBA. Over the past decade, the team with the better record has won 114 of 143 playoff series. (7 involved teams with the same record.) That's 80%. Do the same math we did for baseball. The odds of the best team winning the championship in a three round playoff is above 50% (.8*.8*.8=51.2). In a four round playoff it's still above 40%. The actual numbers bear out the math. The NBA has had four full rounds of playoffs since 1977 and had three full rounds before that. The best team—again as measured by regular season records has won 23 of 53 championships since 1969 compared to 14 of 51 over the same time span in baseball, even though the NBA has had more playoff rounds than MLB. In basketball, where one team can win as much as 80% of its games during the regular season, a three or five or seven game series is a much better measure of excellence than it is in baseball. A big part of baseball's charm is its quirkiness, its possibilities for the unexpected. Baseball isn't any more a game of percentages than basketball, but it takes longer for those percentages to work themselves out in baseball. In baseball, a star comes to bat four or five times in a game. In

basketball, a star can take 30 shots. Aaron Judge doesn't hit a home run every game, even if it sometimes seems that way. But Steph Curry does hit a three-point shot just about every game (232 in a row at one point). Small sample sizes—five at bats rather than thirty shots—almost beg for flukes. Baseball, probably more than any other sport, begs for upsets.

What to do with this? I don't mean to ignore the postseason, as some analytic types do. I do not think that what happens in the post season is random. But, George Steinbrenner notwithstanding, I also do not think that the only success that counts is in the postseason. Sometimes bad things happen to good teams. Some of this is simply chance or, more precisely, bad luck. We should take the postseason seriously, but we should not let it make everything else irrelevant.

Rivals

"Everybody" knows that the Yankee/Red Sox rivalry is the best in baseball. I don't disagree. What I want to point out here are two things: First, until the beginning of divisional play, the Red Sox were *not* the Yankees biggest AL rivals. Second, since the beginning of divisional play (1969), the Yankees/Red Sox rivalry isn't a matter of a general hostility from New York as a city to Boston as a city—and certainly not a moral contest between good and evil ("The Evil Empire" versus the pampered Red Sox, even more racist than the Yankees). It's a competition on the field. That's more than enough.

For whatever reason, I've always known a lot more people from Boston than from anywhere else besides New York. Some of this is pretty obviously because my parents were both from the Boston area before they were thoughtful enough to raise me in the New York suburbs (thus allowing me to become

a Yankees fan). I also now live in Western Massachusetts. There are a lot of uprooted New Yorkers around but even more Bostonians. Even in college, in New York City, I knew a lot of Bostonians. It was not a matter of population. Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Washington, Philadelphia, and four other cities have larger metropolitan populations than Boston. It isn't a matter of location either. According to Google maps, it's 205 miles from Yankee Stadium to Fenway Park. It's only 203 to Camden Yards in Baltimore and it's a mere 102 to the site of old Shibe Park where the Philadelphia Athletics played before bailing for KC and eventually Oakland. Whatever. I do not think the Yankee/Red Sox rivalry is driven by population or proximity and certainly not by where my parents grew up or where I live. My sense is that the rivalry between the North Side Chicago Cubs and the South Side Chicago White Sox is more about geographical rivalry than is the case for the Yankees and Red Sox. Ditto for the Dodgers (in Brooklyn and Los Angeles) and the Giants (in Manhattan and San Francisco). My friends from Boston, even, maybe especially, the ones who live in New York, tell me that Bostonians do feel some resentment of New York, of its bigness, of its visibility, of its wealth. I do not feel that hostility toward Boston as a city, nor do any of the other Yankee fans I know. (But, if I did: What could be a better put down to hostile Southies than claiming you hadn't really even noticed them?) So far as I'm concerned, the rivalry between the Yankees and Red Sox has played out on the field.

It makes sense that it took a while for a rivalry to develop between the Yankees and the Red Sox. For most of the time that the Red Sox were winning, through 1918, the Yankees were losing. In 1904, the Yankees did finish second to the Red

Sox by just 1 ½ games but that was the only time the two teams finished one/two, in either order. When the Yankees bought Babe Ruth from the Red Sox (and bought or traded for a slew of other players as well), it was more or less a relationship between predator and prey. Then, when the Yankees got good, in part because they had Ruth, the Red Sox got bad, precisely because they did not have Ruth. The Red Sox got better in the late 1930', after then 30-year-old Tom Yawkey bought both the team and players to fill out the lineup. In 1938, 1939, 1941, and 1942, the Red Sox finished second to the Yankees each year—but never finished within nine games of first.

There was a real rivalry between 1948 and 1950, but the Yankees and Red Sox were not the main event the way they would be later. In 1948, the Yankees, Red Sox, and Indians were all tied for first with seven games to go but it was the Indians and Red Sox who wound up tied for first. In 1949, the Yankees led almost the entire way before getting swept in a three-game series in Fenway in late September and then won the final two games of the season against the Red Sox at Yankee Stadium to finish first by a game. That was a rivalry. In 1950, the Yankees led both the Red Sox and the Tigers by a mere half game on September 19 but both teams faded and the Red Sox finished third, four games back.   And that was pretty much it for rivalry seasons until the late 1970's.

To get a better sense of the Yankees main rivals, I made up a pretty simple system. I gave each team one point for each time it finished first and the Yankees second or the Yankees finished first and the rival second. I also gave five points for how close the pennant race was: 5 points for finishing within a game of each other (when one won the pennant) down to one

point for finishing within 5 games of each other. Here's what I got through 1968 and the beginning of divisional play. Cleveland, a frequent runner up to the Yankees in the 1950's, not the Red Sox, come out as the Yankee's biggest rivals.

<pre>
Cleveland   29 rivalry points
Boston   21
Detroit   17
Chicago   14
Philadelphia   9.5
Wash/Minn   9
StL/Balt   7
</pre>

Since 1969, two things have changed to make the Yankee/Red Sox rivalry more intense. One is that the Yankees and Red Sox have been in the same division. In an eight-team league—the case through 1960—the random chance of the any particular team finishing first was 1 in 8 and the chance of any other particular team finishing second was 1 in 7. That means the odds of, for example, of the Yankees finishing first and the Red Sox second were 1 in 56 (1/8 times 1/7). Since 1994, with five team divisions, the odds drop to I in 20. The other thing is that both teams have been good. Since 1969, the Yankees have had the best record in the majors (.562). The Red Sox have the second-best record in the American League (.542) and third best in the majors behind the Yankees and barely behind the Dodgers (.544).   Here are the rivalry points since 1969:

<pre>
Boston   47.5
Baltimore   27.5
Tampa Bay   12
Toronto   9.5
</pre>

At first, I thought that there was no reason to look at the playoffs. After all, until the coming of the Wild Card (1995), it was impossible for the Yankees and Red Sox to meet in the post season. And guess what? I gave each team one point for each time it met the Yankees in an early round of the playoffs, two points for every time the Yankees and the rival met in the AL Championship Series. Kansas City gets 8 points, for the four times they played the Yankees in the ALCS (all from 1976 through 1980). But the Red Sox also get 8 points, with three meetings in the ALCS and two in earlier rounds. (Cleveland and Minnesota are third and fourth, with 7 and 6 points respectively.)   Maybe you think it isn't really much of a rivalry because the Yankees so clearly dominated (at least through the first three games of the 2004 ALCS). Well, the Red Sox have finished as the runner up to the Yankees 15 times, including eight straight years from 1998 through 2005, which is pretty amazing. The Red Sox' 15 years as runners up to the Yankees is the most times any one team has finished second to any other team, ever. But the Yankees have also finished second to the Red Sox six times, more often than they've been runner up to any other team.

The Yankees/Red Sox rivalry has produced some of the most dramatic moments in the history of baseball—the final two games of 1949, the Bucky Dent home run in the 1978 play off game, the Aaron Boone walk off home run in the bottom of the eleventh in the 7th game of the 2003 ALCS, and—I still wince when I think about it—the Red Sox comeback from a 3 game to zero deficit in the 2004 ALCS. And none of this is to mention the brawls—in 1976, featuring Craig Nettles and Bill Lee; in 2003, featuring Pedro Martinez and Don Zimmer; in 2004, featuring Rodriguez and Jason Varitek. Neither is it to mention

Derek Jeter's famous diving catch into the stands in 2004, preserving a twelfth inning tie in a game the Yankees eventually won in the 13ᵗʰ. Neither is it to mention the rivalries between DiMaggio and Ted Williams (who seemed at least to respect each other) or between Thurman Munson and Carlton Fisk (who seemed genuinely to dislike each other).

I know that I take more pleasure when the Yankees beat the Red Sox than when they beat other teams and suffer more when the Yankees lose to the Red Sox than I do when they lose to any other team. I'm pretty sure I'm not alone. But that rivalry is not the product of any special animosity between New York and Boston as cities or even, so far as I know, any special animosity between Yankee players and Red Sox players. Rather, those animosities are the product of the rivalry, the sorts of things that happen when any two teams play year after year when the stakes are high. If I absolutely had to, I'm confident I could make invidious distinctions between the South Street Seaport and Boston's Faneuil Hall Marketplace. But in truth, I kind of like them both even though they're both tourist traps and I'm not sure how well I could distinguish either one from Baltimore's Inner Harbor. (Tourist Tip: If you are in Baltimore, do visit the Babe Ruth birthplace museum. It's surprisingly moving and only about a twenty-minute walk from the Inner Harbor and an even shorter walk from Camden Yards.) What I do care about is the AL East standings. For 50 years that's where Boston has been the biggest competition. Let Baltimore get good again and I'm just as happy to root against the Orioles as against the Red Sox.

Underrated, Overrated, Misunderstood, and Understood All Too Well: A note on ARod

In both 2011 and 2012, *Sports Illustrated* asked major leaguers to pick the most overrated player in baseball. Alex Rodriguez "won" both years. You would think that would qualify Rodriguez for a place on my list. It doesn't. Quite the reverse: If so many players are picking Rodriguez as overrated it suggests just the opposite—that he is *underrated* by the very players who call him overrated. I don't see how there can be much doubt about Rodriguez' on-field performance. He won the MVP three times (a rating) but he also led the league in WAR (a performance) five times--twice with the Yankees—and led position players six times. He led the league in offensive WAR 9 times, three with the Yankees. He did deteriorate as he got older and he did use steroids, but the sum of his career is extraordinary. He is 12th all-time in WAR for position players, just behind Ted Wiiliams in 11th and just ahead of Lou Gehrig and Mickey Mantle. That's good company. Neil Paine, writing on the website FiveThirtyEight, summed up Rodriguez's career thus: "A-Rod *before* his prime was better than almost anybody in baseball history. In 1996, at the ripe old age of 20, Rodriguez produced 9.4 WAR — which is still tied for the 87th-best season in MLB history and was, at the time, easily the most WAR produced in one season at that age. From there, A-Rod would pile on seven more seasons of 8 or more WAR, and he'd make a strong case for having the best career of any player who ever spent the majority of his prime years at shortstop." That seems about right. When people say they think Rodríguez is/was overrated, I think they do not mean that he was overrated for his performance on the field. I think they mean five things.

One is that he was overpaid. He was. He signed what was, at the time, the biggest contract ever with the Texas

Rangers in 2001 and a second then-biggest-contract-ever with the Yankees after the 2007 season for 300 million dollars. Was he worth it? Given that the contract kicked in when Rodriguez was 32, that he started to decline almost immediately, that he was suspended for the entire 2014 season, and that the Yankees bought him out before the contract expired, the answer is almost certainly no. That still does not make his on-field performance any less good.

A second thing people mean is that his now well-documented steroid use made him better than he would have been otherwise. My sense, for what it's worth, is that steroids did not help Rodriguez as much as they helped either Barry Bonds or Roger Clemens. Bonds got better as he aged, to a degree that was unprecedented. Clemens did not get better as he aged but he did not fall off the way most pitchers do. In contrast, Rodriguez did drop off, precipitously, in his late 30's. (See, if you like the very smart analysis of Bonds and Clemens on the ESPN website: www.espn.com/mlb/story/_/id/32806209.) Now, to say that Rodriguez did not benefit from steroids as much as Bonds or Clemens is to damn with very faint praise. It's a reasonable presumption that Rodriguez did benefit. And in this sense, that his performance was actually better than his drug free ability, Rodriguez was overrated.

A third sense people seem to mean is that Rodriguez did not live up to expectations. This is not to say that Rodriguez was not as good as his numbers, just that people expected the numbers to be better. This claim also seems to me right. In Rodriguez's first year with the Yankees, 2004, he hit .286 with 36 home runs. Those are good numbers but both batting and home runs were lower than Rodriguez had managed in each of

the previous six years with the Mariners and Rangers. When the Yankees signed him to his second contract, they did so expecting Rodriguez to break Bonds record for career home runs, which might very well have justified his salary. But Rodriguez didn't come particularly close (59 home runs short), in large part because he faded quickly once he hit 35 years old and because he missed an entire year because he was suspended for steroid use.

A fourth thing people seem to mean when they say Rodriguez is/was overrated is that he is a jerk, a bad sport, selfish, a narcissist for those who like slightly more clinical language. Buck Showalter couldn't stand him in Texas and wanted him gone even though he had just won an MVP. He had a falling out with Derek Jeter, once a good friend, because he made dismissive remarks about Jeter's ability. This position is so universally stated and so rarely contradicted that I'm willing to take it as truth. It has even less to do with his performance on the field than does his salary., his steroid use or inflated expectations.

The fifth thing people mean does address his on-field performance. It is, to me, the most telling. This is that Rodriguez did not hit in the clutch. Start with the postseason. He was great in 2009 in both the divisional series against the Twins and the AL championship against the Angels. He was mediocre in the World Series, the first the Yankees had won since 2000 and the last they won to this day. Overall—with the Mariners and Rangers as well as the Yankees, Rodriguez career statistics in the postseason are a .259 batting average, a .365 on base percentage, a slugging average of .457, and an OPS of .822. Just with the Yankees his postseason OPS was lower, .794. Those aren't terrible numbers but they are well

below Rodriguez' regular season standard of .295/.380/.550/.930. (.283/.378/.523/.900 with just the Yankees.) With two out and a runner in scoring position, Rodriguez had an OPS of .850 for his career, .865 with the Yankees, both below his standard in other situations. In "Late & Close" situations, he was equally disappointing. The numbers were .268/.364/.505/.869 overall. With the Yankees? An OPS of .819. And do not think this was a fluke of small sample size. Rodriguez had 907 plate appearances late & close, just with the Yankees.

Think about it. Over the course of all situations Rodriguez was a much better hitter than Berra, on the order of 10 to 12%. That's the difference between a batting average of .300 and .330 or an on base average of .400 and .450. But in "Late & Close," Berra was the better hitter than Rodriguez, an OPS of .897 to Rodriguez' .869, .819 with the Yankees. That seems to me the most damning charge against Rodriguez, *as a player.* I still think Rodriguez was great on the field, one of the top ten to twenty players ever, deserving of his three MVPs. But it is not as clear a judgment as it would have been if he had not used steroids and if he had not come up short so often at key moments.

Do Old Teams Get worse?

The single most distinctive characteristic of the Yankee teams in the aughts is that they were old. The 2005 team was the oldest ever (at least in the AL) with a weighted average age of 33.3. That was 4.2 years older than the average for the league. (Weighted age comes from Baseball Reference, where else. The weighting is by at bats plus games played. That means that you count someone with 600 at bats in 150 games 750 times but someone with 400 at bats in 100 games 500

times. Pitchers are weighted by an equivalent process. I then simply averaged the weighted averages for both players and pitchers.) The 2004 team was the second oldest ever, an average of 32.6 years, 3.5 older than the league average. The 2005 Red Sox and the 1982 Angels also had team averages above 32. The 2003 Yankees averaged 32.1. And that's the grand total of teams that averaged 32 or above.

There have been 39 American League teams with an average age of 31 or above. Fourteen of them were Yankee teams. There have been 123 American League teams with an average age above 30. 26 of them have been Yankee teams, almost twice as many as any other franchise.

The Yankees have not always specialized in old players. Take a look at the graph below. It shows two things. One is that the overall age of players has gone up, but not very fast. Roughly through 1915, American League players were significantly younger than they are today. During World War II, players got older, because that's who had deferments. After World War II, players got younger again. I'm not sure why. It's too early for a Baby Boomer effect. Around 1976 players started to get older again. It's possible that some combination of hyperinflation of salaries and better training methods kept players around longer. I don't know that. I'm guessing. And there is some hint that ages may have started to fall again.

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The second thing the graph shows is how dramatically the Yankees have departed from league average since the 1970's. I did the calculations. Through 1970, the Yankees were, on average, about 2 months older than the league as a whole. That's no big deal. Since 1971, they've been 19 months older. That is a big deal. From 1999 through 2015, they averaged 32 months older. That's an even bigger deal. It's not hard to explain what happened. Free agents are generally older than other players because they need years to qualify. Once the Yankees committed themselves—or drifted into—a strategy of signing free agents, they also committed—or drifted into—into a roster filled with older players.

Does it matter? Yes, but not in the way you probably think it does. We know that players decline once they pass their early or mid-thirties.   Some decline dramatically (Mantle, DiMaggio),

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others more gradually (Ruth, Jeter), but they all decline eventually. Teams are different. Unlike most of us, teams can actually get younger. Departures and arrivals are part of every season. The holdovers do, of course, get one year older each season but the arrivals are usually younger than the departures and that keeps teams in a much narrower age range than individual players. But what happens when a team does get old?

The easy answer is that they get worse. The Yankees have had 26 teams with an average age of 30 or higher. Fifteen got worse the next year. Ten got better. One had the same record. If we limit it to Yankee teams with an average age of 31 or more, the story doesn't change much. Of 14 teams, eight got worse, five got better and the same one (the 2003 Yankees) repeated the same record. The Yankees are the franchise with the oldest teams but there were others. I've found 21 other American League teams with an average age of 31 or more. Fifteen of those twenty-one teams got worse the next year. The total? 35 teams and 23 got worse. That's about as convincing a finding as we're likely to get from a small sample. But there's a very big qualification.

