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Bridging Two Dynasties

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Memorable Teams in Baseball History

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Bridging Two Dynasties

The 1947 New York Yankees

Edited by **Lyle Spatz**

Associate Editors: **Maurice Bouchard and Leonard Levin**

Published by the **University of Nebraska Press Lincoln & London**,
and the **Society for American Baseball Research**

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Introduction

Marty Appel

The 1947 Yankees always seemed to stand "alone" to me among the litany of champion Yankee clubs—neither a Joe McCarthy team nor a Casey Stengel team, carrying over some wartime players and introducing some guys that, frankly, did not feel like Yankees.

I mean, what were George McQuinn (a St. Louis Brownie!), Bobo Newsom (who played everywhere!), and Aaron Robinson (a catcher who was neither Dickey nor Berra) doing in Yankee pinstripes?

And for that matter, what was Bucky Harris doing managing the Yankees? As Larry MacPhail was remaking the team following his purchase of the club in 1945 (with Dan Topping and Del Webb), this made little sense. Harris was a career American Leaguer with little connection to MacPhail, and even less a connection to the Yanks. This was the man who would manage the team? You thought of Harris, and you thought of the Senators. The Yankees?

It all seemed so strange.

McQuinn, for example, was best known for holding down first base for the pennant-winning Browns in 1944—their only pennant—but even then, he was a .250 hitter of rather pedestrian skills.

Newsom! Don't get me started! He had this clownish nickname, and he was so un-Yankee, having started playing pro ball in 1928 and pitching for Brooklyn, the Cubs, the Browns, the Senators, the Red Sox, the Browns again, the Tigers, the Senators again, the Dodgers again, the Browns again, the Senators again, the Athletics, and the Senators again, before waking up and finding himself in baseball heaven, the Yankees. He had lost twenty games three times. This was not a classic Yankee pickup.

Yet there was Bobo, thirty-nine, taking the mound as a starting pitcher in his baggy gray New York uniform, starting Game Three of the 1947 World Series in Ebbets Field, the park where he had broken in at age twenty. His teammates then included Dazzy Vance, Davey Bancroft, and Max Carey, and his manager was Wilbert Robinson, who broke in in 1885! He had more than five thousand professional innings under his belt, and there he was—a Yankee starting pitcher in a World Series, surrounded by Joe DiMaggio, Tommy Henrich, and Phil Rizzuto.

This would be the game in which Yogi Berra, pinch-hitting for Sherm Lollar, lofted a pinch-hit home run in the seventh inning off Ralph Branca, which would, incredibly, be the first pinch-hit home run in World Series history.

Yes, there was something very interesting about this team. There was Snuffy Stirnweiss at second base, a chance to prove he was not just a "wartime" player, as he paired with Rizzuto to form an excellent double-play combination. And there were Allie Reynolds and Vic Raschi, not quite the Reynolds-Raschi-Lopat trio who would prove so dominant in coming years, but enjoying their first year as teammates and picking up World Series rings in the process. Reynolds came from Cleveland for Joe Gordon and won nineteen, while Raschi, homegrown and signed by Lou Gehrig's scout, Paul Krichell, came up from Portland in July and went 7-2.

Fireman Joe Page was a special figure in 1947, a

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relief pitcher before there was glamour to the role, winning fourteen and saving seventeen (although saves were not an official statistic back then), and Joe enjoyed the good life, perhaps more than he should have. But to be young and a Yankee and to hang out with Joe DiMaggio—life was good.

Fans were still basking in the postwar era of good feelings, packing Major League ballparks, and enjoying the return of the "real guys" after enduring years of 4-F players. DiMaggio, who had hit just .290 in 1946, needed to prove that he was still Joe D., and he did, with his third MVP Award. He got out of the gate quickly and peaked at .368 on June 3. Now thirty-two, there certainly loomed large questions over whether his skills were gone. Everyone—Yankee fans or not—breathed a collective sigh of relief when it looked like indeed, his game had returned.

Given little chance to displace the powerful defending champion Boston Red Sox, this blend of veterans—along with rookies like Frank Shea, Yogi Berra, and Bobby Brown—compiled a record-tying nineteen-game winning streak as they romped to the American League pennant. They then defeated the Brooklyn Dodgers in a classic seven-game World Series that included two of the most memorable incidents in Series history—both at the expense of the Yankees.

It was in the 1947 World Series, the first to be televised, that Brooklyn's Cookie Lavagetto broke up Bill Bevens's attempt at the first World Series no-hitter, when, as Red Barber announced, "here comes the tying run and here comes the winning run!" And Al Gionfriddo was the Brooklyn outfielder who Barber told us went "back, back, back, back, back . . . oh doctor!" in robbing DiMaggio of what would have been his only World Series home run in Yankee Stadium. (Neither Bevens, Gionfriddo, nor Lavagetto ever played in the big leagues again after that Series.)

