

The Demise of the New York Yankees, "1964-1966"

©DiamondsintheDusk.com

By AL FEATHERSTON

When the New York Yankees surged from behind to win the 1964 American League pennant in the final week of the season, it was perceived at the time as just another monotonous triumph by the greatest dynasty in American sports.



It was, in fact the 29th pennant in 45 years for the mighty franchise of Ruth, Gehrig, DiMaggio and Mantle.

Indeed, the big story at the time was how close they came to NOT winning – not that they had won their 14th pennant in 16 years. First-year manager Yogi Berra was crucified (and fired) for not winning easier. The season was characterized not by the team's great September finish,

but by the infamous Phil Linz harmonica incident.

Even when the Yanks fell to the St. Louis Cardinals in a thrilling seven-game World Series, no one could guess that the dynasty was about to collapse.

Yet, that's exactly what happened.

Between 1920 – when Jake Ruppert and T.L. Huston purchased Babe Ruth from the Red Sox – and 1964, when Berra guided the team to 99 wins and a pennant, the Yankees bestrode the American sports scene like a Colossus. That 1920 Yankee team failed to win the pennant, but it did win a team-record 95 games with Ruth blasting an unheard of 54 home runs and slugging .847 percent. The first title in franchise history came the next season. It was the first in a torrent -- 29 pennants and 20 world championships in that 45-year span.

During that run, New York finished first in the American League 29 times, second seven times and third eight times. The only non-top-three finishes were in 1945, when the Yankees, depleted by the world war, finished fourth, and 1925 – the year of Ruth's "bellyache" – when the team finished seventh in the eight-team league with a 69-85 record. That was an awful season, but it was a one-year slump followed by three straight AL pennants.

Then, in 1965, it all came to an abrupt end. The Yankees, starting almost exactly the same lineup that had won 99 games under Berra, finished 77-85 under new manager Johnny Keane. And unlike 1925, the '65 collapse wasn't an isolated incident, but the first stage of the team's fall to the bottom of the American League. Even when Ralph Houk re-assumed the manager's role in 1966, the team's decline continued – 70-89 and a tenth place finish in 1966 ... 72-90 and ninth-place in 1967. It would be almost another decade – 1976 – before the Yankees won again.

Pinstrip Dynasty

New York Yankee Results 1920-1967

Year	W-L	Pct.	Finish	World Series
1920	95-59	616	3rd of 8	
1921	98-55	641	1st of 8	Lost 5-3
1922	94-60	610	1st of 8	Lost 4-0
1923	98-54	645	1st of 8	Won 4-2
1924	89-63	586	2nd of 8	
1925	69-85	448	7th of 8	
1926	91-63	591	1st of 8	Lost 4-3
1927	110-44	714	1st of 8	Won 4-0
1928	101-53	656	1st of 8	Won 4-0
1929	88-66	571	2nd of 8	
1930	86-68	558	3rd of 8	
1931	94-59	614	2nd of 8	
1932	107-47	695	1st of 8	Won 4-0
1933	91-59	607	2nd of 8	
1934	94-60	610	2nd of 8	
1935	89-60	597	2nd of 8	
1936	102-51	667	1st of 8	Won 4-2
1937	102-52	662	1st of 8	Won 4-1
1938	99-53	651	1st of 8	Won 4-0
1939	106-45	702	1st of 8	Won 4-0
1940	88-66	571	3rd of 8	
1941	101-53	656	1st of 8	Won 4-1
1942	103-51	669	1st of 8	Lost 4-1
1943	98-56	636	1st of 8	Won 4-1
1944	83-71	539	3rd of 8	
1945	81-71	533	4th of 8	
1946	87-67	565	3rd of 8	
1947	97-57	630	1st of 8	Won 4-3
1948	94-60	610	3rd of 8	
1949	97-57	630	1st of 8	Won 4-1
1950	98-56	636	1st of 8	Won 4-0
1951	98-56	636	1st of 8	Won 4-2
1952	95-59	617	1st of 8	Won 4-3
1953	99-52	656	1st of 8	Won 4-2
1954	103-51	669	2nd of 8	
1955	96-58	623	1st of 8	Lost 4-3
1956	97-57	630	1st of 8	Won 4-3
1957	98-56	636	1st of 8	Lost 4-3
1958	92-62	597	1st of 8	Won 4-3
1959	79-75	513	3rd of 8	
1960	97-57	630	1st of 8	Lost 4-3
1961	109-53	673	1st of 10	Won 4-1
1962	96-66	593	1st of 10	Won 4-3
1963	104-57	646	1st of 10	Lost 4-0
1964	99-63	611	1st of 10	Lost 4-3
1965	77-85	475	6th of 10	
1966	70-89	440	10th of 10	
1967	72-90	444	9th of 10	