Those 26 Yankee teams with an average age above 30? Every single one finished above .500. Their overall won/lost percentage was .587, the equivalent of 95 wins in a 162-game season. Fifteen of those teams did get worse the next year but the average drop off was small—to a .580 won/lost percentage, the equivalent of 94 wins, an average drop of all of one game.

Old teams do decline. But what's even clearer is that old teams are good. You think this is just a coincidence? The Yankees are old and the Yankees are good so, of course, old Yankee teams are also good Yankee teams. That's what I

thought, too. So, I looked for other American League teams that were old. I found 97 with an average age of 30 or above. 62 finished above .500 (and two more exactly at .500).   Those old teams include the 1944 Browns , who appeared in that franchise's only World Series before they moved to Baltimore, the 2004 Red Sox who "broke the curse" and the 2007 team that also won the World Series, the 1954 Indians who set the record for most wins in a 154 game schedule, the 2001 Mariners who set the record for most wins in a 162 game season, the 1945 Detroit world champions, the 1929 Philadelphia world champions, along with AL champions from Chicago in 1959, the old Washington Senators in 1925 and 1933 and the 1990 Oakland A's. That's an impressive list, even leaving aside the Yankees.

Here's what I think is going on. Older teams do get worse but that's probably as much regression to the mean as deterioration. More generally, we might be making a mistake to wonder about what happens to old teams instead of wondering about why good teams get old. Once we put it that way, we understand the relationship between age and team success much better. A team is good. It's manager or general manager or owner thinks the team has a shot to win. So he trades for a veteran or two or signs a free agent or two, players he thinks will put him over the top. The closer he gets to winning, the more he abandons the effort to develop young players, the more he is likely to go with an aging star whose past and present are brighter than his future. Of course, different teams develop different strategies. The Tampa Rays and the Toronto Blue Jays have never had an old team (average age above 30). The Yankees, for the last 30 years, have never been willing to rebuild. They, more than any other

team, have insisted on competing every year. That's how they stay good but also why they get old. They go together.

Bad Fielding Teams

The teams from the aughts weren't distinctive just because they were old. They were also terrible fielding teams, which probably goes along with being old. Throughout most of their history, especially their glory years, the Yankees have generally been a good fielding team. By Baseball-Reference's measure, they were above average for 31 consecutive years, from 1934 through 1964. I haven't done the research to know for sure (or anything close), but my guess is that that's a record. It's not a surprise: From 1934 through 1964, the Yankees were very good. And part of being good is having good fielding just as part of being good is having good hitting and pitching.

What's amazing about the bad fielding teams of the early 2000s is that the Yankees won despite fielding badly. We probably should not put too much weight on any measure of fielding, especially in historical comparisons and over spans of time where the measures of fielding have changed. Do not imagine that Baseball-Reference is the last word or that they are anywhere close to precise as they seem to be. So, treat the B-R numbers with all due qualifications. It doesn't matter because the evidence is overwhelming. By B-R's measure—fielding runs above or below average—the 2005 Yankees were the sixth worst fielding team in the entire history of the American League. The 2004 Yankees were the 27th worst. But even this much understates the magnitude of the Yankees' dubious accomplishment.

Let's limit ourselves to the roughly 200 AL teams that finished first, either in their division or their league as a whole. The 2005 team is the worst fielding team of them all, 107 runs

below average. Don't let the number slip by. It's two runs every three games, not compared to the best team but to an average team. That is a huge hole to dig oneself out of. The second worst? It's the 2004 Yankees, followed by the 2001, 2002 and 2006 teams, all at 55 runs below average or worse. (If you're wondering about the 2003 AL champion team, they improved all the way up to 43 runs below average.)

If this is all a little too abstract, look at the Yankees' starting lineup in 2005 and their individual contributions to the worst fielding first place team in AL history. The numbers next to the names are fielding runs above or below average. These involve comparisons with other players at the same position. They are not the same as or even the direct basis for Defensive Wins Above (or below) Replacement because they do not include positional adjustments (higher for difficult positions like short or second, lower for easier positions like first or left field)

C	Posada	8
1B	Martinez	7
2b	Cano	-22
SS	Jeter	-27
3B	Rodriguez	0
LF	Matsui	-1
CF	Williams	-27
RF	Sheffield	-14
DH/1B	Giambi	-6
UT	Womack	-14

That's a bad fielding team, by the numbers or by a vision test.

But it wasn't just the 2005 (or 2004 or 2002 or 2006) team. There was a long stretch of good fielding teams (1914-1979,

57 above average, 9 below). Since 1980 it's been very different (13 above average, 30 below). What happened? Here's what I think. As long as the Yankees were buying players from minor league teams or promoting players from their own minor league system, they could get players who were not only young but both good fielders and good hitters. Once the Yankees started stocking up on free agents, in the 1980s and especially in the early 2000s, the equation changed. The Yankees went for hitters. If they emphasized hitting over fielding, it was in part because hitting was more easily measured than fielding. But it was also because free agents are old and fielding skill declines with age, probably faster than hitting or pitching skills Put indifference to fielding together with a strategy of signing older players and you get lousy defensive teams.

And just one more thing. If good fielding disguises mediocre pitching (what I argued was the case for Raschi and Reynolds and Lopat in the 1950s), lousy fielding disguises good pitching. The prime example is Mike Mussina.

Underrated Pitcher: Mike Mussina

What made him underrated: His defense.

It's hard to find a Yankee pitcher who was underrated. Most of that has to do with how we evaluate pitchers and how numbers embed themselves in our mind. I have a very good memory for numbers. Add that to my rabid attachment to the Yankees, I can tell you Red Rolfe's batting average in 1939, how many home runs Mantle hit in 1956, how many runs DiMaggio drove in in 1948 and a lot of other numbers cluttering my brain. I cannot tell you, though, beyond a rough sense, what anybody's WAR or WAA was without looking it up. Some of this is because WAR and WAA are newer statistics. It's possible that in 50 years someone who is now 20 years old will

be able to rattle off the WAA for Aaron Judge or Gio Urshela. But I doubt it. The formulas for WAR and WAA are complicated and vary from website to website. To understand the math behind home runs, all you need is to be able to count. WAR and WAA are far better than batting average, home runs, and RBI in evaluating the overall value of a player. But they are not descriptive in the way batting average, home runs and RBI are. WAR and WAA might tell you how good a player is. BA, HR and RBI tell you much more about what kind of player he is. The conventional statistics for hitters stick in our minds in a way the analytic statistics do not. And, no matter how sophisticated we get with fWAR or bWAR or wOBA, the conventional statistics will likely continue to distort our evaluations. The evaluative process with pitchers is, I think, even worse. The numbers I'm likely to know for pitchers are won/lost records. I know that Guidry was 25-3 in 1978, that Turley was 21-7 in 1958, that Red Ruffing won 20 games four years in a row, that Jack Chesbro won 41 in 1904, that Whitey Ford won 25 in 1961 once Ralph Houk let him pitch more often and more regularly than Casey Stengel ever had. But won/lost record, as almost all analysts agree, is a terrible way to evaluate pitchers. It involves giving the pitcher something like full credit for the team's success—for what the hitters did, for what the fielders did as well as his own efforts. For the Yankees, a pitcher's won/lost record is particularly deceptive. Take a pitcher from a team with a losing record, with lousy hitting and lousy fielding, then put him on the Yankees in one of the Yankees' good years. Of course, he'll win more games. That's what happened to Red Ruffing. This isn't the magic of Yankee pinstripes. It isn't (at least not usually) the magic of better coaching. It's the very unmysterious effect of better teammates. When Yankee

pitchers have great won/lost records, some of it has to do with their own performance. A lot does not. Isn't Earned Run Average better? Yes. But ERA also has its limits. First, ERA does not resonate the way won/lost does. I carry a lot of numbers around in my head, but, for whatever reason, I do not carry ERAs in my head the way I carry Batting Averages. Second, ERAs (like won/lost) depend on teammates, not for their hitting but still for their fielding.   Third, ERA like BA or OPS (but unlike won/lost records) vary enormously depending on the offensive context. The Yankees, in particular, have tended to have their down years (dead ball baseball, the mid-60's to early 70's) in pitcher friendly contexts. The result is that when Yankee pitchers have had terrific ("uncorrected") Earned Run Averages, they have tended to have mediocre won lost records.

What would an underrated pitcher look like? He would win games, sure, but would win less than his pitching ability suggested. He would play for mediocre teams that did not pad his wins totals. He certainly would not pass milestones we think of as meaningful even if they are not statistically significant. The obvious example is winning 20 games in a season or 300 in a career. He would likely pitch in a high offensive context that inflated his ERA. And he would pitch in front of a lousy fielding team that made his ERA, corrected or uncorrected, even worse than it would have been in front of good fielders. I can't find anyone who meets all those criteria. I can find one who comes close. Mike Mussina played for good teams— that's the exception—although even he never played for a World Series winner. All the other standards he meets. He didn't win 20 games in a season until his final year. He came close to 300 for his career but retired before he got there. He

played in a high offensive context and he played in front of historically bad fielders.

Mussina was (is?) both famously smart and famously reclusive. He went to Stanford and graduated with a major in economics. According to Allen Barra, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, Mussina may have intentionally avoided graduating high school as his class valedictorian, so that he could also avoid having to make a speech. The only time I can remember seeing Mussina interviewed is in the documentary *Wordplay*, about Will Shortz, who edits the *New York Times* crossword puzzle and the people who solve it (including Bill Clinton, Jon Stewart and Dan Okrent—who is usually credited as the inventor of rotisserie baseball—as well as Mussina).

Mussina played for a decade with the Orioles. He signed as a free agent with the Yankees in 2001, the year after they had won three straight World Series and retired in 2008, the year before the Yankees won the World Series for (so far) the last time. He was remarkably durable, starting 27 or more games 14 years in a row (including all eight with the Yankees). He won 11 or more games eighteen straight years. He rarely led the league in anything—wins once with the Orioles, and once each, all with the Orioles in games started, innings pitched, shutouts, and won/lost percentage, each in a different year. He never had a single dominant year—like Guidry in 1978 or Ford in 1961—with the result that he never won a Cy Young Award despite finishing in the top six nine different times. He did have excellent control, averaging only two walks per game over his entire career. Of course, good control does not evoke the same oohs and aahs as a 100 mile per hour fastball. And it is entirely in keeping with Mussina's personality and record that he came within one out of a perfect game in

2001, against the Red Sox, no less, and then left the Stadium without talking to the media. Mussina won 123 games for the Yankees and lost only 72. He was elected to the Hall of Fame in 2019, his sixth year of eligibility, just barely reaching the 75% of votes that was the threshold for induction.

He shouldn't have had to wait so long. Mussina's lifetime WAR, Yankees and Orioles, is 82.6. That's 20th all time. All 19 pitchers with a higher WAR are in the Hall of Fame. Mussina's total is higher than Nolan Ryan, Carl Hubbell, Jim Palmer, Sandy Koufax and Juan Marichal as well as Whitey Ford, Red Ruffing. Lefty Gomez, Herb Pennock and Waite Hoyt and every other pitcher who played the majority of his career for the Yankees. But here's the catch: Mussina's lifetime Earned Run Average (3.68) is higher than all but two Hall of Fame pitchers (Red Ruffing and Jack Morris) and his lifetime ERA with the Yankees (3.88) is higher even than Ruffing's.

Doesn't ERA mean more than wins?   Well, maybe, but ERA is hardly independent of team and league context. ERA+ is meant to take park and league contexts into account. And by ERA+ Mussina moves up considerably, even among Hall of Fame pitchers. By that standard (ERA+ of 123 or almost ¼ above average) Mussina still trails the all-time greats (Mathewson and Seaver and the Johnsons—Walter and Randy—and Maddux and Marichal) but he also leads Bob Feller, Warren Spahn, Steve Carlton and 35 other pitchers firmly ensconced in the Hall. And even this understates. ERA+ takes into account park effects and league effects but it does not take into account fielding. And Mussina, especially with the Yankees, played in front of historically bad fielding teams.

In ten years with the Orioles, Mussina had an ERA of 3.53. In eight years with the Yankees, it was 3.88. Maybe he was

getting old? Maybe, but not likely. Look at his FIP—fielding independent pitching—for both teams. It was 3.63 for the Orioles and 3.5 for the Yankees. It sure looks as if Mussina was pretty consistent, if anything a little better as he aged, and what changed was the fielding behind him. Another way to look at this is to look at the runs (earned and unearned) Mussina gave up per nine innings and see how many of them could be credited to his fielders. This is a different calculation from FIP but should be close. It is. As an Oriole, Mussina was giving up 3.74 runs per nine but his defense was saving him .13. Add those two together as an alternative measure of his pitching net of defense and you get 3.87. With the Yankees, Mussina gave up 4.19 runs per nine but his defense was costing him .34 runs. *Subtract* those runs and his runs allowed per nine with the Yankees was 3.85, very close to what it was with the Orioles. Fangraphs does have a listing for what they call FIP-, the equivalent for FIP to ERA+ for ERA (and then inverted, just to keep things simple). Baseball-Reference does not have a separate listing for FIP+ or FIP-, but they, like Fangraphs, use something much like relative FIP (plus or minus) to figure Wins Above Replacement. That's not only how Mussina comes out 20th on the all-time list but also explains why not a lot of people noticed just how good he was.

FIP and ERA, Again

I've used FIP a lot—in discussing why Mike Mussina has been underrated, just above, and in discussing, earlier, why Ruffing, Raschi, Lopat, and Reynolds were all underrated. Here's the data a little more systematically. Below, I list the 36 players who have pitched 1000 or more innings for the Yankees. The last column list Earned Run Average minus Fielding Independent Pitching. A negative number suggests

that the pitcher was helped by his defense. A positive number suggests that he was hurt. I've arranged the table in chronological order, from the year of the pitcher's debut with the Yankees. I've done this to emphasize the remarkable run of pitchers (10 in a row, 12 of 13) who were helped by fielding in the glory years from 1930 through 1964. I've also done this to emphasize how different the situation was for Yankee pitchers in the early 2000's. Not only Mussina but also Petite and Clemens were hurt, often badly by the defense that played behind them. Mariano Rivera is the great exception but Rivera, as I've already shown, was the great exception to almost everything.

Player	IP	From	To	ERA	FIP	ERA-FIP
Jack Chesbro	1952.0	1903	1909	2.58	2.39	0.19
Al Orth	1172.2	1904	1909	2.72	2.48	0.24
Jack Warhop	1412.2	1908	1915	3.12	3.19	**-0.07**
Jack Quinn	1270.0	1909	1921	3.15	2.91	0.24
Russ Ford	1112.2	1909	1913	2.54	2.78	**-0.24**
Ray Caldwell	1718.1	1910	1918	3	2.95	0.05
Ray Fisher	1380.1	1910	1917	2.91	2.79	0.12
Bob Shawkey	2488.2	1915	1927	3.12	3.38	**-0.26**
Carl Mays	1090.0	1919	1923	3.25	3.88	**-0.63**
Waite Hoyt	2272.1	1921	1930	3.48	3.63	**-0.15**
Sad Sam Jones	1089.1	1922	1926	4.06	3.95	0.11

Herb Pennock	2203.1	1923	1933	3.54	3.36	0.18
George Pipgras	1351.2	1923	1933	4.04	3.72	0.32
Red Ruffing	3168.2	1930	1946	3.47	3.83	**-0.36**
Lefty Gomez	2498.1	1930	1942	3.34	3.87	**-0.53**
Spud Chandler	1485.0	1937	1947	2.84	3.4	**-0.56**
Tiny Bonham	1176.2	1940	1946	2.73	3.32	**-0.59**
Vic Raschi	1537.0	1946	1953	3.47	3.61	**-0.14**
Allie Reynolds	1700.0	1947	1954	3.3	3.78	**-0.48**
Eddie Lopat	1497.1	1948	1955	3.19	3.74	**-0.55**
Whitey Ford	3170.1	1950	1967	2.75	3.26	**-0.51**
Bob Turley	1269.0	1955	1962	3.62	4.15	**-0.53**
Ralph Terry	1198.0	1956	1964	3.44	3.68	**-0.24**
Al Downing	1235.1	1961	1969	3.23	3.18	0.05
Jim Bouton	1013.2	1962	1968	3.36	3.82	**-0.46**
Mel Stottlemyre	2661.1	1964	1974	2.97	3.36	**-0.39**
Fritz Peterson	1857.1	1966	1974	3.1	3.1	0
Ron Guidry	2392.0	1975	1988	3.29	3.27	0.02
Tommy John	1367.0	1979	1989	3.59	3.59	0

Dave Righetti	1136.2	1979	1990	3.11	3.12	**-0.01**
Andy Pettitte	2796.1	1995	2013	3.94	3.77	0.17
Mariano Rivera	1283.2	1995	2013	2.21	2.76	**-0.55**
Roger Clemens	1103.0	1999	2007	4.01	3.8	0.21
Mike Mussina	1553.0	2001	2008	3.88	3.5	0.38
CC Sabathia	1918.0	2009	2019	3.81	3.92	**-0.11**
Masahiro Tanaka	1054.1	2014	2020	3.74	3.91	**-0.17**

CHAPTER 19
THE DYNASTY THAT WASN'T: 2008-16

In 2008, Joe Girardi replaced Joe Torre as manager. It didn't go well. The big problem was the offense. Rodriguez, Jeter and, especially, Cano all fell off dramatically from the year before. The team went from leading the league in runs scored (968) in 2007 to roughly average (789) in 2008. The Yankees were never really in the race. They finished 89-73 and were only that good because of a strong September. They finished in third place, 8 games behind Tampa Bay and 6 games behind the Red Sox for the wild card spot. They missed the playoffs for the first time since 1993, for the first time since MLB had expanded the playoffs to four teams in each league.

2009 was much better. Jeter had his last great year. Cano bounced back. Posada, at age 38, caught 100 games and appeared in 111. Mark Teixeira, signed as a free agent over the off season, led the league in home runs and RBI. And the Yankees again led the league in scoring. Mike Mussina had retired after the 2008 season, but the slack was taken up by another free agent, C. C. Sabathia. The Yankees won 103 games, the most in the majors.

