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Essay for NPR “All Things Considered”

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Today Joe Torre put on Dodger blue, finalizing the end of an era in New York. Perhaps, though, in the most important way of all, it’s an era that’s only just begun.

There’s a photograph of my father as a boy, hanging over the railing at Yankee Stadium, his father behind him. You can’t see the field, but you don’t need to. It’s obvious from the look of wonder and wide-eyed excitement on my father’s face that legends are at play below. Mantle, Rizzuto, Yogi Bera.

My grandfather was a press photographer, and he was on a first-name basis with the players in those days. Sometimes he would take my dad onto the field when he took pictures of the team. It was the glory years of the fifties when battles between the Yankees and Dodgers defined an era. My dad grew up in Brooklyn, but there wasn’t a question in his mind—these Yankees were his team.

They still are.

“They don’t make teams like that anymore,” I’ve heard a comical number of times. “Year in and year out, the same guys playing together.” This has been his mantra for as long as I can remember—that and “nobody knows how to bunt anymore!”

Make no mistake, my dad is no old codger, unwilling to love a modern team. When Joe Torre arrived in 1996, he was thrilled by that magical season. I was overseas, and he excitedly sent me weighty packets of clippings detailing the fun I was missing in the Bronx. We had watched games together when I was a boy in the 80s, but it’s clear to me now that his main draw to the team then had been the voice bringing him the games at night. Phil Rizzuto’s passing this summer affected my dad—I’ve held onto the offering of clippings to prove it.

But during the Torre years, we finally had a team we could enjoy together. Sure, I had favorite players growing up—Mattingly, of course, and Mike Pagliarulo because I loved to say his name—but my “boyhood” Yankee heroes came along as I was finishing up my teens. Privately, dad might have wondered if they would ever come for me, but just in time, they did. And what a group they’ve been. Mo, Derek, Bernie, Paul O’Neill, Andy Pettitte.

I remember the day Andy left for Houston. I was useless. I felt like a ten-year-old whose dog had just died, or a thirty-year-old whose manager had just left for LA. Dad was disappointed too, but I can’t be sure how much of that was just watching me suffer. He’d already passed this rite with his Yankees. His words of wisdom and condolence were a wistful remembrance of a time when teams stayed together for decades. “The same players, year in and year out. Stengel’s guys. Now *that* was a team.”

If they’re lucky, every generation gets a golden year. If they’re exceptionally lucky, they get a golden run. Yankees fans of every generation have been exceptionally lucky.

“The new Yankee Stadium, I know, is going to be state of the art,” Joe Torre said, putting a poetic cap on his time in New York and on my boyhood team of Yankee heroes. “It’s going to be like no other new stadium. But that stay in the old one wasn’t too bad.”

Someday I’ll take a son of my own to the new Yankee Stadium. Maybe it will be Joe Torre Day. Derek will be there. Mo will be there. Bernie, Jorge, Paul and Andy will all be there. And I will drink in the memories. My son will probably understand in some distant way that these guys were very special. He’ll stand and applaud with everyone else, but in his heart of hearts he’ll be more excited to see his heroes waiting in the dugout to play. They will be his team. They will be his era. And I’ll be okay with that, because even though he won’t get it then, I’ll know that inevitably there will come a day when he’ll fully understand just what I’ve meant all those times I said: “Torre’s guys. Now *that* was a team.”