

March 28, 2008

*Tactics*

## Is Joe Torre Worth the Money?

**L.A. Gave Him \$13 Million,  
But Stats Guys Are Dubious;  
His Problem With Pitchers**

By **DARREN EVERSON**

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*(See Corrections & Amplifications item [below](#).)*

Frustrated by finishing fourth last season, tired of being the second-best team in town, the Los Angeles Dodgers made a major move last fall. They shelled out \$13 million over three years...and hired, by one statistical measure, the sixth-worst manager in major-league history.


Joe Torre, who makes his debut with the Dodgers on Monday, ranks eighth in all-time wins. He won four World Series titles with the New York Yankees during a 12-year career there, which ended last season after the team's third straight first-round playoff loss. He became renowned for his ability to handle star players' egos and navigate crises. But his actual, quantifiable skill as a skipper is debatable.

In close games, in which a manager's decisions in baserunning, pitching and substitutions tend to make the most difference, Mr. Torre's teams have struggled in recent years. Over the past three seasons, his record in games tied after the sixth inning is 23-31 -- a .426 winning percentage, compared with .588 in all games. Several of his peers, including Ron Gardenhire of the Minnesota Twins and Willie Randolph of the New York Mets, have performed better in close games.

There's also some evidence that Mr. Torre negatively impacts the performance of his players. Last fall, David Gassko, a former major-league consultant and a contributor to the Hardball Times Web site, did a study of major-league managers through 2006, determining how many additional games a manager won or lost for his team per season. Of the 422 managers he studied, Mr. Torre's score was the sixth-worst. The best manager ever, according to Mr. Gassko's study, is Bobby Cox, the current manager of the Atlanta Braves.

It's also not clear whether Mr. Torre is a good fit for the Dodgers. He has long been known to favor giving playing time to older players over younger, more-

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SEE A SORTABLE TABLE

Grading the Managers

To assess how Joe Torre compares to his peers, we used three criteria to measure the performance of baseball managers: how their teams performed in close games when the manager's strategic decisions have the most impact; how many games their teams lost compared to how many wins they scored; and their win-loss record as a percentage of games. We also selected the best and worst managers based on these criteria and awarded the results.

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Overall Rank	Manager	Current Team	Close Games		Win-Loss Percentage		Player Performance		WPA%
			Rank	Record	Rank	Record	Rank	Record	
1	Tommy Lasorda	Los Angeles	5	0.075	4	9	5	0.72	4.00
2	Bruce Bochy	San Diego	4	0.068	10	-1	4	0.67	3.00
3	Ned Yost	San Francisco	7	0.062	7	6	6	0.51	3.00
4	Charles Manuel	Philadelphia	2	0.061	12	-2	10	0.51	3.00
5	Bob Melvin	Oakland Athletics	3	0.060	3	10	11	0.50	3.00
6	John Gibbons	San Jose	1	0.058	14	-4	7	0.40	3.00
7	Clayton Kershaw	White Sox	10	-0.007	2	14	6	0.38	3.00
8	White Sox	White Sox	8	0.048	11	-1	12	0.38	3.00
9	Bobby Cox	Atlanta	11	0.024	17	-9	1	0.28	3.00
10	John Gibbons	San Jose	1	0.028	14	-4	7	0.40	3.00
11	Clayton Kershaw	White Sox	10	-0.007	2	14	6	0.38	3.00
12	White Sox	White Sox	8	0.048	11	-1	12	0.38	3.00

See a chart on the performance of MLB managers

Baseball managers are tough to grade. Compared with football, basketball and hockey, where coaches are often hired because of their offensive or defensive acumen, a manager's job involves relatively little strategic philosophy. Even the tactical decisions managers make, from how to set a batting lineup to when to take out a starting pitcher, are based on a careworn historical consensus shared by almost all managers.

One of a manager's most-important jobs -- keeping players happy and productive -- is unquantifiable. "There's something in jelly that makes it jelly," says Mr. James, senior baseball-operations adviser with the Boston Red Sox. "Without that, it's runny grape juice with a lot of sugar in it. That's what the manager is. He's not the thing you taste, not the thing you're really trying to get to; he's the thing that holds it together."

The Dodgers staunchly defend Mr. Torre. Ned Colletti, the team's general manager, points out that younger players have flourished under Mr. Torre in the past, including Derek Jeter and Jorge Posada. "He understands the psyche of a player very well. Whether you're managing a team or a company or a family, how you interact with people is how every relationship succeeds or falters," he says. Mr. Torre did not return calls to his agent seeking comment.



Getty Images

promising ones -- which the Dodgers have in abundance.

That hardly means Mr. Torre is about to run the Dodgers into the ground. According to the "Pythagorean" projection system, a formula pioneered by baseball author Bill James that determines how many games a team should have won based on how many runs it scored and allowed -- the Yankees won 16 more regular-season games over the past five years under Mr. Torre than they should have, suggesting his presence didn't hurt.

DISCUSS



2 Do you think Mr. Torre is worth the \$13 million he's making? Is any baseball manager worth that much? [Share your thoughts.](#)<sup>3</sup>

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Among his peers, Mr. Torre is widely credited for the Yankees' success because of his people skills. "I think he's one of the better managers in the game," says former manager Jack McKeon, whose Florida Marlins beat the Yankees in the 2003 World Series. One of his strengths is how he expresses confidence in his players, Mr. McKeon says, which is critical to guiding them through slumps. When Roger Clemens struggled through his first season with the Yankees, in 1999, Mr. Torre defended him until he began to improve. "Even if that confidence isn't real, you've got to be a good salesman," Mr. McKeon says.

In Mr. Gassko's study, which compared how players

Baseball analysts who have studied managers say Joe Torre of the L.A. Dodgers gets mediocre marks.

performed under different managers -- adjusting for variables such as age and home ballpark -- Mr. Torre's score was -1.23, which means his teams won a little more than one fewer game per season than they should have, based on the talent available to them. Jeff Weaver, Javier Vazquez and Kevin Brown all saw marked performance dips in New York. "One of the interesting things with Torre was his negative effect was almost completely with pitchers," Mr. Gassko says. "He was above average with hitters, but his pitching numbers were off-the-charts bad."

In another study, Mr. Torre led the American League last season in two more categories: relief appearances and "quick hooks" -- early removals of starting pitchers. Steve Wang, an associate professor of statistics at Swarthmore College, says the three AL managers whose teams won their divisions were more moderate with how they handled pitchers. In 2006, Yankees reliever Scott Proctor pitched 102-1/3 innings, an uncommonly high number for a reliever.

To be fair, Mr. Torre is not a pitching coach and can't be held solely responsible. His increasing tendency to pull starters earlier than other managers may have been owed to the Yankees' weaker-than-usual starting rotation last season. It's also widely believed that some players don't excel in New York due to the intense pressure from media and fans.



Associated Press

In any case, the numbers suggest that a manager's influence on the outcomes of games may not be as great as people imagine. Mr. Gassko's study showed that Mr. Cox, though No. 1, wins his team an average of only 2.29 additional games per season.

"I think managers are a bit overrated in terms of the impact that they have on their players," says J.C. Bradbury, an economist and associate professor at Kennesaw State University and author of "The Baseball Economist." To make a team better, he says, "get better players."

Write to Darren Everson at [darren.everson@wsj.com](mailto:darren.everson@wsj.com)<sup>5</sup>

### Corrections & Amplifications:

Bob Melvin manages the Arizona Diamondbacks. In some editions of Friday's Weekend Journal, a table accompanying this article on Dodgers manager Joe Torre gave Mr. Melvin's first name as Doug.

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