New York’s Coming Baseball Famine

The Yankees and Mets both stink—and will continue to stink for the foreseeable future.

Yankees closer Mariano Rivera retired earlier this year. (Photo by Ken Kurson)

With all eyes focused on the new mayor—not to mention the streaky Giants, the possibly decent Jets, the woeful Knicks, plus the Nets and Rangers—New Yorkers are ignoring the most important issue facing the city: the coming baseball famine. In every decade since 1900, New York City has hosted a World Series. For the past 92 years, since 1921, a New York City baseball team has won at least one championship in every decade. Even during the Yankees’ worst years, from 1962 to 1977, and during the 17-season drought from 1979 to 1995, the Queens-based Mets twice won the World Series, in 1969 and 1986.

New Yorkers are accustomed to mediocre basketball and football teams. The Jets haven’t won a Super Bowl since 1969, when today’s Medicare recipients were dealing with the draft, and the Knicks have not won a championship since 1973, the first year of Richard Nixon’s second term. The Giants did win the Super Bowl in 2007 and 2011, but before the first of those victories, the team had not won a championship in 17 years.

Although New York is home to numerous colleges and universities, they really are no longer known for their
winning athletic teams. New York City high schools typically export their best students, in science as well as in 
basketball and football, to other states. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar went from Power Memorial High School in 
Manhattan to UCLA, and Kenny Anderson went from Archbishop Molloy High School in Queens to Georgia 
Tech.

Historically, the New York Yankees unearthed and groomed players, from many points in the Western 
Hemisphere, whose successful careers in the Bronx tied them inextricably to our city: Mickey Mantle, Joe 
DiMaggio, Babe Ruth, Yogi Berra, Reggie Jackson, Derek Jeter and Mariano Rivera—and even a memorable 
New Yorker, Lou Gehrig. The New York Mets gave us Tom Seaver, Dwight Gooden and Darryl Strawberry. But 
these days the teams invariably find a way to lose. The Knicks have a remarkable tradition of paying top dollar 
for talent but failing to build dominant teams. Willis Reed and Walt Frazier, Knick heroes from the 1970s, did not 
play on teams that won multiple championships. And some of the Giants’ best-known players are those who, 
following in the footsteps of Pat Summerall and Frank Gifford, built second careers on television, like Michael 
Strahan and Phil Simms.

The Yankee dugout. (Photo by Ken Kurson)

Ironically, painfully, the Boston Red Sox, who had not won a World Series in 86 years, from 1918 to 2003, have 
superseded the New York Yankees in the 21st century, with three World Series Championships: 2004, 2007 and 
now 2013. The Red Sox have done this with smart trades and low-risk free agent signings, and a lineup filled 
with talent from their own farm system, like Jacoby Ellsbury, Dustin Pedroia, Daniel Nava, and Xander Bogaerts. 
By contrast, the Yankees are filled with aging stars, expensive contracts and little talent on the bench to fill in for 
injured starters. The Yankees’ player development system is an unmitigated disaster, no match not only for the 
Red Sox but also for the St. Louis Cardinals, who have a pitching staff filled with home-grown talent under 23 
years of age.

Until recently, the Yankees were famous for winning. That is why they draw huge crowds, attracting thousands
of tourists as well as dedicated fans from the entire Northeast. Since 1969, when the Mets won the World Series, the Yankees have had only two seasons with a losing record in home games. By contrast, the Mets have had 14 losing seasons at home during the same time period. Since 2001, the Yankees have sold at least 3 million tickets per season, for an average of at least 40,000 tickets per game. (In contrast, the Mets have exceeded ticket sales of 3 million only four times since 2001 and have averaged 40,000 tickets per game in only three seasons since 2001.)

Ever since the Yankees won the 2009 World Series, they have been in a decline. In 2010, they lost in the American League Championship Series; in 2011, they lost in the American League Division Series; and in 2012, they lost in the American League Championship Series to the Detroit Tigers, who were then swept by the San Francisco Giants in the World Series. This past year, of course, they had a respectable 85-77 record—but the team allowed 21 more runs than it scored: 671-650. This was the first time since 1992 that the Yankees had a negative run differential.

