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It's Still O.K. to Root Against the Yankees

By Nicholas Dawidoff

When the New York Yankees resume their playoff series against the Seattle Mariners back in the Bronx tonight, they are likely to encounter euphoria. During the last home game, the Yankees defeated Oakland and the crowd watched with such jubilant intensity that the manager, Joe Torre, reflected later that in between the cheers you could hear the fans breathe.

Until the playoffs began, glee had been in scarce supply hereabouts. For weeks New York's chief source of unity and comfort had come from the singular heroics of the city's emergency and relief workers. But now the Yankees have given New Yorkers something else on which to pin their hopes. "It's everywhere — people you run into just on the street, they say, 'You've got to do it this year, you've got to,' " said the Yankee first baseman Tino Martinez. "Every year you're motivated to win, but this year it's something extra."

Since the 19th century, when towns across the country began hiring skilled young men to play for the local nine, baseball has always been a source of civic pride and solidarity. That the Yankees are offering diversion and perhaps even some temporary solace to a grieving city represents the apotheosis of what a baseball team can mean to its community.

Yet what is a bit startling, even under today's extraordinary circumstances, is that all across America people are rallying around the Yanks. This is true in Massachusetts, home of the Yankees' embittered rival, the Red Sox; in Queens, home of New York's other, less fortunate team, the Mets; and even in Seattle, where the Mariners slugger Edgar Martinez recently said: "We all feel very sad about what happened in New York. If we were not playing the Yankees, I'd probably want the Yankees to win."

> A hard-to-love ball club gets harder to hate.

How is this? Let us not forget this is the gluttonous team that has already won 26 World Series (not to mention four of the last five). These are the "Damn Yankees" who inspired Douglas Wallop's hit play and A. J. Liebling's acid observation, "The Yankees are the least popular of all baseball clubs, because they win, which leaves nothing to 'if' about." These are the Yankees of the truculent pitcher Roger Clemens and of George Steinbrenner, the temperamental Boss with the biggest payroll in baseball.

Perhaps because it is only a game, baseball offers people a helpful way of grappling with complicated events and expressing strong feelings about them. Rooting for the proud Yankees — or the plucky Mets during their admirable, doomed September playoff run — can offer a focus of emotion during a confusing time. You can still count yourself a loyal supporter of the Atlanta Braves or the San Francisco Giants and express your solidarity with New York by cheering for the Yankees just this once. Maybe you simply wish things would get back to normal — and what is more normal than the Yankees winning the World Series?

But if it feels right to root against the Yankees, that is all right too. One of the signal pleasures of living in a democracy is the privilege of point of view. You can love New York — and feel compassion for all the suffering that has happened here — and still deplore those smug Yankees.

During World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt wrote in his "green-light" letter to the baseball commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis: "It would be best for the country to keep baseball going. ... These players are a definite recreational asset to at least 20 million of their fellow citizens — and that in my judgment is thoroughly worthwhile." In days like these, the Yankees are providing the most we can really ask from a group of ball players — an ideal and compelling distraction. □

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