

Derek Jeter and Roger Maris: Similar, Different and Unique Yankees – Leaders by Example

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BY JOHN ESPOSITO

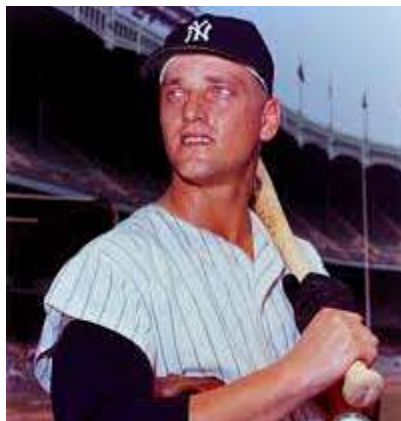
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COMMENTARY

On February 19th, Derek Jeter met with the media in Tampa, Florida, at the Yankees Spring Training Camp. The Yankee Captain held court at a pre-retirement press conference, after announcing earlier in the week on his Facebook page that 2014 would mark his final year as a Major League baseball player.

I would like to offer a comparison of sorts concerning Jeter and another Yankee star of yesteryear, Roger Maris. I believe there is an analogy to be drawn between these two athletes. Firstly and unequivocally, they will be remembered as gifted baseball players who consistently checked their egos at the front door, were not flamboyant or outwardly impressed with the glory that comes with fame, (clearly opposites of the pervasive braggadocio that populates much of sports celebrity today).

The similarities in Maris and Jeter are many. They regarded their baseball life as jobs first and only experiencing the exhilaration and enjoyment after their work was complete. Neither man ever wished to be placed on a pedestal; they attempted to avoid the limelight and controversy; both were respected by teammates and opposing players alike; Maris remained a devoted husband and family man; Jeter is devoted to his parents and his sister; both placed their teams and winning first with individual accomplishments a distant second. They played with a fierce intensity (although Maris was unjustly accused of dogging it in his final years as a Yankee - but don't tell that to his Cardinal teammates after being traded by the Yankees and helping St. Louis win the 1966 NL pennant. He represented pure class in every respect). Above all, they are heroes who demonstrated a strong work ethic, humility and integrity.



Maris and Jeter only part ways in comparisons when it comes to advancing Yankee lore. Derek always professed to be in awe of the great players who came before him and what it meant to be a Yankee. Roger did little to advance that cause, except to prove himself a well-liked teammate. Maris could be sullen at times. As a pre-teen, I recall a Sports Magazine article from the early 1960s whereby the occasionally direct, young and unsophisticated Maris (when speaking of the Holy Grail), referred to former baseball greats of the 1920s as “Punch and Judy” hitters, who did not measure up to the power hitters of his own modern era. Maris could also demonstrate a laid back attitude concerning awards and memorabilia by once informing a writer that his historic 61st home run ball was later used by his young children in a backyard baseball game. But that was Roger simply being Roger, not so much acting flip, but simply stating that records and accolades really meant very little to him. Just the same, some of his comments to the press got him in hot water at times, especially with the Yankee brass that never protected him or his image. He did not fit the Yankee mold. The late, great Star Ledger sports columnist, Jim Ogle, referred to Maris as the most honest athlete he had ever known.

By his own admission and design, Jeter was never truly forthcoming when addressing the media. This was the modus operandi from the very beginning of his career in dealing with the New York spotlight. In his press conference last week, a reporter asked what his plans were after retirement. Jeter replied in a somewhat mildly irritated manner: “Did you read my [Facebook] letter?” Beyond that slightly ruffled retort, all of his remarks throughout the conference were respectful in every regard, as they always have been.

The great Willie Mays and Joe DiMaggio are prime examples of other great athletes who remained guarded during and after the end of their careers. This is not meant to be a slap at either Maris or Jeter. It is simply the make-up of their personalities, the way they chose to go about their business, much like the unheralded husband or wife, leaving the house each morning for work to begin another long day.

Local sports psychologist, Marshall Mintz informed Star Ledger sports columnist, Dave D’Alessandro that, “To be accomplished as Derek is on his level, you have to have compulsive features... a determined, organized, disciplined, mildly evaluative and judgmental style that lets you keep after things. But it’s not always best to be a purebred pit bull – a pit bull with a golden retriever, perhaps. Because you find that compulsive perfectionism is really a joyless mind state.” Although Dr. Mintz’s point about perfectionism was probably meant to be theoretical, and not Jeter-specific, there is an applicable validity to the doctor’s comments by virtue of Jeter’s press conference admission, that he “never really enjoyed the ride.”

It is best said that when Derek Jeter and Roger Maris were on the playing field, their energy were focused on doing what they were paid handsomely to do, and success was foremost on their mind. Conversely, it was perhaps unfortunate that neither man engaged in a more forthcoming dialogue with the fans and press, but their drive to succeed simply was primary and everything else would prove a distraction. I am reminded of the former Yankee star, Paul O’Neill, whom George Steinbrenner referred to as his “warrior.” No Yankee player in recent vintage ever displayed a more fierce intensity as O’Neill, which at times appeared to demonstrate itself as anger. With that said, when Paul O’Neill became a Yankee broadcaster he shocked many people by unveiling a completely different aspect of his personality, one that perhaps had always been evident to his teammates. He is clearly relaxed, a sometimes jokester, a good natured tease, and competent, seemingly enjoying his new found profession.

Whatever lightheartedness and openness Jeter and Maris did not outwardly display to the public, the element of fun and joy in playing this summer game was always there, but reserved more for their teammates in the clubhouse, until they could take care of business. And for that matter, how many of us really take the time to relax, laugh a bit, and stop and smell the roses before that retirement day finally arrives?

Derek Jeter deserves all the accolades he can possibly receive in this, his last season. He has been the consummate Yankee and professional athlete, who has done the pinstripes proud. Fans, teammates and opposing players alike all hope he will enjoy this year’s ride.

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