The 2009 postseason was surprisingly undramatic. In the ALDS, the Yankees swept the Twins. Rodriguez was the hero with two home runs and 6 RBI. In the ALCS, the Yankees beat the Angels 4 games to 2. Rodriguez was the hitting hero again with three home runs and another 6 RBI. Sabathia won games two and four, giving up only two runs across 16 innings. In the World Series, the Yankees took on the defending World Series champion Phillies. The Phillies won the first game. The Yankees won the next three and again in game six. Hideki

Matsui, in his last year with the Yankees, was the World Series MVP with three home runs and 8 RBI. Mariano Rivera finished one of his best (of many) postseasons, 12 games, 16 innings, one run allowed, five saves.

From 2010 to 2012, the Yankees had the best record in the American League in two years and missed by just one game in the third. Jeter and Posada both showed signs of aging, but Cano emerged as a star of the first order and Curtis Granderson, acquired by trade, was very good in both 2011 and 2012. They were at or near the top of the league in scoring and slightly above average in scoring runs all three years.

It could have been glorious. But the postseason playoff format makes it hard. We should appreciate what the 1998-2001 Yankees accomplished all the more in retrospect. In 2010, the Yankees beat the Twins in the ALDS, because they always beat the Twins. They then lost to the Rangers, 4 games to 2, in the ALCS. Phil Hughes was the obvious goat, giving up 14 hits, 7 walks and 11 runs in nine innings while starting games two and six.

2011 was worse. The Yankees lost to the Tigers 3-2 in the ALDS. Game 5 was close. The Tigers took a 3-0 lead behind Max Scherzer. Cano made it 3-1 with a home run in the fifth. Then, in the bottom of the seventh the Yankees loaded the bases on singles by Jeter, Granderson and Cano with one out. Rodriguez struck out. Teixeira walked to force in a run to make it a one run game with the bases still loaded. But Nick Swisher struck out to end the inning and the Yankees never challenged again. It was a good game in a good season but not by the standards of a team that had won 27 championships.

2012 was more of the same. The Yankees beat the Orioles three games to two in an exciting ALDS. The Yankees

won the first game 7-2 with 5 runs in the top of the ninth to break open a game that had been tied since the fourth. The Orioles won game two, 3-2 but the Yankees won game three after scoring the tying run on a Raul Ibanez home run in the bottom of the ninth and then winning on a home run in the bottom of the twelfth on a home run by the very same Raul Ibanez. In game four it was the Orioles turn, this time a 2-1 win in 13 innings. The Yankees ended the series by winning game five 3-1 behind Sabathia's 4 hit complete game. It looked promising but it was not to be. The Tigers swept the Yankees in the ALCS as the Yankees scored a grand total of 6 runs over the four games.

Could 2010-2012 have turned out different? Sure. But it didn't.

2013 to 2016 was much worse. In 2013, Jeter turned 39, was hurt most of the year, played only 17 games and hit .190. He played the full season in 2014 but hit only .256 with almost no power as his fielding, already bad, got even worse. Rodriguez hurt his hip in 2013 and played only 44 games. He was suspended for all of 2014 for steroid use. He came back as a 39-year-old in 2015 but hit only .235 for the two remaining years of his career. Mark Texeira, a mere 33, was also hurt in 2013—his wrist—and played only 14 games that year. He also came back in 2014 and played three more years with the Yankees but with a combined batting average for those years of .225. Over the four years from 2013 through 2016, the Yankees featured in their starting line up a series of over the hill stars (Carlos Beltran, age 37 and 38; Alfonso Soriano, back for a second tour of duty with the Yankees, also age 37 and 38; Ichiro Suzuki, age 39 and 40) and a long list of 30ish overpriced disappointments (Lyle Overbay, Chris Stewart, Brian McAnn,

Chase Headley).   The closest thing the Yankees had to a youngish star in 2013 was Robinson Cano, but he left at the end of the year as a free agent for Seattle.

From 2013 to 2016, the Yankees never won less than 84 games or more than 87. Even that was a bit of a miracle as they were outscored in three of the four years. They made the postseason only once, in 2015, when they promptly lost the wildcard game to the Astros, 3-0, racking up a total of three singles.

Great infields

In a 2013 article on ESPN, Buster Olney picked the 2009 Yankees infield—Mark Teixeira, Robinson Cano, Derek Jeter, and Alex Rodriguez—as the second greatest in major league history. His choice for the best ever was the 1976 Cincinnati Reds (Perez, Morgan, Concepcion, and Rose) with the 1999 Mets third, the 2009 Tampa Bay Rays fourth and the 1914 Philadelphia A's fifth.

I will try, in just a little bit, to save Olney's evaluation of the 2009 Yankees but the whole list—to put it nicely—is just a little eccentric.   The most obvious way to rank infields is simply to add up the WAR of the four starters. For the 2009 group that total is 20.6.   (Teixera, 5.3; Cano, 4.5; Jeter, 6.6; Rodriguez, 4.2) That's good. But I also found no less than 19 infields with better totals, including the Yankees of both 1927 and 2007. There may be more that I missed. Here's the full list as best I know:

PHI, A	1912(McInnis, Collins, Barry, Baker)	27.9
PHI, A	1913(McInnis, Collins, Barry, Baker)	27.1
MIL, A	1982(Cooper, Ganter, Yount, Molitor)	25.1
TB, A	2009(Pena, Zobrist, Bartlett, Longoria) 24.9	

PHI, A	1914(McInnis, Collins, Barry, Baker)	24.6
DET, A	1934(Greenberg, Gehringer, Rogell, Owen)	23.9
CIN, N	1976(Perez, Morgan, Concepcion, Rose)	23.6
NYG, N	1927(Terry, Hornsby, Jackson, Lindstrom)	23.6
BKN, N	1951(Hodges, Robinson, Reese, Cox)	22.4
CIN, N	1975(Perez, Morga, Concepcion, Rose)	22.1
CHI, N	1906(Chance, Evers, Tinker, Steinfeldt)	22.1
PHI, A	1910(Davis, Collins, Barry, Baker)	22.0
DET, A	1935(Greenberg, Gehringer, Rogell, Owen)	22.0
NYY, A	2007(Mantkiewicz, Cano, Jeter, Rodriguez)	21.4
CIN, N	1939(McCormick, Frey, Myers, Werber)	21.2
NYY, A	1927(Gehrig, Lazzeri, Koenig, Dugan)	21.1
NYM, N	1999(Olerud, Alfonzo, Ordonez, Ventura)	21.1
TEX, A	1977(Hargrove, Wills, Campaneris, Harrah)	21.0
STL, N	1946(Musial, Sch'nd'nst, Marion, Kurowski)	20.7
NYY, A	2009(Teixeira, Cano, Jeter, Rodriguez)	20.6

It's an interesting list. Most of the teams finished first. A few did not: the 2009 Rays, the 1927 Giants, the 1951 Dodgers, who famously lost to the Giants in a playoff, the 1999 Mets, and the 1977 Rangers as well as the 2007 Yankees.

It also seems clear from the list that the Philadelphia Athletics "$100,000 infield"—its purported market value, well before inflation-- deserves the title of best ever. The 1912 and 1913 versions are first and second on the list. The 1914 version is fifth and the slightly different 1910 version (Davis instead of McInnis at first) also shows up. The 1982 Brewers featured two Hall of Famers (Yount and Molitor), another very good player (Cooper) and an above average player at 2nd (Gantner). The 1976 Reds have the highest total in the National League and the 1975 version is fourth in the league.

As for the 2009 Yankees, they are neither first in their own year nor first among Yankees. The 2008 Tampa team was one of the great surprises, going from last to first in a single season. The 2009 team wasn't quite as good but they were still good. Ben Zobrist, a much underrated player, had a sensational year (8.6 WAR) and shortstop Jason Bartlett had by far the best year of his career (6.2 WAR). Carlos Pena at first (3.1 WAR) and Evan Longoria at third (7.0 WAR) were also very good.

The comparisons between the Yankees' 2009 infield and the 1927 or 2007 infields are a bit more complicated. The 1927 Yankees had Lou Gehrig at first base, having one of the best years of anyone, ever (11.9 WAR). And they had Tony Lazzeri at second having a terrific year (6.4 WAR) but they also had Mark Koenig at short, who was roughly league average and Joe Dugan at third who was barely above replacement level. Total WAR notwithstanding, it's not so much that it was a great infield as that Gehrig and Lazzeri were great. Ditto, sort of, for the 2007 Yankees. The 2009 Yankees had Mark Texeira, a very good player at first base. The 2007 Yankees didn't have a real regular first baseman. Jason Giambi, who was a regular in 2006 and 2008, was hurt much of the year and started only 16 games at first (and 53 at DH).   They tried Josh Phelps for 20 games, mostly in May and June, before waiving him. He was picked up by the Pirates but out of the majors by 2009. Through July and August Andy Phillips got most of the starts. Phillips, a long time Yankee minor leaguer, had played sporadically in 2006 but his entire career comprised only five years and a total of 557 at bats. The player I've counted as the Yankees' regular first baseman in 2007 is Doug Mientkiewicz, a 33-year-old signed as a low budget free agent in the off season.   Mientkiewicz was decent, slightly above average

when he played, but he also broke his wrist and missed almost all of June, July and August. Mientkiewicz started 72 games at first, the most of any Yankee. His WAR, 1.4, wasn't high but it was still higher than Giambi's, Phelps', or Phillips'. So why is the 2007 Yankees' total so high? Well, Rodriguez had his best year as a Yankee (9.4 WAR) and one of the best years for any third baseman ever and Cano also had a very good year (6.7 WAR) and Jeter had a Jeterish year (3.9 WAR). In 2009 Teixeira was much better than Mientkiewicz had been in 2007 and Jeter was also better than he had been two years earlier but not enough to make up for the significant fall offs from both Cano and Rodriguez.

At this point you might want to object to the whole procedure. How can you call an infield the greatest ever if it has a below average player at third (Dugan in 1927) or a part-time mediocrity at first (Mientkiewicz in 2007)? You—which is to say, me—want to add up WARs. I—which is to say, hypothetical you—want to do more than that. I want either some minimum above which every player must pass or some way to include balance. OK. I'm not sure that's any more right than simply adding up WAR but it is another way of measuring "best." So, instead of just adding WAR I multiplied (same logic as I used earlier in discussing the most home runs by brothers, many pages ago). By that method the 2009 Yankees are clearly the best infield in team history (5.3 X 4.5 X 6.6 X 4.2, from first to third,=661). The second highest score goes to the 1931 team (Gehrig, Lazzeri, Lary, Sewell) and the third highest to the 2002 team (Giambi, Soriano, Jeter, Ventura). The 1919 infield (Wally Pipp. Del Pratt, Roger Peckinpaugh, and Frank Baker, recycled from the A's), which is sixth by this method, deserves a mention if only because so few pre-Ruth Yankee

teams make in onto best of anything lists. Still, none of the Yankee teams come close to the Philadelphia A's teams of 1912-1914, the Reds teams of 1975-76, the 2009 Rays, the 1982 Brewers, the 1934 Tigers or several other teams. (They do, however, come out ahead of the 1999 Mets.)

We can keep going. Maybe what you mean as the best infield ever isn't the most WAR in one year (one of the A's teams) or even the most WAR over a span of years (the A's again, 1912-1914 or 1910 to 1914). Maybe what you mean is the single infield that collected the greatest amount of *talent* on the field even if they didn't all peak at the same time. Maybe what we mean is the infield with the highest lifetime WAR, past, present and future? Aha. Here we have it. I haven't checked out every possibility, but I have checked out the leading candidates. The four infielders on the 1912-1914 A's have a career total of 247.7, roughly half from Eddie Collins (124) and about half of the remaining half from Baker (62.8). The 1975-1976 Reds have a total of 274.4, led by Morgan (100.4) and Rose (79.6). The 2009 Yankees come in at 307.6 (Teixeira, 50.6; Cano, 68.1; Jeter, 71.3; Rodriguez, 117.6). If you want to argue that the 2009 Yankee infield was the best ever, this is how you would have to do it. Personally, I think the logic is a little tortured but we're all Yankee fans here, so who's telling.

CHAPTER 20
A NEW HOPE: 2017-2019 AND BEYOND

On August 3, 2016, in the 107th game of a fourth straight mediocre season, the Yankees made Gary Sanchez a regular, playing either at DH or catcher. Sanchez had played a previous total of three games in the majors. He had come to bat six times, all without a hit. For the rest of the season, from August 3 on, Sanchez appeared in 52 games. He hit .305 with 20 home runs, 42 RBI and an OPS comfortably above 1.000. He finished second in the vote for Rookie of the Year, just behind Michael Fulmer who had spent the entire season pitching for Detroit. In the off season, Sanchez was anointed as the second coming of Babe Ruth. And, at the end of the season, Sanchez was still just 23 years old.

Sanchez had a decent year in 2017 (33 HR, 4.0 WAR) although he did not live up—how could anyone?—to the massive off-season hype. In any case, the attention soon shifted from Sanchez to Aaron Judge, the 6"7", 282-pound rookie right fielder. Judge, who had typically been rated between the 45th and 90th best prospect in baseball, established himself as a star of the first order by the end of April (10 HR and 20 RBI in just 22 games with an OPS of 1.151). Despite a slump in August and September, Judge finished the year with a league leading and rookie record 52 home runs. He also led the league in runs scored, bases on balls and WAR (8.0). He finished second in the MVP vote and was a unanimous choice for Rookie of the Year. Judge 's emergence made 2017 exciting. What made Judge exciting was not just that he was big and could hit the ball a long way. He was also young. Make no mistake: At 25, Judge was not young for a

rookie. But he was young for a Yankee. He was the youngest player to lead the team in WAR since Derek Jeter in 1996.

It wasn't just Judge and Sanchez. . Second baseman and shortstop Starlin Castro and Didi Gregorius were both 27. Luis Severino, the best pitcher on the team, was just 23. Jordan Montgomery was one year older. Even Masahiro Tanaka and Michael Pineda were only 28.   The average age of the team (28.2) was the lowest since 1974 and the team age was below league average for the first time since 1970.

They were also good. The 2017 Yankees won 91 games, their most since 2012. (By the ratio of runs scored to runs allowed, the Pythagorean theorem, they were even better, a hundred-win team.) They finished second, two games behind the Red Sox. They beat Minnesota in the Wild Card game and beat Cleveland, 3-2 in the ALDS before taking the Astros to seven games in the ALCS. These were the "Baby Bombers." The future looked bright.

In 2018, the Yankees managed to get both better and (slightly) younger at the same time. The returning players were all, of course, one year older. But 21-year-old Gleyber Torres took over at second. 23-year-old Miguel Andujar replaced 33-year-old Chase Headley at third. Giancarlo Stanton, still just 28, replaced 37-year-old Matt Holiday as the primary designated hitter. The weighted average team age dropped from 28.2 to 28 and the team won nine more games than the year before. They set a major league record with 262 home runs but still finished second by 8 games to the Red Sox, who enjoyed one of the best years in that franchise's long history. The playoffs, however, retold what was becoming the same old story—a win over Oakland in the Wild Card and a loss to Boston in the ALDS.

In 2019, the team was even better—103 wins and their first first place finish since 2012. They also set what would have been yet another team record with 306 home runs, except that the Twins did them exactly one better with 307. Torres and Sanchez led the team in home runs with fairly modest totals (38 and 34) but seven players hit 20 or more (the second most ever) and fourteen hit ten or more (the most ever). The post season: More of more of the same, a sweep of the Twins in the ALDS and a 4-2 loss to the Astros in the ALCS.

Despite the post-season disappointments, it was exciting. After years and years of teams dominated by aging—and disappointing—free agents, the "Baby Bombers" evoked both hope and attachment of a sort not seen since at least the late nineties. The results, so far, have been mixed. Judge, of course, has been great but he has played more than 106 games in a season only four times (including 2024). Gary Sanchez did not develop the way we hoped. Neither did Pineda. Severino was terrific for two years but hurt his arm in 2019 and eventually left for the Mets as a free agent. Torres has been inconsistent, at best.

The 2020 season was limited to 60 games by COVID. The team finished a decidedly mediocre 33-27, won one round of the expanded playoffs before losing a tight series with Tampa Bay, 3-2 in games, 2-1 in the final on an 8th inning home run by Mike Brosseau., a little used utility infielder, off Aroldis Chapman.

It's too soon to tell a coherent story about the years since COVID. 2021 was mediocre, a second-place finish and an early exit from the playoffs. 2023 was worse. Judge was great until he got hurt in early June and only played 106 games all year. But Judge and Torres were the only above average

hitters on the team (OPS+ greater than 100) and the team as a whole featured an offense significantly below league average. As late as August 27, the Yankees stood at 62-68. Only a (moderately) hot stretch the rest of the way saved the Yankees' streak of 31 straight years above .500. There was no post-season disappointment but only because they failed to qualify for the playoffs since 2016.

2022 was much better. The Yankees got off to a fast start and coasted to a 1st place finish, seven games of the Blue Jays. It was just their second first place finish since 2012. The Yankees beat Cleveland in the ALDS but lost to Houston—again—in the ALCS, a 4-0 sweep. The big news, though, was Aaron Judge's sensational season—the highest WAR by any Yankee since Mantle in 1957 and a new AL home run record with 62. (From Ruth to Maris to Judge, a Yankee has now held that record continuously for a century.)

The years since the Yankees' last championship in 2009 have been frustrating. No World Series wins. Not even a World Series appearance. Four first place finishes in 14 years (compared to 12 in the previous 16 years.) But let's not exaggerate. The Yankees have still made the playoff 10 of the last 14 years. They still have a winning percentage of .567 over that time span, best in the American League (and second only to the Dodgers in MLB), roughly 50 games better than Tampa Bay in second in the composite standings. The bar is high for the Yankees. I like it that way.

What lies ahead? Damned if I know. That's why I wrote a history.

Do Young Teams Get Better?

Casey Stengel, if it is not already obvious, was more entertaining than he was, in any sense, kind. In 1965, in his

last year with the Mets, Stengel pointed to then 20-year-old Ed Kranepool and said that, in ten years, he had a chance to be great. Then he pointed to back up catcher Greg Goossen, who was the same age. "And Goossen," he said, "is only 20 and in ten years he has a chance to be 30."

We were right, I think, to be excited by young players in 2017, even if they didn't all pan out. Were we right to be excited because the team as a whole was young? That I'm not so sure about.

