

NEW YORK POST

CLASS DISMISSED

By MIKE VACCARO

October 19, 2007 -- CLEVELAND - The more you think about it, the more you understand that there was nothing the Yankees could ever do to make this end well. Joe Torre was never going to give them the obvious escape hatches to jettison him from his nest in the Yankees dugout. He was never going to make it easy for them.

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He was never going to get stinking drunk on a team charter, as Joe McCarthy did, and he was never going to start snoring on the bench and forgetting his players' names, as Casey Stengel did. He was never going to call his best player a "liar" and his owner "convicted," the way Billy Martin did.

And he was never going to lose 60 percent of his games, as Stump Merrill did.

In the end, he would have to leave the same way he arrived: with his head held high and his dignity intact. Few men have ever been allowed to leave that way. Good for him. Good for Joe.

Eventually, that faction of Yankees brass that wanted Torre out was going to do something very similar to what they did yesterday, presenting Torre with a contract they knew, in their hearts, he was going to be unable to accept. It was smart. It was crafty. No working man anywhere in New York is going to empathize too deeply with Joe Torre this morning, after walking away from \$5 million in guaranteed money and another \$3 million in incentives.

Fair enough. That still doesn't make this a rightful ending. And it still doesn't paint the ending anyone wanted. Maybe the problem all along was that Torre liked the job too much. Even if the Yankees won the World Series this year, do you really believe he would have left on his own then? Would he really have walked away?

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Of course not. He loved the life. He loved the perks. He loved being the city's non-partisan unelected mayor, its

smiling ambassador. He loved being one of the three most famous faces in a city filled with famous faces. He loved the attention. He loved the money. And he loved the fact that this was all taking place in his city, in his town, in his New York.

From the start, after all, this was a New York tale all the way, the kind of dream harbored in the souls of millions of kids through the years in the neighborhoods of Brooklyn and the Bronx, and the lower East Side, and Queens, and everywhere else in this tangled network of a town where baseball has always been king, always borne princes with wide eyes and big ideas.

In Joe Torre's case, it was a row house at 3324 Avenue T, and it was the surrounding streets of Marine Park that would flood with kids armed with broom handles and pink balls called "Spaldeens," filling their afternoons with the elegant geometries of a quintessential city game.

"The adults in the neighborhood, they hated the fact that we played stickball in the street," Joe Torre told me a few years ago, his eyes closed and his mind drifting, rewinding half a century and more. "They wanted us to move the games to the park. And no matter how much you tried to explain, they couldn't seem to grasp that you can't bounce a ball on grass."

This was Joe Torre's basic appeal, of course. It was that way 30 years ago, with the Mets, when he managed some of the lousiest teams you'll ever see but always managed to do the job with a distinct Gotham grace and good humor that belied the train wreck he'd been handed. And it was that way all across his final year with the Yankees, maybe his finest year on the job, when he was the biggest reason - bigger than A-Rod, bigger than Joba, bigger than anyone - that the Yankees were able to overcome the vast hole they'd dug for themselves.

"We respect Joe Torre an awful lot," said Randy Levine, the team president who dominated the conference call yesterday that delivered the fateful news. Referring to the Yankees' inability to escape the first round, Levine said: "It's nobody's fault. And it's everybody's fault."

Now, this will be someone else's maze to negotiate, someone else's team to manage. Good luck to them. Maybe somewhere in the mix of Don Mattingly, Joe Girardi, Bobby Valentine and Tony La Russa - let's call them Matgirvalla, for short - will emerge a baseball version of George Allen, who followed Vince Lombardi in Washington and took the Redskins to the Super Bowl two years later.

Or maybe they will get a pinstriped version of Phil Bengtson instead, who followed Lombardi in Green Bay and became a trivia question for his troubles.

We'll find out now. We'll all find out. Those who revered him to the final minute, and those who plotted years for this very day, and this very outcome. Soon enough, we'll all find out.

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