

Life, measured by innings

Baseball teaches a veteran Yankees fan
and a rookie valuable lessons

BY JOHN ESPOSITO

This is a story about turning 50. It's also a story about a great baseball team from long ago. Actually, it's a story about a little boy, his dad and some special lessons they learned about winning and living. In case you haven't guessed, I'm the father who's about to turn 50 and the little boy is my son.

Most self-respecting boomers like myself were weaned on a steady stream of pop culture offerings as long as a list of entrées on a Chinese menu: Dr. Spock, Captain Kangaroo, comic books, "Leave It to Beaver," transistor radios, westerns, the Beatles, Clearasil, "Catch-22," Hendrix, "The Graduate," yogurt, "Star Trek" and Diet Coke.

Now our speech is colored by fragmented talk of 401(k) plans, high cholesterol, decaf coffee, prostate screenings, teeth whitening kits and retirement packages. So how does this dinosaur who lives with more than an occasional '60s flashback handle his lament?

The answer came this Sunday evening. It's a magical potion of sorts, allowing a middle-aged man to grow old and retain the fresh exuberance of youth. The prescription simply reads: baseball. It's a metaphor for the life process. For many, the connection carries an even more personal name: the New York Yankees.

Time will not erase special memories of the great Yankee teams of my youth. The players had magical first names: Mickey, Whitey, Billy, Yogi, Ellie, Rog and Moose. The voice of Mel Allen still echoes in my brain — "Boyer to Richardson to Skowron. Double play. How about that!" They played out the golden summers of my childhood during the early 1960s. They were my heroes.

The Yankees of today go about their craft, improving on the richest legacy in all of sports. They, too, have their own unique set of names: Derek, Bernie, Tino,

Shane, Rocket, Paulie and Mariano. They do not have one definitive superstar. Instead this proud team brings together a collective set of magnificent skills, with one remarkable athlete playing off the talents of the other.

As I write these words, less than an hour has passed since the Yankees lost the seventh and deciding game of the 2001 World Series to the Arizona Diamondbacks. My wife and I allowed our son to stay up late to see the final game.

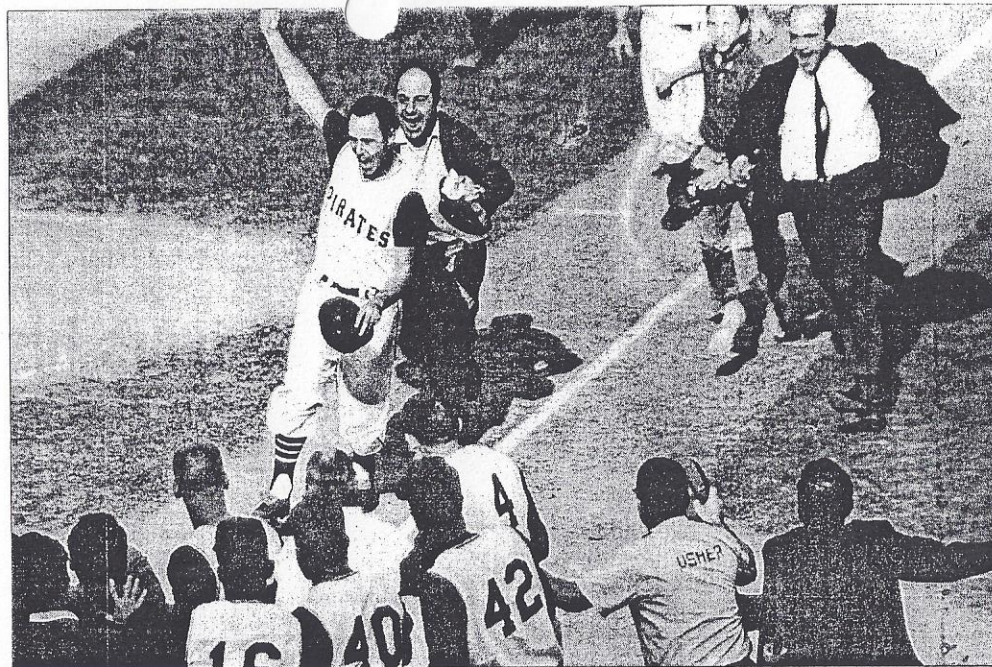
The outcome left him visibly upset. None of us wanted to see the Diamondbacks' victory celebration. We clicked off the remote, and my son went sadly off to bed. Tomorrow he turns 8 and loves the New York Yankees as much as I ever did.

