



Steinbrenner, Yankees' Boss, dead at 80

George Michael Steinbrenner III, the colorful, turbulent, and outspoken owner of the New York Yankees, died Tuesday at age 80, after a massive heart attack. His passing came just nine days after his July 4th birthday and only two days after the team's legendary public address announcer, Bob Sheppard, died at age 99.

He was known as one who idolized Generals Patton and MacArthur, but it was, perhaps, the political warrior Richard Nixon, whom he resembled most. Nixon once solemnly pledged to the nation that he would not "take this country down the road of wage and price controls." Steinbrenner, when he took over the storied baseball franchise in 1973, said he would not be involved in the day-to-day decisions for the team. Yet the owner's frequent public criticism of players, his second-guessing and firing of managers and general managers, and his domineering management style drew frequent protests from players, fans, and, of course, managers. But his micromanaging met with a good deal more success than Nixon's experiments in wage and price controls.

The Yankees had not been to the World Series in nine years and had not won one in 11 when Steinbrenner acquired principal ownership of baseball's most successful franchise. Five years later, the team had added three American League pennants and two World Series titles to its impressive list of championships. In all, the Yankees won seven World Series and 11 pennants since the shipbuilding magnate bought the team from CBS for \$10 million. The franchise now has an estimated market value of \$1.6 billion and holds the most lucrative TV and radio contracts in baseball. Its \$210 million payroll for 2009 was the game's highest.

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In recent years, the patriarch ceded increasing authority to sons Hal and Hank, who became co-chairmen of the corporation. But it seems certain that for years to come the single word "Steinbrenner" will call to mind, first and foremost, the man often called "the Boss" and even "King George the 3rd," the arbitrary ruler who switched managers 18 times and hired 13 general managers in his 37 years as team owner.

His feuds were at least as legendary as his team's successes on the field, and before long the team took on the character of its owner, with managers publicly feuding with players and high-priced players feuding with one another in what had become known in the 1970s as the "Bronx Zoo."

Steinbrenner's pledge to stay out of the day-to-day affairs of the organization did not long survive his acquisition of the team. Clashes with Michael Burke, who had been running the Yankees for CBS and had stayed on to help manage the franchise, led to Burke's departure after just four months. John McMullen, a minority owner, was quoted as saying, "Nothing is as limited as being a limited partner of George's."

His firing of managers was legendary and some managers had the dubious honor of being recycled in the job,

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having been hired and fired by the same owner for the same team more than once. Billy Martin, arguably more high-strung and tumultuous than the owner himself, was hired and fired five times by the Boss. Hall of Fame catcher Yogi Berra was sacked barely two weeks into the season in his only managerial stint under Steinbrenner. Berra was bitter for years over the abruptness of the firing and stayed away from Yankee Stadium until Steinbrenner apologized — 14 years later.

But no one doubted the owner's determination to bring championships back to the Bronx, and he opened the vault to do it. A pioneer in the free-agency market, Steinbrenner was the first owner to make ballplayers multimillionaires, offering multi-year seven and eight-figure contracts to future Hall of Famers Catfish Hunter, Reggie Jackson, and others at the dawn of free agency. The collection of high-salaried, ego-driven superstars under one clubhouse roof inevitably led to conflicts, as Jackson clearly demonstrated when, during spring training in his first year with the team, he boasted to a reporter from *Sport* magazine, "I'm the straw that stirs the drink." To make matters worse, he added that catcher Thurman Munson thought he was the straw, but "he can only stir it bad." When the words showed up in print, Jackson protested that his remarks were off the record, but the damage had been done and relations between Jackson and Munson remained tense.

In a dugout altercation in Fenway Park in Boston in 1977, manager Martin had to be restrained from physically assaulting Jackson after he had yanked the slugging right fielder from the game for not hustling after a fly ball. Martin's firing the following season came after the fiery manager called Jackson a liar and Steinbrenner a convicted felon, a reference to the owner's conviction and fine for having made illegal contributions to Nixon's reelection campaign in 1972. The \$15,000 fine might have been pocket change for Steinbrenner. *The New York Times* reported on Tuesday that the owner had, by 2005, paid more than \$645,000 in disciplinary fines to Major League Baseball.

The *Times* also recalled that in 1990 Commissioner Fay Vincent ordered Steinbrenner to step aside as the Yankees' managing partner for paying a confessed gambler \$40,000 for damaging information about Dave Winfield, one of the Yankees star players. Steinbrenner had been displeased with Winfield's performance on the field, and the two had feuded over contributions Steinbrenner was to make to Winfield's philanthropic foundation, the *Times* said.

It was but one of the many ways Steinbrenner contributed to the controversy and turmoil that put the team frequently on the front as well as back pages of the New York tabloids. He publicly berated and demeaned the players he was paying princely sums when he felt that neither he, the team, nor the fans were getting their money's worth. He derided Winfield, now in the Hall of Fame, calling him "Mr. May" (in contrast to Jackson, "Mr. October") when Winfield faltered in post-season play. He described Hideki Irabu as a fat toad when the rotund pitcher was slow to cover first base in an exhibition game.

But he also had a sense of humor, consenting to a parody of himself on the TV show *Seinfeld*. He cut a commercial with Derek Jeter, pretending to be calling his all-star on the carpet for keeping late hours and high-profile feminine company, then partying at a nightclub with the player after Jeter had shown him his Visa card. It is unusual to see a superstar player sharing the spotlight with his team's owner, but Steinbrenner was no ordinary owner.

"He's arguably the most recognized owner in all of sports," Jeter said after "the boss" was driven onto the field in a golf cart in a ceremony before the 2008 All-Star Game at the old Yankee Stadium. That facility, opened in 1923, was renovated during the 1974 and '75 seasons, while the Yankees shared Shea Stadium with the New York Mets. The \$160 million project was funded by the city, which owned the park and leased it to the Yankees. The new Yankee Stadium, built by the ball club, cost a reported \$1.5 billion, with \$220 million in public funding for parking facilities, parkland along the waterfront, and other stadium-related work. Ironically, the owner who did so much to restore the Yankees dominance of baseball in the 20th century also presided over the demise of "the House That Ruth Built." The team that won the World Series in 2009, its only world championship thus far in the 21st century, played in "the House that George (and the taxpayers) Built."

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The colorful owner was conservative in his political outlook and was not averse to enforced patriotism. He had a rule enforced at the ballpark that patrons were not to move about during the playing of "God Bless America" in the seventh-inning stretch. One fan who insisted on going to the men's room while the song was being played was ejected from the stadium by security personnel.

He helped many charities and individuals in need and as a board member was a major fund-raiser for the historically black Grambling State University in Louisiana. Even Boston Red Sox fans, accustomed to loathing baseball's "Evil Empire" in New York, are aware of Steinbrenner's regular and generous contributions to the Jimmy Fund, the charity supported by the Red Sox to raise money to fight cancer in children.

"George is a great guy, unless you have to work for him," said Lou Piniella, who endured two managerial stints under Steinbrenner in the 1980s. It is fortunate for the Boss, having entered eternity, that God never had to work for him.

Photo of George Steinbrenner: AP Images