Let's be clear first what it meant for the 2017 and 2018 teams to be young. The 2017 pitchers were the third youngest in the league, but the position players were just above average. In 2018, the position players were the third youngest in the league, but the pitchers were well above average. These were not unusually young teams by normal standards. They were young by Yankee standards.

Over the course of their 120-year history, the Yankees have had only 22 teams that were younger than the league average (all but two of these by 1970). Those 22 teams include seven league champions and compiled an average won/lost record of .579 (slightly better than their overall record of .570). That's good, much better than I would have guessed. I had assumed the situation would be the converse of older teams— not so much that teams would be bad because they were young as that they would be young because they would be bad, as management attempted to rebuild. Sometimes it helps to look at the data.

The young teams were good. But did they get better? Twelve did. Ten did not. Overall, the young teams had an average won lost percentage of .586 the next year. That's about a one game improvement over the course of a full

season. I have not done the work to see if the results would be different for other teams. I would not be surprised if they were. But for the Yankees it's pretty clear. Do younger teams get better? Some do. Some don't. Casey got it right, again. The only thing certain about young players is that they get older.

Where Does Aaron Judge Rate among the Yankee Greats?

"Faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound." It's …. Aaron Judge. Okay, Judge isn't quite Superman. But he's very good. Duh. How good? Let me start with my strongest claim: Judge, at his best, has been better than any other Yankee except Ruth, Gehrig and Mantle. That includes Joe DiMaggio and Alex Rodriguez and any other position player you can think of. And there is some chance that Judge's peak will pass even Mantle and Gehrig.

Look at the best single seasons, at least by WAR. Ruth has the highest ever for a Yankee, 14.1 in 1923, and 10.5 or above in a total of seven seasons. Gehrig reached 11.9 in 1927. Mantle had two seasons (1956 and 1957) above 11. Judge is next at 10.5 in 2022, his 62 home run season. It is possible. But by no means certain, that he will end 2024 above 12, which is to say above everybody but Ruth. Not bad.

Maybe you think one season is too little to go on. Okay. How about looking combined WAR for three best seasons. For Judge, those three seasons are 2017, 2022, and 2024. (Although Judge's 2024 season is still in progress as I write, he is unlikely to move up the list by season's end.)

Babe Ruth	39.7	Joe Gordon	20.4
Mickey Mantle	32.9	Charlie Keller	20.1
Lou Gehrig	31.7	Don Mattingly	20.0

Aaron Judge	28.4	Bobby Murcer	19.8
Aaron Judge	**28.4**	Bobby Murcer	19.8
Alex Rodriguez	26.4	Thurman Munson	19.3
Joe DiMaggio	26.0	Craig Nettles	19.3
Robinson Cano	23.2	Roy White	19.0
Rickey Henderson	22.5	Tony Lazzeri	18.8
Derek Jeter	22.1	Roger Maris	18.2
Snuffy Stirnweiss	21.2	Phil Rizzuto/Yogi Berra 18.0	

There are lots of surprises on the list: Rodriguez ahead of DiMaggio, Cano and Henderson ahead of Jeter, maybe Gordon and Keller ahead of Mattingly, Maris and Berra. In any case, Judge is fourth, still behind Ruth, Mantle and Gehrig but comfortably ahead of Rodriguez and DiMaggio. That's not bad either.

Judge got off to a late start and has suffered a lot of injuries. His career as a whole doesn't look as good as his peak. Thinking about Judge's career involves thinking about two separate questions: where Judge ranks now and where he will wind up. Let's start with the easy part: where Judge ranks now. The second part—where Judge will wind up—is harder but not as much harder than I would have expected.

Begin with WAR. Judge currently (August 24, 2024) ranks 10th on the Yankees all-time list:

	Games	WAR
Ruth	2084	142.8
Gehrig	2164	113.7
Mantle	2401	110.2
DiMaggio	1736	79.1
Jeter	2747	71.3
Berra	2116	59.6
Dickey	1789	56.4

Randolph	1694	54.1
Rodriguez	1509	54.0
Judge	963	50.6

Now, 10th on a list of the best position players in the Yankees' long and glorious history is pretty good. But it seriously understates where Judge should rank. Notice that Judge, as of my writing, has played only 963 games. Everybody else on the list played in at least 1500 games. Jeter played in almost three times as many games as Judge. Longevity—about which more to follow—does count for something, just not as much as WAR gives it. So, let's look at WAA—wins above average rather than the lower standards of wins above replacement. As I've argued on and off on previous pages, WAA makes more sense for the Yankees (who are trying to win pennants) and for comparing careers of different lengths.

	Games	WAA
Ruth	2084	108.7
Mantle	2401	79.3
Gehrig	2164	78.9
DiMaggio	1735	55.2
Judge	963	37.0
Berra	2116	34.1
Dickey	1789	33.7
Rodriguez	1509	31.3
Randolph	1694	30.7
Jeter	2747	29.9

Well, look at that. It's the same ten players but Judge is all the way up to fifth. And that is about where I would rate Judge among Yankee careers, so far.

Projecting Judge's future is, in one sense, hard. In another sense, it's easy. Projecting any player into the future is hard. Projecting Judge is even harder than most. For a start, he was old when he got his first MLB at bat (24) and a year older when he became a regular. Of the 163 players who have hit 300 or more home runs, a group Judge has recently joined, only thirteen have had their first at bat at age 24 and *not a single one* debuted later. As a result, Judge is older than he might seem. He is a few months younger than Mickey Mantle was in 1964, his last great season. He is only about seven months younger than Mike Trout, whose career has already entered a sharp decline. And he is actually older than Bryce Harper, who seems to have been around forever.

These complications aside, it's still easy to project where Judge will wind up on career WAR and WAA lists. Judge zipped past Jeter, Randolph, Rodriguez, Dickey and Berra in Yankee career WAA in 2024 alone. But the gap between Jeter and Berra was small (4.2 WAA) entering the season. Next up is Joe DiMaggio but the gap between Judge and DiMaggio is substantial (17 WAA) and that's without giving DiMaggio credit for the three years he lost to World WAR II.

What are the chances of accumulating 17 WAA after the age of 32? Not good. Among Yankees, only Babe Ruth topped 17 (with a ridiculous 43.2). The next three are Gehrig (a surprise to me given his disease) at 15, DiMaggio (another surprise, given that he retired at 36) with 13.2, and Tommy Henrich with 11.7. After age 32 Mantle accumulated the grand total of 5.4 and Rodriguez, 5.3. Could Judge outdo everyone

but Ruth and pass DiMaggio? Sure, it's possible but I wouldn't bet on it. And there are also two important qualifications.

Qualification one: Judge has been great when he's been healthy, but he hasn't always been healthy. In 2017, Judge hurt his shoulder sometime around the All-Star game. He did not lose time to the injury but it probably contributed to a late season slump. In 2018, a fastball fractured his right wrist. He played 112 games. In 2019, he suffered an oblique strain, an injury to the torso. He played in only 102 games. 2020 was the COVID shortened season. In 2021 and 2022, Judge was healthy almost all year. In 2023 Judge tore a ligament in his toe, crashing into a wall in Dodger Stadium. He played 106 games.   Ruth, DiMaggio, Mantle and even Jeter missed significant chunks of time with injury or illness, but nothing like Judge. Is Judge brittle or injury prone? It's certainly possible and is the great sword hanging over the nine year, 360 million dollar contract he signed after the 2022 season.

Qualification 2: With any other team, it wouldn't matter as much. With the Yankees it does. The point about the Yankees is not just that they've had good players but that those players have helped them win championships.   Do I think that Ted Williams or Barry Bonds were failures because they never won a World Series? Do I think Ernie Banks or Ken Griffey should be kicked out of the Hall of Fame because neither one even played in a World Series? No and no. I do think, though, that players should get some credit when their teams win and some blame when they lose. I'm not sure how much the post season should count in our assessment of a player's career. I have been skeptical all along about claims that big games define any player but neither am I prepared to dismiss big games altogether as just a matter of random variation, which is to say

chance. Big games should count more than other games. That's what makes them big

Yankee greats have been defined, rightly or wrongly, by winning. Ruth won five World Series in seven tries. Gehrig won six of seven. DiMaggio won an astounding nine of ten in a thirteen-year career. Yogi Berra won ten of fourteen. Mantle won seven of twelve. Jeter won five of seven. Judge has yet to make the World Series let alone win one. Since Judge became a regular in 2017, the Yankees have played in twelve post-season series. They have won six and lost six. How much responsibility does Judge bear? In the regular season, Judge has a career OBA of .405 and a slugging average of .605. In the 44 post-season games, enough for a meaningful sample, the comparable numbers are .310 and .462. That's not good.

One last note on Judge: At the end of August, 2024, the papers and the internet have been full of speculations about Judge. Will he break his own American League record for most home runs in a season? Will his 2024 be the best season ever by a right-handed hitter? Where will Judge and Soto rank on the list of beat teammates? By the time you read this there are likely to be solid answers to all these questions. There's no reason for me to speculate about them here and now. Bui here's a statistic you're unlikely to have seen. Because I just made it up. Remember BABIP—batting average on balls in play? It's usually used to see how much help a pitcher is getting from his fielders, less often to get a sense whether a batter is getting lucky hits. But BABIP is a funny stat. It excludes both strikeouts and home runs. That makes sense if you're thinking about fielding, effectively the inverse of Defensive Efficiency. It makes less sense in thinking about hitting. Why exclude home runs? For evaluating a batter, we

do better including home runs and figure Batting Average on Contact. These days we have all sorts of statcast data about how hard a hitter hits a ball, about his "exit velocity," about his launch angle. But we've had statcast for less than a decade. BAOC strikes me as a good, if imperfect, measure of how hard a player is hitting a ball. And that is why I have gone through a long explanation of a statistic you've never heard of. The record for BAOC, so far as I can tell, belongs to Babe Ruth in 1923 at .478. Think about that. It means that he got a hit almost every other time he made contact.   As of the time of my writing, Aaron Judge is second, all time, all teams, at .472.   That's good company.

Final Words

Let's leave them to long-time announcer John Sterling.

"Theeeeeee ….. Yankees win."

APPENDIX I
Free Agents

"The Yankee glory is a whore, bought and paid for. … They patrol the free agent waters like a great white shark, driving up prices and forcing other teams to the sidelines—and often bidding against themselves. Which means the players and their agents love them. In the past few years alone the Yankees have signed Mike Mussina, Jason Giambi, and Gary Sheffield (among others), plus re-upped homegrown stars such as Bernie Williams and Derek Jeter to long-term contracts equal to the gross national product of Togo."

Jim Gerard, *Yankees Suck*

And what else would you expect from a book called *Yankees Suck*?

It's impossible to write a history of the Yankees—analytic, narrative or any other kind--over the last 45 years without saying something about free agency. Unfortunately, it is almost as hard to write anything sensible. Free agency has either made baseball great or ruined it. It has either undermined fair competition or made it possible. It has either given the rich Yankees a huge advantage or turned them into suckers who overpay for washed up former stars. I can't settle most of these issues.   I'm not going to try—except, sort of, about the Yankees. For the Yankees, I can do a couple of things. I can distinguish the good free agent signings from the bad ones. That's the fun part. I can also try to show what *kind* of signings have generally been good and which not. And I can identify moments when the Yankees have relied more or less heavily on free agents signings.

But all this takes some preliminary work. Evaluating free agents depends on two things.   One is how well they performed. That we have an answer to: WAA or WAR or some other single measure of performance. I prefer WAA in thinking about Yankee free agents for the same reason I proposed many pages ago for thinking about the Yankees in general: The point, in signing a free agent, especially for the Yankees is not to get to average. It's to get to first place and that requires not just wins above replacement but wins about average. (If there were an easily available figure for wins above championship level, I would be tempted to use that.)

The other thing is money. In general, I do not worry about how much the Yankees spend. It's not my grandkids' college education that's at stake and I care much more about whether the Yankees are winning than whether the Steinbrenners are turning a profit.   But, in the case of free agency, it's unavoidable. No team, not even the Yankees, has unlimited resources and every free agent signed is another free agent not signed. You want to get a return on your investment.   I want to get a bargain, whether I'm insisting on my senior discount at Dunkin Donuts or laying out 247 million of the Steinbrenners' money for Alex Rodriguez' services.   But money, surprisingly, is harder to evaluate than performance. Money should be simple.   Unlike performance, which is multidimensional (hitting, fielding, hitting for average, hitting for power, hitting in the clutch, fielding range, fielding arm), money is unidimensional: almost without exception, more is better than less. It also comes with a ready made metric (the dollar) that makes even more intuitive sense than Batting Average.

The big problem in thinking about free agency money is that the dollar is not really a fixed value. There are deferred

compensation deals, and bonuses, and even some special perks that are hard to count. Most importantly, there's inflation. When Reggie Jackson signed a five-year contract in 1977 for $525,000 per year, it was big bucks. (The highest salary at the time was Mike Schmidt's, at $560,000.) Well, $525,000 a year is still good money for most of us but since 2017 it's actually been *lower* than the major league minimum. Good work if you can get it. And the increase in major league salaries is not just "normal" inflation. Prices in 2022 are a little less than 5 times as high as they were in 1977. But Gerrit Cole's current contract at $36 million per year is about 70 times higher than Reggie's. Baseball hasn't just had inflation. It's had hyper-inflation. So how to compare Reggie's contract with Cole's or (anybody else's)?

My solution is pretty simple. I calculated annual salaries as a proportion of the highest salary in the year the contract was signed. You can then multiply that by the number of years in the contract to come up with something I have inelegantly called Maximum Salary Years (MSY). For example, Jackson's salary at $525,000 a year was 93.8% of Mike Schmidt's. Multiply that by the number of years in the contract (.938 X 5) and you get 4.69. For salary, I simply took whatever was listed in Baseball-Reference. I can see using average salary as a standard (rather than maximum) but I'm not sure it's any better and the data is harder to come by. I'm not sure that I figured in all the bonuses I should have and I know I did not depreciate for the value of long contracts. I would not be at all surprised if there were a more sophisticated take on all this hidden away on the internet someplace that I have not stumbled across. No matter: What it did will do for most purposes.

Let's start with salaries. The table below shows the biggest free agent contracts the Yankees have signed. The first column shows the year of the contract. Age is the age of the player during the first contract year. The next two columns show the number of years in the contract and the total value of the contract in contemporaneous dollars. The last two columns show average annual salary of the free agent as a percent of the maximum salary in baseball in the year the contract was signed and, finally, the "MSYs."

YANKEE FREE AGENTS BY CONTRACT VALUE

Year		Age	Years	Total $	%MaxSal	MSY
1981	Dave Winfield	29	10	11.9	1.00	10.00
2008	Alex Rodriguez	32	10	247.0	1.00	10.00
2020	Gerrit Cole	29	9	324.0	1.00	9.00
1999	Bernie Williams	30	7	83.3	1.00	7.00
2009	CC Sabathia	28	9	206.1	0.69	6.25
2014	Masahiro Tanaka	25	7	154.0	0.79	5.50
2009	Mark Teixera	29	8	178.4	0.68	5.41
2002	Jason Giambi	31	7	114.8	0.75	5.22
1975	Jim Hunter	29	5	3.2	1.00	5.00
2001	Mike Mussina	32	8	109.1	0.62	4.95

1978	Goose Goss]age	26	6	2.7	0.82	4.91
1977	Reggie Jackson	31	5	2.6	0.94	4.69
2014	Jacoby Ellsbury	30	6	126.0	0.75	4.50
1977	Don Gullet	26	6	2.0	0.59	3.57
2003	Hideki Matsui	29	7	73.0	0.47	3.32
1983	Steve Kemp	28	5	5.5	0.66	3.30
1982	Ron Guidry	31	5	4.8	0.63	3.17
2014	Brian McCann	30	5	85.0	0.61	3.04
2017	Aroldis Chapman	29	6	99.6	0.50	3.01

A couple of points stick out—at least to me—from this table.   One is that although Hunter and Jackson, the first two big free agent signings, both got contracts that made them either the highest paid player in the league or close to it, they were far from the Yankees' biggest commitments. Those came when the contracts were not only for the highest annual salary but also for more than the five years Jackson and Hunter both got. A second point is that aside from three pitchers (Gossage, Tanaka, and Gullet) all of the other signings were in a very narrow age range—from 28 at the youngest to 32 at the oldest. This is not surprising: Younger players haven't been around long enough to qualify for free agency and the Yankees (and most other teams) have had the good sense not to sign players

older than 32 to long term, high value contracts. A third point is that while most of the free agents came from other teams, several of the free agent signings involved players who were already on the Yankees (Rodriguez, who had originally come in a trade with Texas, Williams and Guidry, who were Yankees for their entire careers, and Chapman, who resigned with the Yankees after a brief "loan" to the Chicago Cubs).

But the most interesting point that I think emerges from the table is this: The big free agent signings cluster around a few years and the Yankees are no longer the biggest spenders around. One cluster is in the early years of free agency, through the signing of Dave Winfield to his massive contract in 1981. Then, after the signings of Guidry and Steve Kemp in 1982 and '83, the big spending took a break. (This includes the years George Steinbrenner was suspended from active management, 1990-93.) Although there were a few important signings in the mid-nineties (Jimmy Key, Wade Boggs) there were no more major free agent expenditures until the Yankees resigned Bernie Williams in 1999. Then the floodgates opened with Mussina, Giambi, and Matsui all signing huge contracts in succeeding years (2001-2003). Then there was a pause until the massive deals for Teixera and Sabathia in 2009, another pause and then three big signings in 2014 (Tanaka, Ellsbury, McCann). Since 2014, with Steinbrenner's son Hal firmly in charge, the Yankees have been seen as favorites to sign Shohei Ohtani, Bryce Harper, Manny Machado, Carlos Correa, and Freddie Freeman, all of whom went elsewhere, some apparently without even drawing serious offers from the Yankees. During that time the Yankees have signed Aroldis Chapman (2017) and Gerrit Cole (2020) but that's it.   The

surprise, I think, should no longer be when the Yankees *fail* to sign a free agent. It should be when they do.

