

The Captain's Goodbye

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One of Derek Jeter's post-career ventures is publishing children's books, one of which is about to be released. We don't know if Jeter is going to write them, but, if he is, he could not write a story any better than what occurred tonight, his final game in Yankee Stadium after 20 years as not only a Yankee icon, but for all of baseball. He has owned New York reminiscent of Ruth, DiMaggio, and Mantle before him.

The day was miserable, raining and there were doubts about whether the game would be played at all. When we arrived it was pouring, so we fed the kids and walked around, looking at all the Jeter and Yankee memorabilia for sale. They were selling Yankee Stadium dirt in a quarter-sized 1/8" plastic disk for \$10!!! One of The Captain's uniforms was selling for \$50K.

On cue, the rain stopped and the skies cleared. Facing west, we could see the remnants of the sunset that reddened the sky...good thing they were playing the O's rather than the Red Sox!

Bruce Springsteen's trumpeter blared a memorable Star-Spangled Banner and we settled into our center field bleacher seats just in time to see the first two Orioles hitters homer and groans took the place of the pre-game anticipation of an historical night. But wait, it was only 2-0 and the Yanks had yet to hit. They did.

Gardner led off with a single, Jeter up next...the crowd electric with their chants of "Der-ek-Jee-ter" that would become the night's anthem. Lost in the crowd noise, the taped voice of the late Bob Shepard announces as he has since his death many years ago, in a signature New York accent, "Now batting for the Yankees...numbuh 2...shortstop...Derek Jeetuh...numbuh 2." With this game, we will never hear Sheaprd's iconic voice again.

Turning to my son-in-law, I joked that if he hits one out, the whole place goes up for grabs. He nearly did as his drive rattled the left-center field wall a foot from going out...Gardner scored and Jeter walked into second with a double. On a wild throw by the O's third

baseman on the next hitter, Jeter scored the second run and we're tied. Unreal!

Oh, by the way, sitting next to me was a couple, both dressed in their pinstriped number 2 Yankees home jerseys. Between the bottom of the first and the top of the second, he gets down on one knee and proposes...she says yes...and the crowd around us explodes. I'm stunned...is this a dream...and I know it's not Iowa! Unbelievable.

The pitchers settled down for the next several innings, throwing zeroes, but not the fans. It has been customary at every home game, for Yankees fans in the bleachers to shout out the names of the starting lineup until the player acknowledges, usually with a tip of the cap or a wave of his glove, but when they got to Jeter, they just kept calling his name. This would be a most unusual game, never mind that it meant nothing to either team as the Yankees were playing out the string and the O's were just maintaining momentum for the playoffs, trying not to incur injuries.

The chants continued for the next several innings despite the fact that neither team mustered much in the way of offense. In the 7th, the Yanks pushed across three runs, two of which scored on a ground ball hit by The Captain that was thrown away in an attempt to turn a double play. It is 5-2, Yanks, and the crowd starts up again..."Der-ek-Jee-tuh", clap, clap, clap-clap-clap. In the eighth, we start with "Thank you, Captain" over and over, louder and louder, and on the TV screens around the ball park, close-ups showed tears in his eyes and in those of Manager Joe Girardi...tears from the guy who always said and did the right thing, never revealing emotion, always direct without saying a word...On that alone, it became a most unusual game.

Top of the 9th, three outs away. We're wondering when Girardi gestures to send a replacement out to short to allow The Captain to trot gracefully off the field to the roar of an already roaring 50,000 people, as he did last year with the Great Mariano Rivera. Jokingly, my grandson smirks, "The O's have to tie it so Jeter can hit the game-winning homer in the bottom of the 9th." I joked, "yeah, dream on." But after taking the count to 0-2 on the leadoff hitter, closer Darrell Robertson, clutch all year, walks him. The next batter, Adam Jones, is almost hit with high and tight chin music, gets up, and smashes the next pitch high and far to the O's bullpen. Suddenly it's 5-4, we're worried, and no longer thinking of the sweet exit finale. After striking out the next hitter, Nelson Cruz, who is leading the Majors in home runs, Robertson blows the save as Steve Pearce belts one to almost

the same spot and its tied, 5-5. Stunned, shocked into near silence, we look to the scoreboard and the lineup tells us Jeter bats third in the inning, so we DO have a chance at a dramatic finish.

Up first for the Yanks in the bottom of the ninth of a tie ballgame is a rookie, Pirela, and don't ya know, he singles to left. Gardner lays down a beautiful sac bunt to get Richardson, the pinch runner, to second with one out. Next up, The Captain. What an unbelievably dramatic opportunity! I'm thinking Girardi isn't managing this game, Disney is. The crowd is apoplectic with the possibility. We are screaming for Jeter to deliver and before we know it, he slices the first pitch past a diving first basemen, through the hole, into right field. Markakis has a strong arm and fires it dead on to the plate as we hold our breaths for a moment, but the speedy Richardson slides across with the game-winner. The Yankees win on Derek Jeter's game-winning single in his last at bat in a Yankee uniform at Yankee Stadium!

At that moment, I heard an explosion of noise that I have never heard in the nearly one hundred Major League games I have attended in my life, all across the US, starting at Ebbetts Field in 1955. It was an instant, and then died down to a continual primal scream as the Yankees poured out of the dugout and mobbed their leader between 1B and 2B. The fans around me were half in disbelief, wonder and delight in their eyes and smiles, and half in sheer joy. We had gone from thinking about how Girardi was going to replace The Captain in the most gracious way, not ten minutes before, to sinking to utter depression as Pearce's homer sailed into the left field bleachers, to euphoria again as Jeter did it again, as he has for so many clutch moments in his 20 years. It could not have gone better if the O's were in on it. Talk about a storybook ending to a storybook career with a storybook franchise of a guy who is going into the storybook writing business for kids.

It was anti-climactic that the post-game interviews were held on the field. Jeter's teammates from the championships...Rivera, Jorge Posada, Andy Pettitte, Tino Martinez, Bernie Williams, and Manager Joe Torre all assembled for post-game hugs. Truly the end of an era and sadly what will likely be a long winter of finishing out of the playoffs again and again.

Allow me an opinion as a lifelong Yankees fan born of Bronx-born parents... The debate about Jeter's place in Yankees lore will continue. Statistically, apart from the power numbers, he is the greatest. He

ranks up with the Ruths, Gehrigs, DiMaggios, Berras, Mantles, and Munsons in terms of championships won. For my money, there is Ruth and everyone else. I am a Mantle/Berra/Ford fan because they won everything in sight when I was growing up, just as the generations of twenty-somethings today grew up with Jeter. For any number of reasons, not the least of which is his ability to deliver in the clutch, he matches DiMaggio, Mantle, Berra, and Munson, whether the regular season, playoffs, or World Series. He is a great Yankee among the greatest Yankees.

But this game was unbelievable!