"Every kid has a dream, right?" said Bevens. "Mine was to meet Babe Ruth, be a Yankee and pitch in a World Series. Well I reached all three so how can I complain? Of course, it would have been nice to know all those years ago that Lavagetto couldn't hit a low inside pitch. But what the hell."

Bucky Harris deserved a better fate. With MacPhail gone in '48 after one too many drinks and one too many punches at the World Series celebration party in '47 , Harris could not survive finishing two and a half games behind the following year, despite winning ninety-four games. Had he been spared, as good logic suggests, he might have been the man to win five straight world championships starting in 1949, as Casey Stengel did. And then we would be speaking of Harris in the opening paragraph when we write of the greatest managers in history.

Yes, the '47 Yanks were the team that did not quite connect with the team's past, but one that made its fans feel terrific—the war was over, and the Bronx Bombers were back on top. Real life had officially returned.

And all was right with the world.

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Chapter 1. The Yankees' Ownership

Mark Armour and Dan Levitt

What came to be known as the Yankees Dynasty began under the twenty-four-year stewardship of Jacob Ruppert. Known as "Colonel" because of his prior service in the National Guard, Ruppert owned and operated a profitable brewery, served four terms in the U.S. Congress, and in 1915 purchased half of the New York Yankees. His co-owner, Tillinghast L'Hommedieu Huston, rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel in the army during the First World War. Colonel Ruppert bought out Colonel Huston in 1923, by which point the Yankees were the class of the American League.

Ruppert's willingness to invest in his team led to the purchase of several players from the Boston Red Sox, most notably Babe Ruth, and the new talent helped win a string of pennants. In the fall of 1920 the Yankees' owners hired Ed Barrow as one of baseball's first general managers. Two and a half years later the team christened the massive Yankee Stadium, with nearly sixty thousand seats, which became the country's most venerated sporting facility. In 1932 Ruppert hired George Weiss to create and run one of baseball's first and best farm systems, ensuring the continuation of the dynasty.

At the time of Ruppert's death, in January 1939, the club had won ten pennants and seven World Series. Ruppert had no children; he left his entire estate, including his brewery and the Yankees, in a trust for the benefit of two nieces and the daughter of a deceased friend. Barrow and manager Joe McCarthy continued to ably run the club, and the team made four more World Series appearances (winning three) in the next six years.

Meanwhile, Ruppert's trustees were faced with a large estate-tax burden and not enough cash to settle it. There were also disagreements between the government and the trust as to the value of its assets, including the Yankees. When Ruppert bought out Huston in 1923, the team had been valued at $2.5 million, but the government now assessed it at $5 million. The estate chose to litigate the valuations of both the team and the brewery, which had the benefit of postponing the tax payment for a few years. Nevertheless, in order to raise the funds to settle the tax burden, the eventual sale of the team was inevitable.[1]

In 1941 the country was drawn into the Second World War, and most of America's non-war-related financial activity came to a halt. The Yankees were now administered by the Manufacturers Trust Company, which was actively trying to sell the team. With a war going on, though, there were few willing and able buyers around.

One interested buyer was Larry MacPhail, the former general manager of the Cincinnati Reds and Brooklyn Dodgers, now working in the War Department. In early 1943 MacPhail put together a syndicate to bid on the Yankees. The most prominent moneyed member of his group was John Hertz, a taxicab and rental-car magnate in Chicago. In February 1944 Commissioner Kenesaw M. Landis put the brakes on the deal because Hertz owned several thoroughbred horses, and Landis wanted to avoid any relationship between baseball and gambling interests. While MacPhail backed away, Ed Barrow looked for another buyer.

Barrow, now seventy-five years old but still running the club and wishing to continue, had two big reasons to disapprove of a sale to a MacPhail group. First, Barrow owned 10 percent of the club, and

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MacPhail's offer ($2.8 million for the 96.88 percent of the stock owned by the Ruppert estate and Barrow) represented little profit on Barrow's investment more than two decades earlier. The team had enjoyed tremendous financial success in the intervening years, always pouring its profits back into the ball club, and now also owned several Minor League teams and Yankee Stadium. Moreover, MacPhail was a loud, domineering man who would surely want complete control over the operation of the club. Barrow would be out, he knew.

Barrow tried to interest his friend Tom Yawkey, owner of the Boston Red Sox, in purchasing the Yankees, which would necessitate Yawkey's finding a buyer for his own club. It is not known how seriously Yawkey took Barrow's suggestion, but in any case, nothing ever came of it. Barrow also turned to James Farley, a former postmaster general, but that also went nowhere.