Some of this may be a little deceptive. The Yankees have also been willing to assume huge contracts in what would otherwise have been one sided trades. The two most obvious examples are Rodriguez, who played four years for the Yankees—his first and best four years—under a contract signed with Texas and Giancarlo Stanton, who came from Miami. But, even considering the Rodriguezes and Stantons, the image of the Yankees as the biggest spender on the block is out of date. From 1988 through 2013, the Yankees payroll was the highest in the majors 19 times. The Yankees were the first team to hit a $50 million payroll (1996) and a $100 million payroll (2001). In 2008, when the payroll hit $209 million (also the first over 200), the Mets were second at $137 million, a huge gap. But over the last nine years, the Yankees have led in payroll only once. The Dodgers have led six times and the Red Sox twice. In 2022, the Yankees were third in payroll after the Mets. the Dodgers and the Red Sox, at $240 million. In 2023, the Yankees spent $278 million, just ahead of the Dodgers, Padres, and Phillies, still well behind the Mets. That's real money but it doesn't quite qualify as an Evil Empire.

The player who provided the most value on the field—measured by WAA or WAR—was not Rodriguez or Winfield or Bernie Williams or Reggie Jackson. It was Mike Mussina. And it isn't close. Mussina produced 8 more Wins Above Replacement than the second highest player on the list (Sabathia) and almost twice as many Wins Above Average than anyone else, including Sabathia, Winfield and Rodriguez. Here's a list of the 26 free agents who compiled the highest

WAA over the course of their contracts. (I'm leaving Cole of the list because his contract still has many years to go.)

YANKEE FREE AGENTS BT HIGHEST WAA

Signing		Age	Years	WAR	WAA
2001	Mike Mussina	32	8	35.1	20.2
2009	CC Sabathia	28	9	27.2	11.7
1981	Dave Winfield	29	10	28.3	10.8
2008	Alex Rodriguez	32	10	23.1	10
1993	Wade Boggs	35	5	18.3	9.4
1978	Goose Gossage	26	6	18.8	9.2
2002	Jason Giambi	31	7	22	9
1996	David Cone	33	3	13.5	9
1998	Orlando Hernandez	32	5	16.2	8.6
1997	David Wells	34	4	16.9	8.3
1977	Reggie Jackson	31	5	17.2	8.1
1982	Ron Guidry	31	5	17.9	8.1
2014	Masahiro Tanaka	25	7	17.5	8
1993	Jimmy Key	32	4	13.5	7.7
1992	Mike Stanley	29	4	12.6	7.4

2003	Hideki Matsui	29	7	20.4	7
2015	Andrew Miller	30	4	9.3	5.8
2019	D. J. Lemahieu	30	2	8.7	5.8
2006	Johnny Damon	32	4	14.4	5.7
2013	Hiroki Kuroda	37	3	11.4	5.7
1999	Bernie Williams	30	7	20.7	5.6
2009	Mark Teixera	29	8	19.3	5.2
1992	Mike Gallego	31	3	8.3	4.7
1999	Mike Stanton	32	3	6.1	3.6
2004	Gary Sheffield	35	3	8.7	3.5
1989	Steve Sax	29	3	10	3.2

A few players show up here who were not on the list of the priciest signings: Wade Boggs, who was a bargain at age 35; Orlando Hernandez, who had just escaped from Cuba, David Cone, David Wells, Mike Stanley, and DJ Lemahieu. Some players who were on the list of the priciest signings drop off here, mostly because of injuries: Hunter and Gullet, because of sore arms; Ellsbury with a long list of injuries; and Steve Kemp

and Brian McCann, who simply weren't as good as the Yankees expected.

More interesting, again at least to me, is how *low* the totals are. On the list of all-time Yankee leaders in pitching WAA, Mussina is 5th. Sabathia is 15th. Gossage is 22nd. Gerrit Cole may, of course, wind up much higher but that is still very much to be seen. And the pitchers do much better than the hitters. Among position players Ruth, Mantle, Gehrig and DiMaggio all top 50 WAA (and Ruth is over 100). Among the free agents, Winfield (including a year on his Yankee contract with Toronto) is at 10.8. That would put him 36th on the Yankees all-time list, not just behind Ruth and Mantle and Gehrig and DiMaggio but also behind Charlie Keller and Ricky Henderson and Gil McDougald and Brett Gardner and Roy White and Hank Bauer and Red Rolfe (and 24 more). The other free agents rank even lower. (Remember that for Rodriguez, the totals exclude his first four years with the Yankees.) So, were they worth it?

Here's where it gets tricky. There have certainly been bargains. The clearest bargains have been players the Yankees signed on the cheap and then turned out to be much better than anybody expected. Here is a list of the free agents the Yankees signed for less than three MSYs who then produced the most value on the field.

YANKEE FREE AGENTS WHO SIGNED FOR LESS THAN THREE MSY BY WAA/MSY

		Age	Years	WAA	WAA/Y	MSY	WAA/MSY
1992	Mike Stanley	29	4	7.4	1.85	0.39	19.13
1998	Orlando Hernandez	32	5	8.6	1.72	0.66	13.08

2019	D. J. Lemahieu	30	2	5.8	2.90	0.63	9.26
1999	Mike Stanton	32	3	3.6	1.20	0.62	5.83
1992	Mike Gallego	31	3	4.7	1.57	0.84	5.62
2015	Andrew Miller	30	4	5.8	1.45	1.16	4.99
1996	David Cone	33	3	9.0	3.00	1.96	4.60
1997	David Wells	34	4	8.3	2.08	1.87	4.43
2003	Roger Clemens	40	1	2.0	2.00	0.45	4.40
1984	Phil Niekro	45	2	2.5	1.25	0.58	4.33
2013	Hiroki Kuroda	37	3	5.7	1.90	1.41	4.03
1999	David Cone	36	1	3.2	3.20	0.80	4.01
1993	Wade Boggs	35	5	9.4	1.88	2.42	3.89
2019	Adam Ottavino	33	3	1.5	0.50	0.47	3.19
1993	Jimmy Key	32	4	7.7	1.93	2.71	2.84
2006	Johnny Damon	32	4	5.7	1.43	2.36	2.41
1989	Steve Sax	29	3	3.2	1.07	1.35	2.36
2021	Corey Kluber	35	1	0.7	0.70	0.31	2.29
2004	Gary Sheffield	35	3	3.5	1.17	1.67	2.09
1998	Tim Raines	38	1	0.5	0.50	0.25	2.01

These signings really were bargains. One type of bargain consists of big names past the age when most players have

entered steep declines.   Clemens, Niekro, Boggs, Raines and Sheffield all had Hall of Fame quality careers. But by the time they signed with the Yankees, these players were old, an average of 38.6 for the five I just mentioned. But it was their very age that made them bargains as their contracts were short, an average of 2.6 for the same five. David Cone (in both 1993 and 1996) David Wells, and Hideki Kuroda are roughly of the same type--established stars, past their prime, but very good for the duration of short contracts.

There is also a second type of bargain, represented by the first six names. They all performed well—that's what gets them on the list—mostly with short term contracts. More importantly, though, they all came cheap, in some cases dirt cheap, because their records before coming to the Yankees were mediocre. Mike Stanley, at the top of the list, came to the Yankees with a reputation as a good field/no hit type of catcher, a .251 hitter without a lot of power and without a lot of walks. Here's how *The Times* described the deal: Stanley "will attend spring training as a nonroster player. … The right-handed-hitting Stanley will compete with JOHN RAMOS for the backup catcher's spot behind MATT NOKES." Not exactly promising. Still, for whatever reason, Stanley blossomed with the Yankees both getting on base more often and hitting with more power. When he left the Yankees at the end of his contract—now with a reputation as a good hitting/mediocre fielding catcher—the Red Sox nearly tripled his salary, all the more impressive in that Stanley was by then 33, an age at which most catchers are in dramatic decline. When the Yankees signed Mike Gallego, he had been a starter for Oakland for several years but a below average hitter whose fielding was probably underrated.

Orlando "El Duque" Hernandez was a refugee from Cuba. Although he had been a star of the first magnitude there, he was one of the first Cuban refugees to sign with Major League Baseball and nobody knew what they were getting. In fact, the Yankees started Hernandez out in the minors and didn't call him up until mid-season. Stanton and Miller had both been journeymen middle relievers, both with negative WAA before joining the Yankees. Once with the Yankees both became stars in middle relief, Stanton by increasing his strikeout rate, Miller by increasing his strikeout rate and dramatically dropping his walk rate. LeMahieu is a slightly different case, as he was much more established than any of the other bargains. He had won three Gold Gloves and a batting title in Colorado. But his batting achievements in Colorado were downgraded, attributed to the great hitting environment in the thin air of Coors Field.

So why not just skip the brand names and shop at the bargain racks for the likes of Stanley and Hernandez, LeMahieu and Mike (not Giancarlo) Stanton? The answer is, of course, that you don't know who they are before they become what they were. With free agents, you don't know what you're getting. It's like the guy who brags that he's won a thousand dollars in the lottery and neglects to mention that he bought two thousand dollars' worth of tickets. To understand the true cost of the bargain basement free agents, we have to look at all the free agents the Yankees signed, including the ones who fell apart as soon as they got them home and tried them on. The next table shows the players the Yankees paid the most without getting *any* wins above average.

HIGHEST MSY WITH ZERO WAA				

		Age	Years	WAA	WAR	WAA/MSY	MSY
1983	Steve Kemp	28	5	-1.7	1.8	-0.51	3.30
2014	Brian McCann	30	5	-0.1	7.5	-0.03	3.04
2009	AJ Burnett	32	5	-0.4	8.3	-0.16	2.50
2014	Carlos Beltran	37	4	-5	2.2	-2.33	2.14
1991	Ed Witt	30	3	-1.5	-0.2	-0.76	1.97
2008	Jorge Posada	37	4	-2.5	2.8	-1.34	1.87
2010	Derek Jeter	36	4	-4.8	2.1	-2.66	1.81
1980	Bob Watson	34	3	-0.2	2.1	-0.12	1.71
1982	Dave Collins	29	3	-0.3	4	-0.18	1.65
2005	Carl Pavano	29	4	-1	0.4	-0.65	1.54
1985	Ed Whitson	30	3	-5	-2.4	-4.38	1.14

The list includes the Yankees' most notorious bad signings. There are not many players who have been as deeply reviled by fans and as thoroughly excoriated in the press as four pitchers--Burnett, Witt, Whitson and especially Pavano (who appeared in a total of 26 games with the Yankees over the course of his four-year contract). Among the position players, the Dave Collins signing—the result of a badly conceived decision to go for speed—was probably reviled less

than it was ridiculed. Derek Jeter and Jorge Posada are also on the list, both for their final contracts, Posada when he was 37, Jeter when he was 36. I doubt anybody thinks of the Yankees, particularly the Steinbrenner Yankees, as sentimentalist. But that's exactly what the Jeter and Posada signings were. Jeter and Posada were both, obviously, fan favorites and resigning them might have been worth it, not just it good will but even in the dollars some people think "good will" generates. But, in terms of performance on the field, 37-year-old catchers and 36-year-old shortstops are not good investments.

These signings were the Yankees most spectacular failures, but they were not the Yankees worst. Taking a chance on Burnett or Pavano or Collins seems to me a reasonable price to pay, not for their services, but as part of an entire package that also includes Mike Stanley and Orlando Hernandez and DJ LeMahieu. The players on the bargains list (Stanley through Raines) produced about 98 WAA at a cost of about 22 MSYs. The players on the list of clunkers (Kemp through Whitson) produced negative 22 WAA in about the same number of MSYs. Obviously, it would be great to get the bargains and skip the clunkers but nobody is that smart. If the cost of getting LeMahieu and Stanley includes the cost of Kemp and Whitson, it's probably worth it. Add the two lists together: You get 76 WAA for 44 MSYs. That is, as we'll see, a better rate of return (1.7 WAA per MSY) than all but a very few of the big bucks free agents.

I also think that, for the mistakes, the point is not to look at the ratio of dollars to wins so much as at the sheer number of dollars (or, more precisely, MSYs) for players who did *little* to create winning (which is to say, above average) teams. So, I

don't care all that much about Ed Whitson or Carl Pavano, bad as they were, because they didn't cost much. I care even less about the silly two-year contract the Yankees gave Tony Womack in 2005. Womack was a 35-year-old utility infielder who had been a below average starter for a series of mostly mediocre teams. With the Yankees, he was predictably bad— 3.5 wins *below* average in one year before the Yankees dumped him. But his salary was only a total of four million dollars. When Alex Rodriguez was setting the maximum, at $26 million a year, Womack's total salary comes to only .15 MSYs (4/26). Now, I would feel it if I blew four million dollars on Tony Womack. For the Steinbrenners it's not much more than pocket change.

What I do care about are the big budget signings, the decision to spend $360 million on Gerrit Cole *rather than* Bryce Harper or Manny Machado, the decision to spend $247 million on Alex Rodriguez *rather than* letting him walk and signing ten mid-level free agents instead. So here it is. My final chart (on free agents) list all the players (except Cole and Chapman whose contracts are still in effect) the Yankees have signed for three or more MSYs. These are the big budget signings, the signings that splashed across the back pages of the New York Post and the Daily News. It lists these big budget signings by WAA per MSY.

YANKEE FREE AGENTS WHO SIGNED FOR THREE OR MORE MSY BY WAA/MSY

.		Age	Years	WAA	WAA/Y	MSY	WAA/MSY
2001	Mike Mussina	32	8	20.2	2.53	4.95	4.08
1982	Ron Guidry	31	5	8.1	1.62	3.17	2.56
2003	Hideki Matsui	29	7	7.0	1.00	3.32	2.11
1978	Goose Gossage	26	6	9.2	1.53	4.91	1.87
2009	CC Sabathia	28	9	11.7	1.30	6.25	1.87
1977	Reggie Jackson	31	5	8.1	1.62	4.69	1.73
2002	Jason Giambi	31	7	9.0	1.29	5.22	1.72
2014	Masahiro Tanaka	25	7	8.0	1.14	5.50	1.45
1981	Dave Winfield	29	10	10.8	1.08	10.00	1.08
2008	Alex Rodriguez	32	10	10.0	1.00	10.00	1.00
2009	Mark Teixera	29	8	5.2	0.65	5.41	0.96
1999	Bernie Williams	30	7	5.6	0.80	7.00	0.80
2014	Jacoby Ellsbury	30	6	2.4	0.40	4.50	0.53
1977	Don Gullet	26	6	0.7	0.12	3.57	0.20

1975	Jim Hunter	29	5	0.8	0.16	5.00	0.16
2014	Brian McCann	30	5	-0.1	-0.02	3.04	-0.03
1983	Steve Kemp	28	5	-1.7	-0.34	3.30	-0.51

This list looks a lot different from the list of highest contract values that I started with. That one had Winfield, Rodriguez and Bernie Williams at the top. Some of these signings clearly worked out well for the Yankees—Mussina, certainly, but also Guidry, Matsui, Gossage, Sabathia and probably Jackson, Giambi, and Tanaka. Beyond that? I'm not sure.

It's not just Gullet and Hunter (who got hurt) or Ellsbury, McCann and Kemp, all of whom were busts. It's also, maybe especially, Winfield, Rodriguez, Teixera, and Williams, all of whom were producing about one win above average for each Maximum Salary Year. Think about that. Remember that it takes about 20 WAA to win a pennant. 20 WAA takes a team from 81 and 81 to 101 and 61. *One* win above average means that a team playing a 162-game schedule would, all else being equal, finish with a record of 82 and 80 in a 162 game season. That's one win per year comes at the cost of the highest salary in the league. That is a huge price to pay. I'm ambivalent about Winfield and Rodriguez but I'm a fan of Williams and Teixera. But, like them or hate them, paying a player the equivalent of the highest salary in the league to move a team all of one game above .500? That is not a good return on an investment.

So, what does it all mean? Here are the lessons I take away.

1.   It's better to be rich than poor. It's better to be smart than stupid. It's better to be both rich and smart than either one alone. It also helps to be lucky. I knew all that before I started to write about free agents. But it applies to free agency even more clearly than it does to most things.

2.   The Yankees are no longer the biggest spenders around. Make no mistake. They are still big spenders but since 2014 or so they have spent much less freely than they did when George Steinbrenner was running the show.

3.   I want to be cautious about this because the number of cases—the sample size—is low. But it looks to me as if the Yankees have been more aggressive in signing free agents just after their great runs (1976 to 1978, 1996-2001) than before. Free agents seem to have done more to keep alive the Yankees streak of 30+ consecutive years above .500 than they have done to win World Championships.   From this it follows that …

4.   Free agents help teams but do not guarantee championships. Leave out Cole and look at the remaining seven richest contracts the Yankees signed: Winfield, Rodriguez, Williams, Sabathia, Tanaka, Teixera, Giambi. Winfield, Tanaka, and Giambi never played on a World Series winner.   Neither did Mussina, who I think is the Yankees' single best big budget signing. Rodriguez, Sabathia, and Teixera each played on one World Series winner—the 2009 team. Williams did play on four World Series champions, but two were before his big free agent contract. That's a total of 5 World Championship out of 58

contract years. For other teams that would be fine. For the Yankees it's meh—at best.

    5.   The Yankees have generally done better with pitchers than position players. This did come as a surprise to me. I have permanently lodged someplace in the back of my brain that the Yankees biggest mistakes have been pitchers—Hunter, Gullet and Burnett because of injuries, Witt, Whitson, Pavano because they just weren't very good. But the Burnett, Witt, Whitson and Pavano signings were, by the bizarre standards of free agency, cheap and the Hunter/Gullet signings (9 MSYs) are matched by Ellsbury, Collins, and Kemp (9.4 MSYs) among position players, with even lees return on the investment. Of the five big budget signings (3 or more MSYs) with the best return (WAA/MSY), four were pitchers: Mussina, Guidry, Sabathia, and Gossage. Of the 12 best "bargain" signings (highest WAA/MSY for players who signed for less than 3 MSYs), nine were pitchers: Hernandez, Mike Stanton, Miller, Cone (twice), Wells, Clemens, Niekro, Kuroda. Is this a more general pattern? I don't know. I would like to.

    6.   Long contracts are generally a bad idea, especially for position players. The Yankees have signed seven contracts of six or more years with position players: Winfield, Rodriguez, Williams, Teixera, Matsui, Giambi, Ellsbury. All of these players, except Ellsbury, gave the Yankees a big boost in the first couple of years of their contracts. All, without exception, were big drags on the Yankees' budget by the end of their contracts.