(W-L records does not include ties)

The Demise of the New York Yankees, 1964-66 [2 of 13]:

The Yankees' 1965 collapse was a shock on par with the fall of France in 1940 or the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 -- an event of such magnitude that it came to be surrounded by myth and legend. Even though many of the principals from that era and millions of baseball fans -- remain alive, it's difficult (if not impossible) to separate the real reason for the Yankee collapse from the myths that have grown to explain it.



The First Myth: Age

It's become conventional wisdom that the Yankees "got old" all of a sudden. Even pitcher Jim Bouton, who should have known better, told author Peter Golenbock, "I figured we would go on forever ... then about 12 guys got old in one day."

That's myth -- the truth is that age had very little to do with the collapse of the Yankees after the 1964 season. Take a look at the ages (as of the end of the season) of the '64 roster that won 99 games and the pennant --

Starting Lineup

C -- Elston Howard (35)
1B -- Joe Pepitone (23)
2B -- Bobby Richardson (28)
SS -- Tony Kubek (28)
3B -- Clete Boyer (27)
RF -- Roger Maris (29)
CF -- Mickey Mantle (32)
LF -- Tom Tresh (26)

Starting Rotation

SP-Whitey Ford (35)
SP-Jim Bouton (25)
SP-Al Downing (23)
SP-Ralph Terry (28)
SP-Mel Stottlemyre (22)

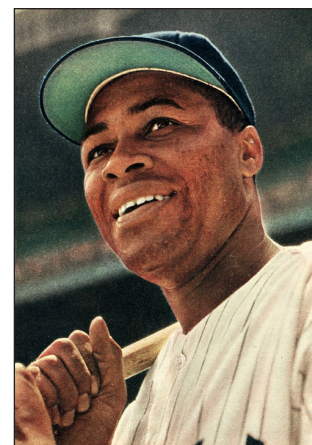
Relievers

CL-Pete Mikkelsen (24)
RP-Bill Stafford (24)
LR-Hal Reniff (25)
LR-Pedro Ramos (29)

Look at those ages closely. Howard DID get old -- and, indeed, 1964 was his last outstanding season. Ford was also aging, although he would have one more very productive season in 1965 before he fell off sharply in 1966. To be fair, age was starting to take a toll on the Hall of Fame lefty -- the arm troubles that knocked him out of the '64 series almost certainly cost the Yankees the World Championship.



But look at the rest of the roster -- Mantle, at age 32, was the only regular other than Howard over 30 years old. The trio of Bouton (39 wins in two seasons, plus two more in the '64 World Series), Downing (touted as "the black Sandy Koufax") and Stottlemyre (whose performance down the stretch drove the Yankees to the pennant) were perhaps the three best young pitchers in the American League.



Elston Howard

The '64 Yankees were a relatively young team. It did -- as Bouton first noted -- look like the dynasty "would go on forever."

Sure, there were players that needed to be replaced -- Howard and Ford the two prime examples -- but that was not an uncommon task for the Yankees. Over the 45-year history of Yankee dominance, that had always been a fact of life. Stars aged and were replaced. When Babe Ruth got old and was shuttled off to the Boston Braves, Lou Gehrig was in his prime as the best slugger in baseball. And before Gehrig's career came to

its sudden tragic end, Joe DiMaggio was established as the game's best all-around player. The Yankee Clipper (or "the Big Dago" as his teammates called him) handed his centerfield job to Mickey Mantle, who was statistically even better than DiMaggio (although that was not recognized at the time).

And it wasn't just the superstars. Hall of Famer Tony Lazzeri was replaced at second base by Hall of Famer Joe Gordon and he gave way to batting champion Stuffy Stirnweiss. Frankie Crosetti gave way to Hall of Famer Phil Rizzuto at

The Demise of the New York Yankees, 1964-66 [3 of 13]:

shortstop. It went from Bob Meusel to Tommy Heinrich to Hank Bauer to Roger Maris in the outfield. Hall of Famer Bill Dickey stepped down and Yogi Berra stepped up a few years later. And when that Hall of Fame catcher got old, Elston

Howard took the spot and won an MVP award. On the mound, Lefty Gomez, Red Ruffing and Spud Chandler were succeeded by Allie Reynolds, Ed Lopat, Vic Raschi and Whitey Ford.