As the pressure grew on the trust to pay the estate tax, MacPhail learned the trust was still willing to accept the original terms if he could come up with the money. He soon did so, more successfully this time, lining up two investors from his original syndicate to put up most of the money: Dan Topping, a sportsman-playboy who owned a professional football team in Brooklyn, and Del Webb, a construction and real estate magnate from Arizona. Once Barrow realized the sale was inevitable, he arranged separate meetings with Topping and Webb to stress the importance of maintaining stability in the organization. Both men assured him they intended to keep the team running as it always had.

The sale of the Yankees to MacPhail, Webb, and Topping was announced in January 1945. Shortly thereafter the trio acquired the small remaining interests held by others, giving the three men complete ownership. MacPhail borrowed most of his share of the purchase price from the other two and, as the baseball man in the group, was named club president. Topping, Webb, and Weiss were elected vice presidents. Barrow was made chairman of the board, an empty title with no duties. MacPhail was in charge.

During the long reign of Ruppert and Barrow, the Yankees had been a businesslike, drama-free operation. Ruppert gave Barrow control over the team, and the two men managed to keep any disagreements they may have had out of the newspapers. In 1931 they hired Joe McCarthy to manage the club and granted him autonomy over the players. They deftly sidestepped Babe Ruth's annual lobbying (with the backing of many fans and writers) for the Yankees' managerial post. Ruppert put off his star until Ruth could no longer help the club on the field and then sold his contract to the Boston Braves.

Ruppert and Barrow wanted to win and were not driven by concerns about public relations. Both men, along with Weiss and McCarthy, lived quiet lives off the field and proved frustrating to the press corps. Despite the assurances to Barrow by Topping and Webb, Larry MacPhail made news wherever he went and would not change just because he was taking over the hallowed and conservative Yankees.

With the war going on and many baseball players in the service, there was little opportunity for reconstructing the ball club. Much of MacPhail's energy was instead directed toward the day-to-day activities of the team, which did not sit well with Joe McCarthy, who had won seven World Series as the Yankees' manager. McCarthy had always been a drinker, but during the relatively calm days working with Ed Barrow he had managed to keep his habit in check. In 1945, though, his problem worsened, and he left the club on July 20 to return to his Buffalo home. (The press was told he was battling health issues.) He tried to resign, but MacPhail encouraged him to stick it out, and he returned on August 9. During McCarthy's absence MacPhail had jettisoned his best pitcher.

On July 27 MacPhail sold Hank Borowy, the

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club's most effective pitcher, to the Chicago Cubs for ninety-seven thousand dollars. This was somewhat shocking, as the Yankees did not seem to be in need of money. MacPhail feebly noted that Borowy was a poor second-half pitcher, but the hurler finished 11-2 for Chicago and helped lead them to the National League pennant.[2] MacPhail, it was assumed, just wanted to shake up his team and to show the troops who was boss. The Yankees were 4 games behind the Tigers at the time of the sale and finished 6½ back.

In 1946, with the war over, MacPhail was ready to make more of an impact. He installed lights at Yankee Stadium, as he had done in Cincinnati (the first in the Major Leagues) and Brooklyn. He added a new Stadium Club (which offered more luxurious seating and brought in five hundred thousand dollars before the season even started), reinstalled fifteen thousand seats, and added more promotional events. The Yankees drew an all-time record 2,265,512 customers in 1946, a sign that much of MacPhail's work was paying off.

On the field the Yankees won 87 games, well short of the powerful Boston Red Sox. Joe McCarthy again had to leave the team for "health" reasons, and this time he did not return. Longtime catcher Bill Dickey took over the club in May, but quit in September when he realized that MacPhail would not renew him for 1947, admitting that getting along with MacPhail was a challenge.[3] Johnny Neun finished out the year, but left after the season to manage the Cincinnati Reds. MacPhail then hired Bucky Harris, a managerial veteran of twenty seasons.

MacPhail made two important moves during the off-season. First, he traded second baseman Joe Gordon to the Cleveland Indians for pitcher Allie Reynolds. The thirty-one-year-old Gordon had hit just .210 in 1946, and MacPhail probably thought he would not recover his prewar form. In fact, Gordon did bounce back to give the Indians a few excellent seasons and help lead them to their 1948 pennant. Nonetheless, Reynolds's eight stellar years anchoring the team's pitching staff made this an excellent deal for MacPhail. In January 1947 MacPhail signed veteran first baseman George McQuinn to take over for the disappointing Nick Etten. McQuinn was nearly thirty-seven and was coming off a poor season with the Philadelphia Athletics, but he still had one excellent season left.