Attendance at Yankee Stadium has been declining, along with the team’s record. In 2010, total attendance at Yankee Stadium was 3,765,807, an average of 46,491 per game. In 2013, attendance was just 3,279,589, a loss of almost half a million, and the average attendance was 40,489 per game.

Television ratings for Yankee games are also in decline. Just six years ago, in 2007, the television audience for the average Yankee game reached 454,000. Last year, the television audience for a Yankee game was just 244,000, a decline of more than 100,000 from the 2012 season and of more than 200,000 viewers, well over 40 percent, in only a half-dozen years. Lower ratings and lower attendance have real consequences for the team’s overall revenues.

More important, fewer fans means fewer paying customers on the Metro North trains that now take fans to Yankee Stadium from the northern suburbs. The new Metro North station at Yankee Stadium has been a striking success, well worth the public investment of $91 million; suburban fans can drink their beer without worrying about driving home after baseball games or finding their way to the parking lots surrounding the stadium or driving home tipsy after a game.

Derek Jeter at the plate. (Photo by Ken Kurson)
The Yankees cannot be expected to improve substantially anytime soon. Two of their top pitchers, Andy Pettitte and Mariano Rivera, retired this year. Several of their leading players, Derek Jeter, Alex Rodriguez, Mark Teixeira and Curtis Granderson, were on the disabled list this season and will face the challenge of aging in a young person’s game. They seem unable to find solid replacements for their injured players, either from their farm system or from the cast-offs of other teams. During the past season, 11 different players were deployed to play third base, and 56 different players made at least one appearance at bat, the highest single-season total in team history. The Yankees’ refusal to meet Russell Martin's contract demands created a nightmare at the catcher position, with two no-hit backstops in the batting order for most of the season. And the continued saga of Alex Rodriguez has created a circus of speculation about his legal team, his surgically repaired hip, his looming suspension by Major League Baseball, and whom the Yankee management really wants at third base next season.

Simply put, the Yankees will not be in the World Series for a long time. If they stick to the current $189 million payroll cap imposed by the luxury tax, they may not contend next year or in the foreseeable future. Signing expensive free agents after they have reached their peak is not a path to sustained success. And the Yankees will probably have to spend at least $25 million a year just to retain Robinson Cano, their star second baseman. To become a playoff-caliber team, the Yankees need lots of new talent: a catcher, a starting pitcher, a couple of outfielders, and lots of role players who can fill in when the superannuated and overpaid starters get injured.

It is pointless to expect the Mets to fill the need for a winner in New York, as they have in previous decades. In 2013, the Mets ranked 23rd in runs scored and 29th in “on-base plus slugging” (OPS), at .672. The Mets have a superb farm system when it comes to producing pitchers, but the team cannot score runs. And their emergent franchise pitcher, Matt Harvey, has been lost to elbow surgery for 2014 and perhaps beyond.

Attendance at Mets’ games has been seriously eroding since 2009, when they attracted 3,168,571 to the new Citi Field, an average of 39,118 per game. In 2013, the Mets had an attendance of just 2,135,657, an average of 26,366 per game. The sole redeeming aspect of a home Met game: the chance to enjoy a Shake Shack.
New York baseball fans are in for tough times, and New Yorkers should prepare for a baseball famine that will affect the mental health of the entire city. The Yankees are one of New York’s great treasures, reinforcing the city’s sense of itself and its image around the world. The Yankee logo adorns one of the top-selling baseball caps, according to Major League Baseball. There is even a fragrance that carries the New York Yankee insignia on the bottle, sold in Macy’s and Lord & Taylor as well as at the stadium. Of course, celebrities such as Madonna and Denzel Washington are often seen wearing Yankee baseball caps in everyday life.

It is difficult to imagine New York without a competitive Yankee team. For the Yankees are the city’s true meritocracy, with players coming from Latin America, Asia and North America—measured only by their skills, not by race or nation of origin. There is more ethnic diversity in the Yankee lineup than in our top levels of municipal or state government. The fate of the Yankees is too important to leave to the Steinbrenner family. All New Yorkers have a stake in this team’s performance. Perhaps it’s time for new ownership and new management, not just aging ballplayers.

*Mitchell L. Moss* is the Director of the Rudin Center for Transportation and the Henry Hart Rice Professor of Urban Policy and Planning at New York University; *Daniel Rathman* is a graduate student at New York University.