Is it any wonder the rest of the baseball world believed – as author Douglas Wallop suggested in his 1954 novel “The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant” -- that the team was in league with the Devil himself?

The 1964 team needed some patchwork after the season, but there was no reason the Yankees wouldn't do what they had always done – find another crop of fantastic players.

Or was there a reason?

The Second Myth: The Sale of the Yankees

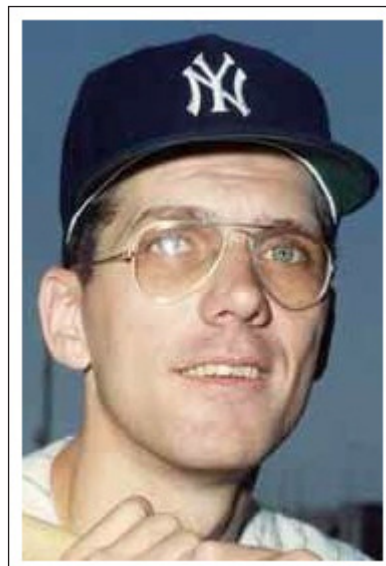
“The basic downfall was a reason that none of us were aware of,” Bouton told Golenbock. “Dan Topping and Del Webb, knowing they were going to sell the ballclub, did not invest in the foundation as they always had in the past.”

CBS Buys New York Yankees In Controversial Sports Deal

Bouton offers Rick Monday as an example of a player the Yankees refused to bid on. That illustrates his fuzzy thinking – Monday was the first pick in the first player draft ... the Yankees never got the chance to bid on him. The draft is also sometimes used as an explanation for the Yankee fall. Yet, in a way, these two theories are contradictory – was it that the Yankees refused to spend big money on prospects because the team was going to be sold or that the draft came along and prevented the Yankees from buying all the top prospects?

In truth, neither was correct. The draft, which began in 1965, was instituted too late to have caused the 1965-68 collapse anyway. As for Bouton's “reluctance to spend” argument, Golenbock himself explains in his 1975 book “Dynasty” that Yankee GM George Weis had grown wary of giving huge contracts to kids (and being forced to keep them on the Major League roster). Instead, he preferred to invest the same amount of money in a number of moderately priced prospects. When you look at the Yankee stalwarts during the dynasty, you'll see that most – including Mantle, Berra, Ford, Rizzuto -- were signed for modest bonuses.

That strategy had kept the Yankee system loaded with talent for years.



Phil Linz

But the idea that Topping and Webb neglected the foundation in preparation of the sale of the team to CBS is a persistent myth. Is there any truth to it?

Well, look at the injection of fresh talent produced by the Yankee farm system in the 1960s:

1961 – 1B Deron Johnson (would play 16 seasons in the Majors), OF Lee Thomas (would play eight years and in two all-star games), P Bill Stafford (would win 14 games in each of his first two full seasons), P Rollie Sheldon (11 wins as a rookie), P Hal Reniff (eight seasons in the majors).

That's a pretty good rookie crop, even if Johnson and Thomas were dealt away (as excess Yankee talent often was).

1962 – SS/OF Tom Tresh (1962 AL rookie of the year; four times in the top 20 of the MVP vote in his first five years), 1B Joe Pepitone (12 seasons, three all-star games), INF Phil Linz, P Jim Bouton (48 wins in his first three seasons).

The Demise of the New York Yankees, 1964-66 [4 of 13]:

Another stellar crop – three future all-stars and a serviceable reserve infielder. It was at this time that Chicago manager Al Lopez told a reporter: “It’s good to see young players come into the league ... just why do they always have to be wearing a Yankee uniform?”

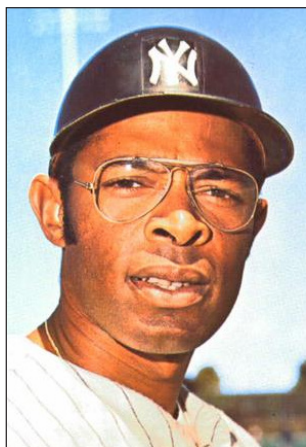
1963 – P Al Downing.