    7.   There's nothing wrong with signing older players—34- or 35-year-olds or even 40-year-olds—as long as the contracts are short. Gary Sheffield and Wade

Boggs, both 35, were good signings. So was Tim Raines (38). So were David Wells (34), Hiroki Kuroda (37), Roger Clemens (40), and Phil Niekro (45). The longest contract among those seven players was five years (Boggs). The average length of a contract was 2.7 years.

8.   Sentimental signings—again, particularly for position players—may make fans (me included) happy. I would not have enjoyed seeing Derek Jeter in a Tampa Rays uniform or Posada in a Chicago White Sox uniform. But they do not make a lot of baseball sense. Jeter, Posada, Bernie Williams, and Rodriguez (if you want to count him) were all bad deals. The clearest exceptions among "lifers" who were re-signed is Ron Guidry, a pitcher.

9.   The Yankees also suffer from a standard statistical problem. That is regression to the mean. Let me explain. Imagine any set of results that involve both luck and skill. Consider, for example, students taking a 100-question true/false test. A few students get a 90 or above. A few get 60 or below. Most, of course, get average scores. Who do you expect to do best on a second test? The ones who did best on the first test, right? Insofar as there's skill involved (smarts, good study habits, testing skills), it won't disappear between the first test and the second. But think about not who would do well or badly but who would most likely do *worse* compared to the first test. The answer is the same, the students who did best on the first test. Why? As anybody who's ever given (and probably anyone who's ever taken) a test knows, doing well on a true/false test or a multiple-choice test also involves a significant chunk of luck. The students who did

best on the first test are likely to be not only the most skilled students but also the luckiest. And luck, unlike skill does not usually repeat. You might even say that what we mean by luck is that it doesn't repeat. That creates regression to the mean, the general process by which measures with extreme results at Time 1 (positive or negative) tend to have results closer to the average (another word for "mean") at Time 2.

If you're still with me, think about what this means for signing free agents. What's the best way to predict who will do best in the coming year? Sign the players who did best the previous year, even though it means paying a premium. But the players who did best the previous year also likely did well at least in part due to luck. And they are the players most likely to regress, to do worse, the next year. And that's the dilemma the Yankees find themselves in. They want to sign the best players but those "best players" are also the players likeliest to get worse. I do not see a way out.

10. Does all of this mean that the Yankees should cut back on their spending or, at least, be a more careful in giving out long term contracts? Well, I'm always in favor of caution before spending but I still think the answer is no. Allow for all the qualifications and exceptions and whatever else, I still think that free agents have *not* given the Yankees good returns on their investments. But the Yankees are not like other teams. Let me explain, again.

Baseball--professional sports in general—is a prime example of what the economists Robert Frank and Phillip Cook have called a winner take all market. For owners, with a lot of spare change in their pockets and who are not

(or not always) driven by a simple profit-loss model, the difference between finishing first and finishing second is enormous, much bigger, certainly, than the difference between finishing third and fourth.: You know: "Winning isn't everything; It's the only thing" type of thinking.

What this means is that you can calculate the value of a player who will take your fourth-place team to third place. You can figure out how many WAR it takes, the going price for each win above replacement, and even project what moving up in the standards means for attendance. But winning a championship? The extra win—the Win Above Average rather merely the Win Above Replacement—will go for a premium. And if winning really were priceless? Then no price would be too high to pay for that extra win. That's the bind the Yankees are in.

The Yankees have higher expectations than other teams. They also have bigger revenue streams (in significant part due to good cable television deals). They are, in a sense, operating in a different market for players than are other teams. The Yankees aren't simply trying to be okay or even good. They are trying, just about every year, to contend for a World Championship. To do this, they have to go after not just the good players but the best players. And sometimes that means they have to overpay. We—we fans—should not get upset if the Yankees overpay. This isn't (only) because it's not our money. It's also because the Yankees (like the Dodgers, maybe like the current version of the Mets) are in a position that almost requires they overpay. The best we—we fans— can hope for is they really are getting the best they can. That takes smarts as well as money.

APPENDIX 2
Hitting in the Clutch

Before I retired, I used to teach a very large introductory sociology class, 450 students crammed—at least on the first and last day of the semester, not so much in between—into one of the largest lecture halls on campus. Getting students to engage in a class that large is hard and I wasn't good at it. But I gave it, so to speak, the old college try. I showed a lot of clips from movies and tv that I thought could illustrate a point at the same time as keeping the students entertained. I also often stayed up late working on lectures and I always left an hour or so before class to go over my notes. It's not that I imagined my last-minute preparations would make much of a difference to the content of my lectures but it was my way of "psyching" myself up. It was my equivalent of a pre-game ritual. I imagined—against all evidence—that I could pull off the lecture at the end, that I would come through in the clutch.

At some point I came to think—also without much evidence--that the students, especially the guys, were doing something of the same sort. In general, it was the young women in the class who did better than the young men. They were likelier to show up for class, to get assignments in on time, to do better on the assignments, and to do better on tests. But whenever I gave an in-class exam it was the guys who stayed longest, who wanted to take advantage of every last minute they were allowed. This puzzled me. Then, at some point, it dawned on me, that the guys had all grown up on Tom Brady's fourth quarter comebacks. (Remember, this was in Massachusetts.) The guys, I think, had the idea that

they could mess around all year, study at the last moment and then pull it all out on the playing field/exam room because they, too, were *clutch.*

Well, I was wrong about my lectures and the students who thought they could pull off a good grade in a semester-ending drive were even more wrong. I say all this because I think it applies to baseball, too. We—we guys—were all brought up on tales of our heroes coming through in the end, of how "the tough get going when the going gets tough."

And it's not just that we think that coming through in the clutch is what matters for winning and losing, flunking out or making the Dean's list. We also think that coming through in the clutch is a sign of character. What bigger insult is there in sports than holding your hand to your throat to accuse someone of choking? But think about it for a minute. If we celebrate someone for getting better in clutch situations, what does that say about the rest of the time? That he wasn't concentrating or that he wasn't trying? Well, that's not very good either.

My guess is that we read more into "clutch" than is really there.

I have been circling about "clutch" for this whole book. I've discussed Yogi Berra's "clutchness" because it's an important part of his record and I've discussed Alex Rodriguez' lack of "clutchness" because that is an important part of his record, too. It's less clear that it's an important part of Jeter's record or Jackson's but "clutch" is certainly an important part of their myths and I've discussed clutch in regard to them, too. But It's time to approach "clutch" straight on. This will take some work.

We have to begin by distinguishing among different types of clutch situations. First, some situations are "clutch" in the context of an *inning.* What a hitter does with runners in scoring position matters more than what he does with nobody on. What he does with runners in scoring position and two out, we think of as more clutch than what he does with nobody out. Those contexts are pretty easy to understand and, fortunately for those of us who care about such things, Baseball-Reference provides splits, roughly from 1915 on, showing how players did in both situations.

Second, some situations are clutch in the context of a game. If bases are loaded in the top of the ninth, it's going to count as "inning clutch" no matter what. But if the batting team is already ahead 15-0, it's not so clutch in the context of the game. If it's the bottom of the ninth and the game is tied, it is a clutch situation even if nobody's out and nobody's on. Well, Baseball-Reference has a stat for that too, one I've already used a couple of times. It's what they call "late & close," which is "any plate appearance from the seventh inning on in which the batting team is either in a tie game, ahead by one run or has the potential tying run on deck." Baseball-Reference has another stat that is probably more precise but a little harder to explain. This stat is based on something B-R calls "leverage." And what is leverage? Leverage is a measure of how important a situation (inning, outs, runners on, score) is to the outcome of a game. A little more precisely, leverage is an index, with one as the midpoint, of how much the win probability of a game depends on the outcome of an at bat. Baseball-Reference then sorts all at bats into "high," "medium" and "low" leverage situations. "High" leverage situations, which is to say clutch situations,

are then defined as the one quarter of all at bats with the highest leverage index. That's also game clutch.

And third, there's season clutch—not a question of whether it's a big spot in an inning, or a big spot in a game, but whether it is a big game in the course of the season. Neither B-R nor anyone else has a good and easily accessible measure of season clutch—although B-R does seem to be working on it. But they do have a record of playoff and World Series records. I treat all of those games as big.

I looked at every Yankee who had come to bat in 400 or more games. There are 120 of them. Here's how they fall out on my different measures:

Inning Clutch: OPS with two out and runners in scoring position. Sample sizes range from 145 (Alvaro Espinosa) to 1380 (Derek Jeter).

Top Ten		**Bottom Ten**	
Babe Ruth	1.213	Everett Scott	.379
Joe DiMaggio	1.076	Jake Gibbs	.522
Mickey Mantle	1.074	Fred Stanley	.529
Lou Gehrig	1.067	Bucky Dent	.535
Oscar Gamble	1.016	Ken Griffey	.549
Aaron Judge	.963	Gene Michael	.557
Butch Wynegar	.952	Bobby Meacham	.562
Reggie Jackson	.949	Pat Kelly	.567
Bobby Brown	.928	Jerry Coleman	.574
Ben Chapman	.912	Del Pratt	.590

Game Clutch: OPS late & close. Sample sizes range from 158 (Fred Stanley) to 1725 (Jeter again)

Top Ten		Bottom Ten	
Babe Ruth	1.213	Jerry Kenney	.556
Mickey Mantle	1.100	Fred Stanley	.559
Lou Gehrig	1.069	Horace Clarke	.581
Joe DiMaggio	1.023	Alvaro Espinosa	.582
Charlie Keller	1.016	Gene Michael	.591
Aaron Judge	.979	Bob Meacham	.612
Ricky Henderson	970	Bobby Richardson	.613
Hideki Matsui	.967	Jacoby Ellsbury	.619
Oscar Gamble	.957	Jake Gibbs	.620
Yogi Berra	.897	Phil Rizzuto	.627

Big Game Clutch: OPS in postseason, minimum of 40 plate appearances, maximum of 738 (Jeter again, of course). This is a separate sample from the regular season sample and includes 107 players.

Top Ten		Bottom Ten	
Babe Ruth	1.285	Mariano Duncan	.432
Lou Gehrig	1.214	Andy Carey	.464
Bobby Brown	1.207	Aaron Boone	.498
Reggie Jackson	1.090	Charlie Hayes	.503
Giancarlo Stanton	1.015	Joe Pepitone	.506
Charlie Keller	1.078	Mark Koenig	.507
Gene Woodling	1.070	Joe Girardi	.521
Bob Watson	1.068	Frank Crosetti	.530
Billy Martin	1.037	Wally Pipp	.541
Hideki Matsui	1.033	Russel Martin	.544

There are a few surprises on the lists. What is Butch Wynegar doing on the list of best hitters with two out and

runners in scoring position? What's Billy Martin doing on the list of best hitters in the World Series. What is Bobby Brown, a future cardiologist and future president of the American league but a mediocre third baseman in the late 1940's, doing on two of the lists? Well, it may be real clutch ability. It may be the flukes that come with small sample sizes (especially for the postseason). What I find most surprising, though, is how unsurprising the lists are. Who do you want up with the game on the line (late & close)? Babe Ruth, Mickey Mantle, Lou Gehrig and Joe DiMaggio? No. Duh.

It's pretty simple. Hitters who are good hitters in general are also good hitters in the clutch. Hitters who are lousy hitters in general are also lousy hitters in the clutch. I divided the 120 Yankees into two groups—60 with career OPS (with the Yankees) above .761 and 60 with career OPS below .761. Look at how the two different groups did in different situations.

	All Hitters	Hi OPS Group	Low OPS Group
Average career OPS	.775	.848	.702
Runners in Scoring Position	.790	.860	.719
2 Out, RISP	.764	.838	.689
Late & Close	.765	.837	.692
High Leverage	.776	.852	.701
Postseason	.751	.794	.694

Look down the first column "All Hitters," first. You see, comparing the first line to the bottom line that the average OPS drops by .024 in the post season. This makes sense. The weather is colder. The pitchers are better. Look at the other lines, though, and the variations are small. Hitters hit slightly better with Runners in Scoring Position than

otherwise and slightly lower with two out and Runners in Scoring Position as well as Late & Close. They hit almost exactly the same in high leverage situations as other situations.

Next, compare the second and third columns, the High OPS Group and the Low OPS Group. The High OPS group outhits the Low OPS Group by .146 (.848-.702) in all situations. In the various inning and game clutch situations the differences range from .141 (RISP) to .151 (High Leverage). That is a remarkably narrow range. I can't repeat it too often. Good hitters are good hitters, regardless of the situation. And bad hitters are bad hitters, regardless of situation. (The range in the postseason is lower, .100 OPS rather than .141 to .151. Why? I don't know but sample sizes—which is to say number of plate appearances—are significantly lower in the postseason than any of other clutch situations. Plus, not all players, even on the Yankees, have played in the postseason which means that there's a smaller sample of players as well as a smaller sample of at bats per player.)

If you prefer correlation coefficients to tables, I can give those to you, too. Overall OPS has a correlation of .81 with OPS in Late & Close situations, of .91 OPS in High Leverage situations and .66 with Postseason OPS. What does this mean? Well, among other things it means when the game is on the line, you want Aaron Judge coming to bat, not Aaron Hicks. You want Mickey Mantle, not Bobby Richardson. My guess is you already knew that.

At this point, I hear an objection. The distinction among inning clutch, and game clutch and big game clutch makes sense, you might agree. But what I've been doing so far is

comparing players to each other in clutch situations. Did Derek Jeter or Joe DiMaggio hit better in the World Series? Was Lou Gehrig or Aaron Judge better with two out and runners in scoring position? Did Mickey Mantle or Babe Ruth hit better in high leverage situations? You might be willing to call all those comparisons "clutch" comparisons. But, you might argue, people mean something else when they talk about clutch. The better question about clutch (and even character) you might think is this: Does a player get better or worse in clutch situations compared to *himself* in other situations? By this standard, the question isn't whether Mickey Mantle had a higher OPS than Babe Ruth in high leverage situations. (He didn't.) The question is whether Mickey Mantle had a higher OPS in high leverage situations than he did the rest of the time. (He did.) Let me call this, with a nod to Stephen Colbert, "clutchiness."

"Clutchiness" is not hard to measure. I simply take the players OPS in various clutch situations and divide by his OPS in all situations. If the result is higher than 1, the player is better in the clutch situation than the rest of the time. If it's below 1, he's worse. Baseball-Reference does have a summary statistic that's probably more precise than my simple ratios, but it is anything but transparent.[*] In some

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[*] OK, I almost made it to the end of this book without any footnotes. Unfortunately, almost is not the same as actually doing it. But academic habits die hard and I did not want to put a long and complicated discussion I've decided *not* to use in the text. Baseball-Reference calls it summary measure of clutch "clutch." That's simple enough but it's what I would call "clutchiness."

"Clutch" as B-R uses the term starts with Win Probability Added. You remember WPA? It's based on a win probability table that assigns a likelihood of winning to every game situation (score, innings, out, runners on base). It

then compares the win probability before and after each at bat. The change in win probability is then the win probability added or subtracted by the player who was at bat. Then, add all of those changes up for each of a player's at bats over the course of a game, or a season or a career and you have his WPA. Being able to do this seems to me a miracle of data management and I am in awe of whoever figured out how to do this.

WPA considers context (game situation) in a way that batting average or slugging average or even WAR does not. It incorporates "clutchiness" but it isn't yet a measure of clutchiness because it isn't separating "clutchiness" from overall ability. To do this, B-R takes another step.

The first step is calculating what it calls a "Leverage Index" (LI) and divides the WPA for each at bat by this index. That means that as the importance of a situation (LI) goes up, the value of WPA/LI goes *down*. Then, second step, subtracts WPA/LI from WPA. The remainder is then called "clutch."

Huh? It took me something between several hours and several months to figure this out, so don't feel bad if the point of this is not immediately obvious. I think I can explain it best with an equation, even though it is not, so far as I know, the actual equation B-R (or Fangraphs) is using. The equation is (Event X Importance) – ((Event x Importance)/Importance). Le me parse this. Win Probabilty Added is, in effect, a measure of an event (a single, a strikeout, a walk, whatever) weighted (or multiplied) by the importance of the game situation (score, outs, so on). That's the first term in the equation (Event X Importance). So, not every home run equals every other home run, not every strikeout equals every other strikeout. Each counts more or less depending on the situation. This is something we all know more or less intuitively. A strikeout with the bases loaded and the score tied in the bottom of the ninth matters more than the "same" strikeout in the top of the fifth with the score 10 to nothing.

Remember that WPA *incorporates* clutch performance but it doesn't separate the part that's clutchiness in particular from a general level of performance. That's why B-R add the second term (Event X Importance/Importance). What that does is to *take away* the weighting that's incorporated in WPA. So, what

you're left with is the value of an event *independent* of its weighting by game situation. It is measuring, in effect, the value of an event (a single, a strikeout, a walk) *aside from* game situation. Now, if this seems like a kinda backasswards way to assign value to events, I couldn't agree more. B-R and Fangraphs and Tom Tango, who invented this measure, are all a lot more sophisticated mathematically than I am and they may have had their reasons. No matter. The equation (E X I - (E X I / I)) tells us something we're actually interested in. By subtracting the second term (unweighted events) from the first term (weighted events) you get an answer to how much more (or less) valuable a player is when you consider game situation. That is exactly what I mean by clutchiness.

So, why not use it? Well, first, I suspect it's pretty clear that "clutch," as B-R and Fangraphs calculate, is not easy to grasp. That's enough for me but, second, it also generates some weird results. Yogi Berra winds up with best "clutch" total in Yankee history at 7.4. That means that he increased the teams win probability by 7.4 games more by hitting better in the clutch than in other situations. Alex Rodriguez clutch total is third lowest in Yankee history at negative 4.9 and Robinson Cano is second worst at negative 5.2. The very lowest? That would be Babe Ruth himself at negative 8.8. Well, this is altogether possible. Remember that we aren't comparing Rodriguez or Cano or Ruth to Bobby Richardson or Isaiah Kiner-Felafa. We're comparing Rodriguez in the clutch to Rodriguez the rest of the time, Cano in the clutch to Cano the rest of the time, Ruth in the clutch to Ruth the rest of the time. Rodriguez, Cano, and Ruth were all very good hitters. It's possible for them to be worse in the clutch than they are the rest of time and still be better (in clutch situations) than Richardson or IKF. That's not my problem.

