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PLAYING WITH PURPOSE

It's fewer pinstripes, more stars and stripes in the battle to be baseball's world champs

All glory is fleeting, unless you're the Yankees.

— A fan in the Bronx, October 2001

By Stephen Williams
STAFF WRITER

IN THIS SEASON of trauma for America, the championship chase of the Yankees contains all the elements of great baseball: resilience, wit, stoicism, extraordinary tension, followed by breathless release. Grace under pressure.

This October, though, there is more than the usual fierce devotion. Even the hardcore fans seem more desperate for another title.

A year ago in New York, baseball desperation — which goes well beyond the possibility of losing a game — was mitigated by elation. After weeks, a joyous, extended anticipation of a Subway Series evolved into just that. Mets fans sniped at Yankees fans, Yankees fans baited Mets fans and there was anger and some real bitterness involved. But, by and large, the goodness of the event itself — minus the "did-Clemons-throw-the-broken-bat-at-Piazza?" episode — overshadowed the pettiness.

The games did not live up to the enormous hype, but that wasn't the point. The two communities of baseball fans — different in makeup, different in attitude, different in style — for a while, at least, shared a community of spirit: If you don't like New York, the collective mob sneered at the rest of the world, you've got double trouble now.

So taken was most of civilization with the New Yorker's baseball conundrum of October 2000, that the madness spread far beyond the precincts of the Inner and Outer Boroughs. In Boston, where I watched one of the World Series games from a bar, Red Sox fans localized the issue with near-scientific logic.

"Of course, it was Mookie Wilson's hit that destroyed this team [Red Sox] for more than a decade," offered one college-age observer, who probably was about 5 years old in 1986, when, on a crisp evening at the Mets' home field, Wilson's soft tapper down the first-base line bounded through Bill Buckner's legs and cost the Sox the World Series that they were one strike away from winning.

"Forget that," countered another. "How can you even compare it to Dent's home run?"

The reference was to Oct. 2, 1978, and the one-game, winner-take-all AL East divisional playoff at Fenway Park. Bucky Dent's three-run shot over The Wall — only his fifth home run in 163 games — put the Yankees ahead in the contest, which they eventually won.

The Yankees have been, in some ways, the standard-bearers of championship ball in recent years (or, cosmically, since time began, some would say), and for that, many out-of-towners agree, they deserve to be vilified. Envy is a powerful force.

But this championship season, should it turn out to be one, would be among the more special in the history of New York sports, because it was accomplished with so much determination amid so much destruction.

The world has witnessed New Yorkers of all stripes and loyalties banding together. And, rather than resenting the tough, brusque New York attitude — the cliche of rudeness bordering on arrogance — folks nationwide have graced us with an empathy that embraces even the Yankees. This is a temporary detente at best — even George Steinbrenner, in his wildest fantasies, could not envision his franchise as "America's Team."

But there is a noticeable shift away from selfishness and toward selflessness in the always dramatic, often traumatic, pursuit that continues this autumn, this week. Rather than team logos, the players wear FDNY on their caps; rather than painting "Derek" or "Tino" on their faces, fans paint themselves with Dali-esque intrepretations of the American flag. Never mind that Madonna or Springsteen might be sitting in the boxes behind the dugout; Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's the celebrity of the moment.



Newsday Photo / Jin Oe



THIS YEAR

The Yankees, including Derek Jeter, far right, and Bernie Williams, above, have honored firefighters in pregame ceremonies and worn the FDNY logo on their caps.

"It's been electric," said Joe Torre just before Game 5 of the ALCS against Seattle. "It's really been extraordinary. I remember last year's World Series; it just didn't seem as loud. But this has been as loud as I can remember in the six years I've been here."

And where the Subway Series pitted neighborhood against neighborhood — and suburb against suburb, in some cases — the attacks on New York have rekindled that rather desperate quality mentioned above: We got beat on Sept. 11. Just try to beat us again.

Imagine a Yankees fan, in any other October, being told by a security guard that he can't bring his bag — any bag, of any type — into the stadium. Yet, on my only post-season visit to the Bronx this year — to Game 2 against Oakland — most briefcase- or knapsack-laden visitors cheerily agreed to check their baggage for some outrageous fee at the bowling alley on 161st Street, and some even smiled at the guards.

The fans, of course, were saving their rage for the A's . . . and some other, perhaps invisible, enemy. There was a vibration — an urgent, pure, powerful tremor — that rattled the place from the first pitch until the final out. Even for Yankee Stadium, there seemed a purpose behind the intensity that went beyond the game at hand.

"The great thing to me about this . . . *connection*, is that it's not about the glory of the Yankees or winning another championship," said Roger Angell of The New Yorker. "The idea is to win, but not to win for the city. That's too much for any ballplayer to carry."

Being at the ballpark to watch Oakland and Seattle, Angell said, "we got the sense that, at last, we were happy for ourselves, and this was the perfect way to do it. It was 'a New York Thing,' and not something like a Broadway show coming here from out of town. It was home-grown and, boy, was it happy and exciting."

"I think the players were under more pressure last year, because they know the way Steinbrenner reacts when the Mets beat the Yankees," said Richie Steier, who edits The Chief, a civil service employees' newspaper.



AP Photo, 2000

LAST YEAR

At right, Barry Phillips and daughter Dana, from Flushing, were decked out in Yankees' logos for Game 1 of the World Series. The Yanks won the Subway Series in five games, delighting Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, far right, who threw them another parade, left.

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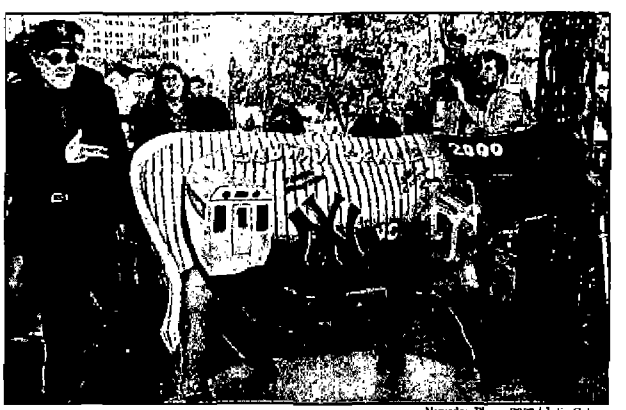

Newsday Photo, 2000 / Julia Gaines

"But baseball isn't a game you win on raw emotion," Steier said. "Torre isn't going to go into the locker room before any game and say, 'Let's win one for New York City.' "

In 2001, other factors enter into the Yankees equation as well that make this year different from last. Paul O'Neill will likely retire after the series (as will the mayor, but not voluntarily), Scott Brosius and Tino Martinez will likely play elsewhere next year.

"There are poignancies about this season," said Rick Stark, a fan from Forest Hills. "The dynasty, what little there is to it, won't go beyond this."

Angell, who recently published "A Pitcher's Story: Innings With David Cone," says that, while much of the country — baseball fans and otherwise — might be sympathetic to New York, "the people I'm sorry for now are the Yankee haters. They're just as low-down because of the terrorism as all of us, and they're missing so much." ■

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