In the spring of 1947 Larry MacPhail was involved in a bit of drama whose echoes would be felt throughout the season and beyond. During spring training the Yankees and Dodgers played a series of exhibition games in Havana, Cuba. After one of the contests, Dodger president Branch Rickey told the press that there were "notorious gamblers" sitting in MacPhail's box. Dodger manager Leo Durocher had been warned by Commissioner Happy Chandler about his own off-the-field associates, so Rickey, and Durocher in a subsequent newspaper column, wondered why the rules were not the same for MacPhail. The angry Yankee boss denied that he even knew the people who were sitting near him and demanded a hearing with Chandler. At the two meetings, both Durocher and Rickey apologized for their apparent mistake, and MacPhail walked over to Leo and hugged him, saying, "You've always been a great guy with me, and you always will be a great guy. Forget it buddy, it's over."[4]

Unfortunately, Commissioner Chandler did not agree, suspending Durocher for the entire 1947 season for his unnamed nefarious off-field activities (none of them related to the MacPhail matter). The Dodgers were flabbergasted, as was MacPhail, who spent most of the rest of the year trying to get Durocher reinstated. Chandler demanded that no one in the hearing talk about what went on, a demand MacPhail ignored. MacPhail had been the man most responsible for Chandler's becoming commissioner in 1945, but the Durocher decision so angered him that it effectively ended their friendship.

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Meanwhile, the Yankees surged to ninety-seven wins and won the pennant fairly easily. After their dramatic World Series victory over the Dodgers, ending with a Game Seven win in Yankee Stadium on October 6, the Yankees' front office had every reason to feel satisfied with their accomplishment and their future.

Yet MacPhail's bizarre reaction to the club's victory would ultimately take over the story. Just minutes after the final game, he stormed into the team's clubhouse and announced his resignation, a decision first thought to be fueled by emotion (he was reportedly crying) and alcohol. A few hours later, MacPhail arrived at the Biltmore Hotel, in Manhattan, where the three owners were hosting a lavish "Victory Dinner." The press was waiting for him, but he angrily shouted, "Stay away or get punched." Sid Keener, of the *St. Louis Star-Times*, managed to get a few quotes. "I'm simply tired of it all," said MacPhail. "Too much worry. The critical New York press gets me down. Besides, there are a lot of guys in baseball I don't like—and don't care to associate with." He specifically mentioned Chandler and Rickey. "Well, I gave New York another championship, didn't I? And what are they saying about it around here? That I'm nothing but a big popoff. Maybe I am, but I deliver the goods, don't I?"[5]

It later came out that MacPhail had been flustered by a brief exchange with Rickey after the final game, before MacPhail entered the Yankees' locker room. MacPhail offered his hand, which Rickey took while saying, "I'm shaking hands with you because a thousand people are looking on, but I don't like you." Rickey later acknowledged this conversation.[6]

When he finally made it inside to the dinner, MacPhail only made things worse. He stumbled drunk around the dining room, alternating between bouts of sentimental crying and irrational raging. He slugged John McDonald, former traveling secretary with the Dodgers, who had made a complimentary remark about Rickey. MacPhail then accosted Weiss, who was sitting with his wife, eventually firing the Yankees' accomplished farm director. When Dan Topping tried to intervene, MacPhail shouted at his partner, "You're just a guy who was born with a silver spoon in your mouth and never made a dollar in your life." As MacPhail walked away, Topping grabbed him, saying, "Come here you. . . . I have taken all of this I am going to take." Topping forced MacPhail into an adjoining kitchen and closed the door.[7]

Mrs. MacPhail was in tears. "What's Danny doing to him?" she cried. "He's a mighty sick, nervous man." Topping emerged alone, having forced the somewhat calmer MacPhail out a side door. MacPhail returned sometime later, freshened up with neatly combed hair. He berated at least one Yankee player after his return, but the drama was largely over.[8]

Topping and Webb quickly assessed the situation and concluded that they could not leave their investment in the hands of the obviously unstable Larry MacPhail. The following day the Yankees announced Webb and Topping had bought out MacPhail's shares for $2 million. Topping was elected president, and Weiss was named general manager. "MacPhail's connection with the Yankees is ended," said Topping. MacPhail had turned his initial $250,000 investment into $2 million in less than three years, but he would never work in baseball again.

Dan Daniel, writing in the *Sporting News*, summarized the dramatic events this way: "After three years of turbulence and equivocation under the sometimes inspired, and often much less than that, administration of Col. Leland Stanford MacPhail, the Yankees have returned to quiet and the peaceful pursuit of baseball happiness."[9] The team of Webb, Topping, and Weiss would remain in place for thirteen years, capturing ten pennants and seven World Series titles.

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