My problem is that the numbers don't correspond to the other measures I have of "clutchiness." Cano was genuinely bad in the clutch. Compared to how he hit the rest of the time, Cano was worse with runners in scoring position, runners in scoring position with two out, when it was "late & close," and in high leverage situations. Little wonder that he is -5.2 by B-R's clutch measure. And Rodriguez? With the Yankees, he was lousy in the World Series (which is beside the point here), and slightly worse with runners in scoring

other circumstances I might prefer precise to transparent. Not here. I'll stick with my measures, which should be easy to make sense of.

You have all that? Don't worry if you don't. It took me a very long time to realize that clutch referred to different types of situations. It took me a very long time to realize that clutch (Player A compared to Player B) is not the same as clutchiness (Player A in clutch situations compared to himself in non-clutch situations). And it took me even longer to realize that simple ratios of OPS in clutch situations to overall OPS were as good and as simple a measure of clutchiness as I was likely to find. In any case, it's time to

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position (inning clutch) but actually slightly better in game clutch situations (late & close, high leverage). His total "clutch" should be close to zero, not -4.9. And the Babe? His overall OPS with the Yankees was an extraordinary 1.195. With runners in scoring position: 1.209. With runners in scoring position: 1.213. Late & close: also 1.213. High leverage: 1.15. And, if you want to know about the World Series: 1.285. That is not the record of the least "clutchy" hitter in Yankee history.

I was puzzled by all this so I looked beyond the Yankees. First, I looked at the 57 players in the American League with 300 or more home runs. 45 of 57 had a negative "clutch" total. That seemed high, so I looked at the 51 National Leaguers with 300 or more home runs: 44 of 51 had negative "clutch" totals. (And, if you're wondering, I also looked at a sample of players with an OPS+ between 90 and 110. 97 of 200 had a positive "clutch" total. 97 had a negative total. 6 were at zero.) Something's going on. Could it be that pitchers are more careful with power hitters in clutch situations or that power hitters are expanding their strike zones in clutch situations? Could be. Could it be that there's something wrong with the measurement, something that becomes more possible as the measure becomes more complicated? Could be that, too. I don't know what's going on and, until I do, I want to steer clear.

move on, beyond definitions and distinctions and answer some questions about both clutch and clutchiness.

Let's take another look at the 120 Yankees with at bats in 400 or more games. I'm going to divide them into two groups again—the high OPS group (good hitters) and the low OPS group (bad hitters). And I'm going to compare the two groups by clutchiness. Remember that this isn't a measure of how good a player is in a clutch situation compared to other players but how good he is in clutch situations compared to themselves in other situations. And here's the surprise. Good hitters don't get better in clutch situations. Bad hitters don't get worse. The numbers in the table are ratios of OPS in the clutch situation to overall OPS. Above 1 is clutchiness. Below 1 is unclutchiness.

	All Hitters	Hi OPS Group	Low OPS Group
2 Out, RISP	.984	.989	.979
Late & Close	.988	.987	.988
High Leverage	1.001	1.005	.998

The main takeaway seems to me that there isn't much difference. The lowest ratio is .979. That means that the low OPS group does about 2% worse with 2 out and a runner in scoring position than they do the rest of the time. The highest ratio is 1.005. That means that the High OPS group does ½ of 1% better in high leverage situations than they do the rest of the time. These are not big differences.

There's another question we can answer by looking at "clutchiness." Is clutch hitting simply something that happens or is it an underlying ability? If it is an underlying ability, wouldn't we expect those players who improved in

one clutch situation to hit better in another clutch situation? It is, of course, also possible that hitting better in late & close situations is a different skill from hitting better in the World Series or that hitting better in the World Series is a different skill from hitting better with two out and runners in scoring position. It could be but it seems, at least to me, unlikely. Given that I'm not convinced there's any such thing as "clutchy" ability I'm even less convinced that there are three (or more) distinct types of "clutchy" ability.

The answer is ambiguous. I'll skip the tables here and just report the correlations. Remember that these aren't correlations of performance in different situations. We already know this happens. They're correlations of differences--improvement or decline--across situations. Does a player who gets better (or worse) in the World Series also get better (or worse) when the game is late and close? The players who get better in the World Series do also get better late & close (correlation=.18) and with runners in scoring position and two out (correlation=.13). But players who get better with two out and runners in scoring position are *worse* when the game is late & close (correlation=-.18). And none of those correlations is very large. Compare them, if you like, to the correlations between performance in different situations (from .66 to .91).

So, is there such a thing as clutch hitting ability as distinct from clutch hitting as a product of random variation? I still don't know. It certainly makes sense. We all know—which does not mean we're right—that different people respond differently to pressure. Why not in baseball? It is at the very least possible. What I am pretty sure of though is that any underlying clutch ability—any underlying ability to

rise (or fall) to the occasion--matters a lot less than ability in general. I'm still not stopping everything else to look up when Harrison Bader comes up, no matter what he's done in the playoffs, the way I will stop everything for Aaron Judge.

APPENDIX 3
Top Ten Lists

At various points in writing this book, I thought I should make up a list of the top ten Yankees ever or a top ten list by position or something like that. But each time I had that thought, I decided it was a stupid idea. For one, I don't know what it would mean. Is it a list of the best careers or the best single years or something in between, a peak of some arbitrarily set span of years? For two, I know how I would go about making up such a list. I would make a list of top tens by WAR or WAA, maybe look at a fixed span of years, maybe look at single seasons. If I'm going to do that—make up a bunch of lists and then combine them in some mysterious way to make a single list—I might as well just make up the lists and then leave it to you either to combine them in any way you please or just look at them as separate lists. I don't know if you'll do any better than I would, but you certainly won't do any worse. In his JAWS scores, meant to evaluate players' qualifications for the Hall of Fame, he adds together career WAR with a seven-year peak WAR. Feel free to add, multiply, divide or subtract as the fancy strikes you.

Here's my first set of lists by position. There are more on the pages to follow. The first list is a list of the top ten (or sometimes, a few more) at the position by WAR, just for the player's time with the Yankees. The second list is by WAA. The third list is for "peak value," by which I mean the player's top three years with the Yankees. The main reasons I picked three years rather than four or five or seven is that it is easier to figure and that seems "fairer" (or maybe more accurate) for players who were not with the Yankees their whole careers.

| Les Nunamaker | 8.5 | Gary Sanchez | 4 | 2017 |

NOTES: Yes, that really is Thurman Munson with the highest WAR for a Yankee catcher in a single season—ahead of Berra, Dickey, Howard, Posada and everyone else. And yes, that really is Munson with the highest total WAR for his three-year peak. Like other players of his era—Willie Randolph and Roy White among many others—the depressed offensive context of the late sixties and early seventies obscures how good he was.

I think there is now a consensus that Berra was the greatest catcher in Yankee history. I don't' disagree, but it's worth remembering that the margin between him and Bill Dickey is remarkably thin. Berra has career WAR and WAA of 59.6 and 34.1. For Dickey, the numbers are 56.4 and 31.7. For three-year peaks, the margin is even lower, 18 to 17.8. And Dickey's single best season (1937) generated a slightly higher WAR than Berra's best (1956). But, you might object, shouldn't Berra get at least some extra credit for his teams' remarkable success—14 pennants and 10 World Series wins in 17 full seasons with the Yankees. Yes, sure. But so does Dickey for 8 pennants and 7 World Series wins in 16 full seasons. I'm not claiming Dickey was better than Berra, but it is very close.

Also note that the much-maligned Gary Sanchez appears on all four lists.

FIRST BASE

CAREER WAR		**CAREER WAA**	
Lou Gehrig	113.6	Lou Gehrig	78.9
Don Mattingly	42.4	Don Mattingly	17.6

Wally Pipp	29.3	Bill Skowron	11.1	
Bill Skowron	23.7	Jason Giambi	9	
Jason Giambi	22	Mark Teixeira	5.2	
Mark Teixeira	19.3	Wally Pipp	5	
Tino Martinez	16.7	Nick Etten	4.2	
Chris Chambliss	15.4	Joe Collins	3.6	
Joe Collins	12	Chris Chambliss	2.9	
Nick Etten	11.3	George McQuinn	2.1	

TOP 3 SEASONS, WAR		SINGLE SEASON HIGHS, WAR		
Lou Gehrig	31.7	Lou Gehrig	11.9	1927
Don Mattingly	20	Don Mattingly	7.2	1986
Jason Giambi	16.5	Jason Giambi	7.1	2002
Mark Teixeira	13.2	Mark Teixeira	5.3	2009
Bill Skowron	12	Tino Martinez	5.1	1997
Wally Pipp	12	Nick Etten	4.8	1944
Nick Etten	11.1	Bill Skowron	4.6	1960
Tino Martinez	10.6	Wally Pipp	4.5	1922
Chris Chambliss	10.6	George McQuinn	4.4	1947
Joe Collins	8.2	Chris Chambliss	4.1	1976

NOTES: Gehrig tops the list, by a lot, His total WAA is higher than the combined WAA of the next nine players. Mattingly is second on all four lists but his totals are lower than I would have expected. There are two reasons: One is that he did not walk much; The other is that,   rightly or wrongly, Baseball-Reference does not credit him for the fielding skills his contemporaries believed him to have.

One of the surprises to me is how highly Bill (Moose) Skowron ranks. Skowron was the Yankee regular first baseman from 1954 to 1962 when he wasn't injured, which was often. Skowron made five all-star games in his nine years with the Yankees but it was at a low point for first basemen in the American League and he was rarely better than the fourth best position player on the team after Mantle, Berra, McDougald and, after McDougald retired, Maris. That he ranks third in career WAA speaks to the depth of the Yankees in those years.

The same could be said of Joe Collins, Skowron's predecessor at first and later Skowron's platoon partner. (Collins hit lefty; Skowron hit righty.) Subject to Stengel's sometimes manic platooning, Collins never played more than 130 games in a season. But, when he played, he was a pretty good player.

Notable absence from any of the lists; Hal Chase, about whom I have already written more than enough.

SECOND BASE

CAREER WAR		CAREER WAA	
Willie Randolph	54.1	Willie Randolph	30.7
Tony Lazzeri	46.4	Robinson Cano	23.8
Robinson Cano	44.4	Joe Gordon	23.3
Joe Gordon	36.8	Tony Lazzeri	20.2
Snuffy Stirnweiss	28.7	Snuffy Stirnweiss	17.7

Horace Clarke	16	
Gleyber Torres	14.6	
Jimmy Williams	14.5	
DJ LeMahieu	14.1	
Del Pratt	13.2	

DJ LeMahieu	7.6
Del Pratt	6.4
Jimmy Williams	3.4
Steve Sax	3.2
Gleyber Torres	3.1

TOP 3 SEASONS, WAR

Robinson Cano	23.4
Snuffy Stirnweiss	21.2
Joe Gordon	20.4
Tony Lazzeri	18.8
Willie Randolph	17.7
Del Pratt	13.3
Horace Clarke	12.6
DJ LeMahieu	12.2
Gil McDougald	12
Jimmy Williams	11.6

SINGLE SEASON HIGHS, WAR

Snuffy Stirnweiss	8.9	1945
Robinson Cano	8.4	2012
Tony Lazzeri	7.8	1929
Joe Gordon	7.7	1942
Willie Randolph	6.6	1980
DJ LeMahieu	5.6	2019
Alfonso Soriano	5.4	2003
Del Pratt	5.4	1919
Gil McDougald	5.1	1955
Aaron Ward	4.4	1023

NOTES: Aside from second base and possibly catcher—where Berra and Dickey are close—every other position on the Yankees has a pretty clear best. That's Gehrig, Jeter, Rodriguez, Ruth, Mantle and DiMaggio or maybe Judge. Second base is a muddle. Willie Randolph tops the lists for career WAR and WAA but Lazzeri, Cano, and Gordon are close behind. Add in some guess about what Gordon would have done in the two years he lost to WWII and it's even closer. Stirnweiss and Cano top the list for best single season WAR and best peak (three year) WAR, followed by Gordon and Lazzeri, with Randolph fifth on both lists. An added complication: If I counted McDougald as a career second baseman, his career WAR (40.7) would be fourth on the list and his career WAA (24.1) would be second. I would tell you my conclusion if I had one.

Notable absences: Bobby Richardson, who actually has a negative WAA, and Horace Clarke, Richardson's successor, from any list that suggests excellence rather than simply longevity.

SHORTSTOP

CAREER WAR		CAREER WAA	
Derek Jeter	71.3	Derek Jeter	29.9
Phil Rizzuto	42.2	Phil Rizzuto	22.1
Roger Peckinpaugh	32.1	Roger Peckinpaugh	11.9
Frankie Crosetti	24.5	Kid Elberfeld	8.3

Kid Elberfeld	19.1	
Tony Kubek	18.4	
Didi Gregorius	15.1	
Bucky Dent	12.5	
Lyn Lary	10.8	
Mike Gallego	8.3	

Didi Gregorius	5.9	
Tony Kubek	4.7	
Mike Gallego	4.7	
Bucky Dent	4.4	
Lyn Lary	3.5	
Roy Smalley	1.8	

TOP 3 SEASONS, WAR

Derek Jeter	22.1
Phil Rizzuto	18
Roger Peckinpaugh	14.7
Didi Gregorius	12.4
Kid Elberfeld	12.1
Frankie Crosetti	11
Gil McDougald	10.9
Tony Kubek	9.9
Bucky Dent	9.4
Lyn Lary	8.3

SINGLE SEASON HIGHS, WAR

Derek Jeter	8	1999
Phil Rizzuto	6.8	1950
Lyn Lary	6.3	1919
Gil McDougald	5.8	1957
Kid Elberfeld	5.4	1904
Didi Gregorius	4.9	2018
Lyn Lary	4.9	1931
John Knight	4.4	1910
Tom Tresh	4.4	1962
Frankie Crosetti	4.1	1936

NOTES: Jeter and Rizzuto at the top of all four lists are a stark contrast. Jeter's value was almost all from hitting and baserunning. He was a significantly below average defender. Rizzuto was a below average hitter but, as measured by Defensive WAR, the most valuable defensive player in Yankee history. If we look at career WAA rather than WAR, the overall difference between them is much lower. Give Rizzuto credit for the three years he lost to military service and it's even closer. Have I already said that I think Jeter is overrated?

Roger Peckinpaugh was almost certainly the Yankees' best player before Babe Ruth. He was the team leader in career WAR until Ruth passed him in 1923. The Yankees traded him away after the 1921 season in one of their numerous deals with the Red Sox who promptly traded him to Washington. He won the MVP award with the Senators in 1925. He didn't deserve it but it was still an impressive accomplishment for a 34 year old in his last full season.

Gil McDougald's appearance on the list of three year peaks is based on the only TWO years he was primarily a shortstop. Give him credit for one of his years as a second baseman and he would move up to third on that list. Give him credit at shortstop for his entire career and he would rank third in career WAR and second in career WAA among all Yankee shortstops.

I'm surprised by Didi Gregorius' ranking on all four lists. I have always thought of Gregorius as a kind of bargain basement stop gap for Jeter, picked up on the cheap from Arizona, where he had been a weak hitting semi-regular. I was wrong. He was much better than that.

Frank Crosetti's drop from 4th on the career WAR list to off the career WAA list is exactly what happens when there's a long mediocre career.

THIRD BASE

CAREER WAR

Alex Rodriguez	54
Graig Nettles	44.4
Red Rolfe	29.1
Home Run Baker	20.6
Clete Boyer	19.7
Wade Boggs	18.3
Wid Conroy	13.4
Billy Johnson	9.8
Andy Carey	9.1
Joe Sewell	8.8

CAREER WAA

Alex Rodriguez	31.3
Graig Nettles	23.2
Red Rolfe	11.7
Home Run Baker	9.7
Wade Boggs	9.4
Clete Boyer	7.1
Jerry Kenney	3.2
Gio Urshela	2.8
Joe Sewell	2.6
Robin Ventura	2.3

TOP 3 SEASONS, WAR

Alex Rodriguez	26.4
Graig Nettles	19.3
Red Rolfe	16.3
Wade Boggs	13

SINGLE SEASON HIGHS, WAR

Alex Rodriguez	9.4	2007
Graig Nettles	8	1976
Red Rolfe	6.7	1939
Scott Brosius	5.3	1998

		Home	Run		
Clete Boyer	12.5	Baker		4.9	1918
Gil McDougald	12.2	Clete Boyer		4.6	1962
Home Run		Gil McDougald		4.5	1951
Baker	12.1	Wade Boggs		4.5	1994
Joe Sewell	8.9	Wid Conroy		4.2	1904
Fritz Maisel	8.6	Joe Sewell		3.9	1931
Scott Brosius	8.6				

NOTES: Until Rodriguez, 3B was clearly the Yankees weakest position over the years. Rodriguez, Nettles and Rolfe top all four lists in exactly the same order. There are, so far as I can see, any notable inclusions or exclusions. I am impressed that Boggs and Baker rank as highly as they do on the career lists considering that neither played even 680 games for the Yankees.