Forty-one years ago, there lived another 8-year-old boy who loved the New York Yankees and Mickey Mantle. He also witnessed the closing moments of a seventh and deciding World Series game.

The year was 1960, and the opposing team went by another name, wore a different uniform and played in Pittsburgh. The young fan sat helplessly in his Irvington home, watching a ball hit by the Pirates' Bill Mazeroski drift over the left field wall at Forbes Field for the game-winning home run. The outcome was the same, just a different time.

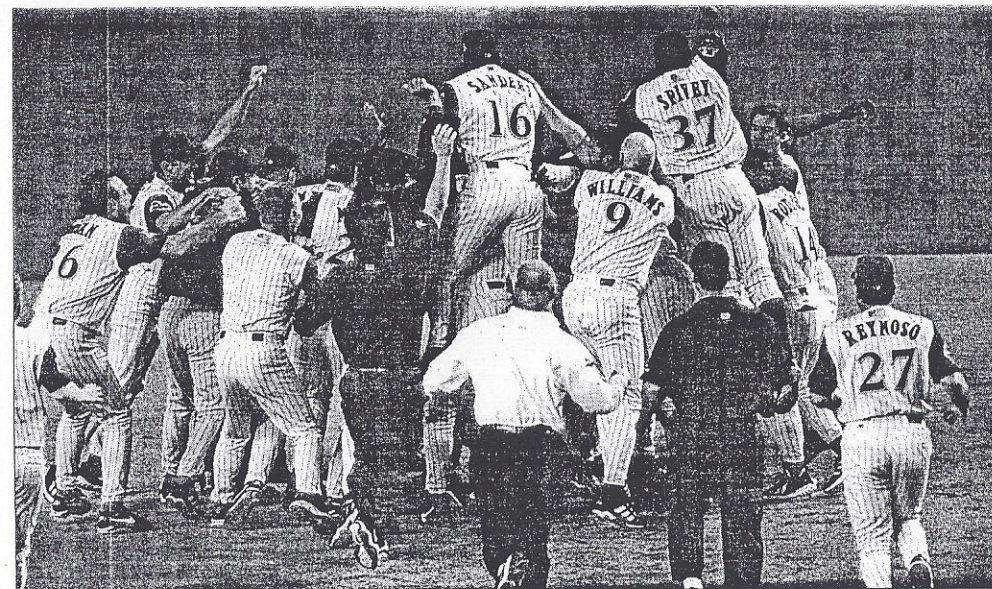
The young boy rose slowly from his chair, turned off the small black-and-white set and walked out of the room overwhelmed with grief. He would experience the worst stomachache of his young life.

Next year or in future years to come, the Yankees may not be able to duplicate the feats that took them to the pennant. Talent, hard work, luck and more hard work are basic requirements. Even with that, there are no assurances our team will come out on top. I think my son learned something about invincibility. It is all right to lose. Even the New York Yankees can lose. Tonight he is sad.



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For a father, the Pirates' World Series victory 41 years ago, when he was just 8, shattered his image of the invincible Yankees.



ANDREW MILLS/THE STAR-LEDGER

For his 8-year-old son, this year's World Series showed that it's all right to lose sometimes. Even the Yankees do it.

Tomorrow he will wake up a stronger person for what has just happened.

He is a wonderful boy who is wise beyond his years. I think he recognized another important lesson. It is still a very special time to be a Yankees fan.

His dad learned something as well. I

can now leave the playing field for a pinch runner and have no regrets. I plan next year to turn on the Yankees broadcast, sip iced tea and welcome my 50th birthday while dreaming new dreams. There is nothing to fret about. I've passed my son the baton.

This year, this team and this summer will someday become part of his memories. My boy has everything under control.

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