CENTER FIELD

CAREER WAR		CAREER WAA	
Mickey Mantle	110.2	Mickey Mantle	79.3
Joe DiMaggio	79.2	Joe DiMaggio	55.2
Bernie Williams	49.6	Rickey Henderson	22.7
Earle Combs	44.7	Earle Combs	21.3
Rickey Henderson	30.8	Bernie Williams	18.7

Bobby Murcer	27.7	
Mickey Rivers	15.1	
Curtis Granderson	14.9	
Roberto Kelly	13.2	
Aaron Hicks	11.5	

Bobby Murcer	10.4	
Mickey Rivers	8	
Curtis Granderson	7.3	
Elliott Maddox	4.6	
Roberto Kelly	4.5	

TOP 3 SEASONS, WAR

Mickey Mantle	32.9
Joe DiMaggio	26
Rickey Henderson	22.5
Bobby Murcer	19.8
Bernie Williams	17.3
Earle Combs	17.3
Mickey Rivers	15.2
Curtis Granderson	13.8
Roberto Kelly	11.5
Aaron Hicks	10.1

SINGLE SEASON HIGHS, WAR

Mickey Mantle	11.3	1957
Aaron Judge	10.6	2022
Rickey Henderson	9.9	1985
Joe DiMaggio	9.4	1941
Bobby Murcer	8.2	1972
Earle Combs	7.1	1927
Bernie Williams	6.4	1995
Mickey Rivers	6.4	1976
Curtis Granderson	6.1	2011
Roberto Kelly	5.5	1990

NOTES: Are Yankee center fielders the greatest concentration of talent for any one team at one position? Probably not. My guess is that honor goes to Red Sox left fielders (Williams, Yaz, Jim Rice, Manny Ramirez and, when he wasn't pitching, a young Babe Ruth). But it's close, especially if you include Henderson and Judge as center fielders. Is that legit? For Henderson, it clearly is. Throughout his long and illustrious career with other teams, Henderson rarely played anything other than left. For the Yankees, though, Henderson played 321 games in center (and played them well) compared to 274 in left. Judge is a little more complicated. He has played far more games in right that in center. In Judge's two best seasons to date, 2022 and 2024— I am writing in August 2024—he has played primarily in center. Mantle, DiMaggio, Henderson, Judge plus Combs, Murcer, and Bernie Williams? That is a very good group.

More people may now remember Bobby Murcer as a TV announcer than as a player. That would be too bad. Murcer was very good. Just as Mantle was winding down, Murcer had the burden of coming to the majors from Oklahoma as a shortstop converted to the outfield. The comparisons to Mantle were both inevitable and unfair. Murcer debuted as a 19 year old (also like mantle) in 1965 but played little that year and the next. He spent 1967 and 1968 and became a regular in 1969. In 1971 he was 3rd in WAR among AL position players, behind only future teammate Graig Nettle (then with Cleveland) and current teammate Roy White. In 1972, he was second, behind only Richie Allen. After another good season in 1973, he had a bad season in 1974 while the Yankees were playing in Shea

Stadium during Yankee Stadium renovations. In the off season, he was traded head-to-head for Bobby Bonds (Barry's father). Murcer returned to the Yankees in 1979 as a part time player and finished his career with the Yankees but had missed out on the championship teams of 1977 and 1978.

I think the most interesting thing about the lists is that DiMaggio is only fourth on the list of single season highs. DiMaggio's best year was 1941, the year of his 56 game hitting streak. He was very good that year but Henderson in 1985, Judge in 2022 and, maybe, 2024, and Mantle in 1955, 1956, 1957 and 1961 were all even better.

CORNER OUTFIELDERS

CAREER WAR		CAREER WAA	
Babe Ruth	143.4	Babe Ruth	109.3
Aaron Judge	49.1	Aaron Judge	35.8
Roy White	46.8	Charlie Keller	28.8
Brett Gardner	44.3	Tommy Henrich	23
Charlie Keller	42.6	Brett Gardner	21.5
Tommy Henrich	39.6	Roy White	20.4
Hank Bauer	29.3	Roger Maris	15.6
Bob Meusel	28.2	Hank Bauer	12.9
Dave Winfield	27.1	George Selkirk	11.9

Paul O'Neill	26.7
Ben Chapman	26.4
Roger Maris	26.3
George Selkirk	23.4
Tom Tresh	22
Hideki Matsui	20.4
Reggie Jackson	17.2
Gene Woodling	16.3
Birdie Cree	15.4
Johnny Damon	14.4
Nick Swisher	11.9

Ben Chapman	11.9
Dave Winfield	11.3
Paul O'Neill	8.1
Reggie Jackson	8.1
Gene Woodling	8.1
Hideki Matsui	7
Tom Tresh	6
Johnny Damon	5.7
Bob Meusel	5.5
Jesse Barfield	4.7
Birdie Cree	3.5

TOP 3 SEASONS, WAR

Babe Ruth	39
Aaron Judge	26.2
Charlie Keller	20.1
Roy White	19
Roger Maris	18.2
Brett Gardner	16.5

SINGLE SEASON HIGHS, WAR

Babe Ruth	14.2	1923
Aaron Judge	8	2017
Roger Maris	7.5	1960
Brett Gardner	7.4	2010
Charlie Keller	6.8	1942
Roy White	6.8	1970

Name	WAR		Name	WAA	Year
Tommy Henrich	16.1		Rickey Henderson	6.3	1988
Ben Chapman	15.3		Ben Chapman	5.9	1931
Hank Bauer	15.1		George Selkirk	5.8	1939
George Selkirk	14.2		Paul O'Neill	5.8	1998
Dave Winfield	14.2		Tommy Henrich	5.5	1941
Paul O'Neill	14		Hank Bauer	5.5	1953
Tom Tresh	13.8		Birdie Cree	5.5	1911
Hideki Matsui	13.6		Tom Tresh	5.4	1966
Reggie Jackson	12.8		Dave Winfield	5.3	1984
Bob Meusel	12		Jesse Barfield	5.2	1990
Johnny Damon	11.8		Bobby Bonds	5.1	1975
Gene Woodling	11.7		Hideki Matsui	5	2004
Jesse Barfield	11.2		Willie Keeler	5	1904
Birdie Cree	11.1		Reggie Jackson	4.8	1980

NOTES: The single season high for Judge is based on a season he played right field. (Ditto for Henderson in left.) The totals for Judge in career WAR, career WAA, and his top three seasons include seasons he played primarily in center and were current as of early August, 2024.

Babe Ruth's numbers are ridiculous, but we already knew that.

Compare Gardner, White and Keller—all three much underrated—to Hall of Famers Winfield and Jackson. Look at all four lists. Who would you rather have on your team?

STARTING PITCHERS

CAREER WAR		CAREER WAA	
Whitey Ford	53.6	Whitey Ford	28.6
Andy Pettitte	51.3	Ron Guidry	26.3
Ron Guidry	47.9	Andy Pettitte	24.6
Red Ruffing	46.5	Mike Mussina	20.2
Lefty Gomez	43.4	Lefty Gomez	19.8
Bob Shawkey	43.1	Bob Shawkey	19.1
Mel Stottlemyre	40.7	Red Ruffing	17.7
Waite Hoyt	36.3	Mel Stottlemyre	17.7
Mike Mussina	35.1	Russ Ford	17.1
Herb Pennock	33.9	Waite Hoyt	13.9
Jack Chesbro	29.8	Ray Caldwell	12.6
CC Sabathia	29.4	Herb Pennock	12.3
Ray Caldwell	28.4	Jack Chesbro	12.2
Russ Ford	27.3	Gerrit Cole	12
Spud Chandler	22.9	CC Sabathia	11.6

Roger Clemens	21.2	David Cone	11.4	
David Cone	20.3	Spud Chandler	11.1	
Tommy John	19.8	Roger Clemens	10.6	
Fritz Peterson	19.6	Orlando Hernández	10.6	
Allie Reynolds	19.6	Tiny Bonham	10.3	
Tiny Bonham	19.1	David Wells	9	
Mel Stottlemyre	19	Masahiro Tanaka	8	
Ray Fisher	18.1	Jimmy Key	7.7	
Gerrit Cole	18	Tommy John	7.6	
Jack Warhop	17.9	Chien-Ming Wang	7.4	
Masahiro Tanaka	17.5	Luis Severino	7.3	
Al Orth	17.4	Urban Shocker	7.1	
Eddie Lopat	17.3	Al Orth	6.8	
David Wells	17.1	Allie Reynolds	6.6	
Carl Mays	17	Carl Mays	6.4	
			5.7	

TOP 3 SEASONS, WAR

SINGLE SEASON HIGHS, WAR

Russ Ford	23.8	Russ Ford	11.4	1910

Lefty Gomez	23.5
Bob Shawkey	22.1
Ron Guidry	21.4
Herb Pennock	20.8
Jack Chesbro	20.7
Mike Mussina	18.8
Red Ruffing	18.1
Mel Stottlemyre	18
Red Ruffing	17.8
CC Sabathia	17.4
Whitey Ford	17
Sad Sam Jones	16.6
Waite Hoyt	16.6
Ray Caldwell	16.5
Al Orth	15.9
David Cone	15.8
Gerrit Cole	15.7
Carl Mays	15.3
Jack Warhop	15.1
Spud Chandler	14.5
Roger Clemens	14.3
David Wells	13.6

Jack Chesbro	10.6	1904
Ron Guidry	9.6	1978
Lefty Gomez	9.2	1937
Andy Pettitte	8.4	1997
Herb Pennock	8.1	1924
Bob Shawkey	8.1	1920
Al Orth	8.1	1906
Catfish Hunter	8.1	1975
Gerrit Cole	7.4	2023
Mike Mussina	7.1	2001
Jack Warhop	7	1912
Mel Stottlemyre	6.9	1965
David Cone	6.7	1997
Whitey Ford	6.7	1964
Red Ruffing	6.6	1931
Ray Caldwell	6.5	1914
CC Sabathia	6.4	2011
Spud Chandler	6.4	1943
Stan Bahnsen	6.4	1968
Jimmy Key	6.3	1993
Carl Mays	6.1	1920
Melido Perez	5.9	1992

		Randy		
Jimmy Key	13.6	Johnson	5.8	2005
Tommy John	13.5	Waite Hoyt	5.7	1921
Urban		Roger		
Shocker	13.4	Clemens	5.7	2001
		Urban		
Ed Figueroa	13.4	Shocker	5.7	1925
Chien-Ming				
Wang	13.3	Tommy John	5.5	1979
Ray Fisher	12.8	Hiroki Kuroda	5.3	2012
		Hippo		
Tiny Bonham	12.1	Vaughn	5.3	2010

Notes: I've already written elsewhere about Russ Ford, Jack Chesboro, Ruffing, Chandler, Raschi, Reynolds, Lopat and Mussina. No reason to add anything here.

What stands out most to me about these lists is the depth of good pitchers along with the absence of great pitchers. Whitey Ford tops the list of career WAR at 53.6. No less the eleven Yankee position players top that list. Here's another way to put that. Ruth, Rodriguez, Gehrig and Mantle are all in the top eight for career WAR in the AL. Among pitchers, Ford is 28th.

A lot more players from the pre-Babe Ruth era show up on the list of starting pitchers than all the lists of position players combined. Bob Shawkey, Russ Ford, Ray Caldwell, Jack Chesboro, Al Orth, Urban Shocker, Ray Fisher, and Jack Warhop all preceded Ruth. This should not be surprising. Dead ball pitchers pitched in shorter rotations with fewer

relievers. As a result, they ran up higher totals of both WAR and WAA.

There are a lot more heartbreak—or, better, armbreak— stories among the pitchers than the position players. Among position players, Elliott Maddox is just about the only star whose career was cut short while he was still young. You could make a case to include Mattingly and Keller (back injuries), Munson (who died in a plane crash) and Gehrig (Lou Gehrig disease). But Mattngly was 29 when he got hurt. Keller was 30; Munson, 32; Gehrig, 36. I've already discussed Russ Ford, who had two of the best pitching seasons in Yankee history and, then with a sore arm, lost 39 in the next two years. Al Downing was one of the best pitchers in the AL from 1963-1967, developed a sore arm, and was never the same (although he did have one terrific comeback year in 1971 with the Dodgers. Jim Bouton won 21 games in 1963 and 18 in 1964 as a 25 year old. He got a sore arm in 1965 and won only 16 games (against 36 losses) for the rest of his career. Jim Hunter, who had won the Cy Young award in 1974 just before he became one of the first free agents. After signing a mega contract (by 1975 standards), Hunter won 23 games in 1975. He was 29 years old. He developed "arm fatigue" in either 1976 or 1977. In any case, after 1975 Hunter accumulated negative 4.4 WAA before retiring at age 33. C M Wang went 8-5, 19-6, 19-7 over his first three seasons. He was 8-2 as 28 year old in 2008 when he broke his foot running the bases in an interleague game. He won only one more game for the Yankees (in 2009) and 14 for the rest of his career. And most recently, Luis Severino won 14 and 19 for the Yankees in 2017 and 2018, finished in the top ten the Cy Young award both years. During Spring training of 2019, he developed shoulder

inflammation and wound up pitching only 18 innings over the next three years. As I write, he is trying to revive his career with the Mets. That's a long list but I should also mention Brien Taylor. Taylor was the Yankees' choice the only year (1991) they had the top overall pick in the draft. Taylor got into a bar fight in 1993, hurt his shoulder and became one of only two overall first picks never to reach the majors. Pitchers are fragile.

It's good to pitch for the Yankees. Spud Chandler has the best won lost percentage for any pitcher with 100 or more wins. Whitey Ford is fourth, with the best won lost percentage for any American league pitcher with 200 or more wins. Vic Raschi, Johnny Allen, Roger Clemens, Lefty Gomez, Ron Guidry, Mike Mussina, Andy Petitte, and Alli Reynolds, each of whom played part or all of their careers for the Yankees, are also in the top 21 in the AL for career winning percentage. It helps to pitch in front of good fielding, backed by good hitting.

RELIEF PITCHERS

CAREER WAR		CAREER WAA	
Mariano Rivera	56.3	Mariano Rivera	32.5
Dave Righetti	22.9	Dave Righetti	10.7
Rich Gossage	18.8	Rich Gossage	9.2
Sparky Lyle	12.9	David Robertson	7.1
David Robertson	11.4	Dellin Betances	6.6

Ramiro Mendoza	14.9	Sparky Lyle	5.9	
Dellin Betances	11.6	Ramiro Mendoza	4.7	
Steve Hamilton	8.1	Chad Green	4.4	
Mike Stanton	7	Tom Gordon	4.4	
Chad Green	9.3	Steve Hamilton	4.3	
Adam Warren	8.8	Mike Stanton	4.1	
Aroldis Chapman	7.4	Adam Warren	4	
Tom Gordon	7.2	Aroldis Chapman	3.6	

TOP 3 SEASONS, WAR

Mariano Rivera	13.5
Rich Gossage	11.4
Sparky Lyle	10.8
Dave Righetti	9.6
Murphy	9.5
Dellin Betances	9.1
Joe Page	8.8

SINGLE SEASON HIGHS, WAA

Mariano Rivera	5	1996
Lindy McDaniel	4.2	1962
Rich Gossage	4.5	1982
Joe Page	4.4	1949
Tom Gordon	4	2004
Dellin Betances	3.9	2015
Dave Righetti	3.8	1986

David Robertson	7.9		David Robertson	3.7	2011
Mike Stanton	7.7		Sparky Lyle	3.7	1977
Ramiro Mendoza	7.4		Joba Chamberlain	3.5	2008
Chad Green	7.1		Jonathan Loaisaga	3.2	2021
Ron Davis	6		Luis Arr0yo	3.2	1961

NOTES: My criterion for inclusion here is 80% of appearances in relief. Wilcy Moore in 1927 just misses this criterion with 76% of his appearances in relief. If I included Moore, his 6.6 WAR in 1927 would have topped the list. Note that 80% of appearances is very different from 80% of innings. Righetti and Mendoza both started roughly 15% or more of their games. But Righetti pitched 35% of his Yankee innings as a starter and Mendoza, 45%. Although I don't have WAR and WAA breakdowns for Righetti and Mendoza as starters and relievers, my guess is they would be roughly the same as the percentage of innings. Moreover, as I showed earlier, in my comment about The Great Mariano, relievers' innings, especially closers' innings, typically come in high leverage situations. As a result, WAR and WAA understate the importance of relievers. Righetti's and Mendoza's rank is inflated both by their innings as starters and the treatment (in WAR and WAA) of starters' innings as equal value to a reliever's innings. If you want a more precise ranking of Yankee relievers, knock Righetti and Mendoza down a notch or two.

From everything I've read Gossage sounds like a first class jerk. In 1978, his first year with the Yankees, Gossage appeared in relief 63 times and pitched 134 innings, more than two innings per appearance. That's impressive. The problem is that Gossage hasn't stopped talking about it since, claiming among other things that his ability to do two innings made him a better reliever than The Great Mariano. He's wrong. He also seems to have forgotten—or never new—that the late 1970's style relievers were only one moment in an evolution of relief pitchers that has been going on for over a century.

I'm also not a big fan of Lyle's book, *The Bronx Zoo*. It has none of the self-deprecating humor of, for example, Jim Bouton's *Ball Four*, spends too many pages complaining about contract negotiations, and lacks of any of the joy I associate with my favorite books and movies about sports.

And, while I'm at it, I'm also not happy that The Great Mariano endorsed Trump in the 2024 election. I hope it is needless to say that neither Gossage's whining, Lyle's writing skills, or Rivera's politics diminishes their skill as pitchers.

Although they don't all make it to any of the top ten lists, the roster of one and two year wonders among relief pitchers is even longer than among starters. In addition to Wilcy Moore of the 1927 Yankees, add Rhyne Duren (33 saves and a combined ERA 2.0 in 1968 and 1969, hen only 22 saves the rest of his career), Luis Arroyo (15-5 with a 2.19 ERA and a league leading 29 saves in 1961 and then only 2 more wins, an ERA over 4 and 16 saves for the entire rest of his career), and even Joe Page (3rd in the MVP vote in 1947 and 4th in 1949 before he hurt his arm in 1950 and pitched in only 44 more games with little success before retiring). Pitchers are fragile. Relief pitchers are especially fragile.

APPENDIX 4
Yankee Caps

In March of 2023, Jack Nicas reported in T*he New York Times* that "In Brazil, soccer is life, and baseball confounds. But a few days in any of Brazil's metropolises or beyond will make clear that, regardless, the Yankees cap is perhaps the country's hottest headwear." Nicas went on to say that he had seen Yankee caps "on the beaches of Rio and the bars of Sao Paolo" even though virtually nobody seemed to know who or what the Yankees were. I was not surprised. My brother has lived in Brazil for about twenty years and, on visits, I have frequently seen such caps myself.

But it's not just Brazil. Below: A display at the Terminal 21 Mall in Bangkok . Thailand, a picture from the express ferry on the Chao Praya river, also in Bangkok, a picture from Marrakesh (courtesy of my friend Fran), and my personal favorite, a shop window at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China. The last picture I found on the internet: Remember to read from right to left.

I