Just one significant new player, but the lefty hurler was an immediate sensation with 13 wins and 171 strikeouts in 175 innings – which won him the accolade as “the black Sandy Koufax”.

1964 – INF Pedro Gonzales, P Mel Stottlemyre (9-3, 2.06 ERA), P Pete Mikkleson (7-4 with 12 saves).

Mikkleson at age 24 was the team’s best reliever all season until he wore down late. Gonzales was a versatile utility man who played five positions and batted .277. But the real revelation was Stottlemyre, who was called up from Richmond in August and fueled the team’s title drive, winning nine games with a 2.06 ERA. He added a World Series win, plus a seven-inning scoreless stint in a game the Yankees lost in 10 innings.

1965 –OF Roger Repoz (.298 as a rookie), 2B Horace Clarke, C Jake Gibbs, OF Roy White. White bounced back and forth between the Yankees and Triple A for a number of years, but ended up playing 15 seasons for the Yankees and was a regular when the team finally returned to championship caliber in the mid-1970s. Clarke came to symbolize the Yankee utility in the late 1960s, but was actually a solid player – almost exactly the same quality player as Bobby Richardson (whom he replaced). Gibbs and Repoz were the highly touted newcomers in this season ... unfortunately, neither lived up to the hype.



Horace Clarke

1966 – OF Bobby Murcer, P Fritz Peterson, OF Steve Whitaker, P Stan Bahnsen. Murcer, a 20-year-old shortstop-converted-to-centerfielder from Oklahoma, had the misfortune to be compared to Mickey Mantle when he arrived. His reputation always suffered from that – he wasn’t Mantle! – but Murcer was a fine player who played 17 seasons. Bill James rates him one of the 50 best right-fielders in baseball history – ahead of a number of Hall of Famers. Peterson, who won 12 games as a rookie, pitched 13 seasons in the Major Leagues and won 133 games in his career. Bahnsen was just 1-1 in ‘66, but won 17 games in ‘68 and 146 in a 16-season career.

1967 – 1B Mike Hegan, who had been up briefly in 1964 and 1966, played 68 games, but batted a miserable .136. He spent the next season in the minors and was sold to the Seattle Pilots before the 1969 season. There he earned all-star status, hitting .292 (with an amazing .427 OBP) before he was hurt late in the year.

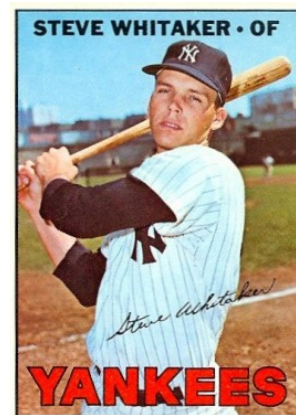
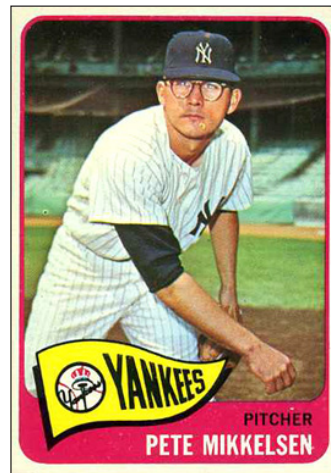
After ‘67 the talent train did start to run off the tracks until Thurman Munson (the Yankees first significant draftee) arrived in 1969. It was during this time that some of the earlier cal-lups (Roy White and Stan Bahnsen, especially) began to blossom.

But the point is that the talent continued to flow during the 1964-66 period when the franchise collapsed. There might not have been a superstar in that crop (although Stottlemyre and Murcer were near-supers), but there were a lot of very solid players – between 1961 and 1967, the Yankees called up 13 players from their farm system that would eventually play in at least one all-star game.

So when you look beyond the myths, you see that the Yankees didn’t collapse (1) because they got old or (2) because the talent stopped flowing from the farm system.

So what did cause the demise of the longest-running and most successful dynasty in American sports?

End of Part One. Part Two “What Really Happened?”



The Demise of the New York Yankees, 1964-66 [5 of 13]:

What Really Happened?

The demise of the Yankee dynasty in the mid-1960's defies a simple explanation. But it can be summarized as an accumulation of bad luck and bad decisions.

Of course, it's more complicated than that. Injuries are bad luck, but how a franchise treats those injuries and responds to them is a different story. Personalities and personnel decisions cannot be labeled as "misfortune."

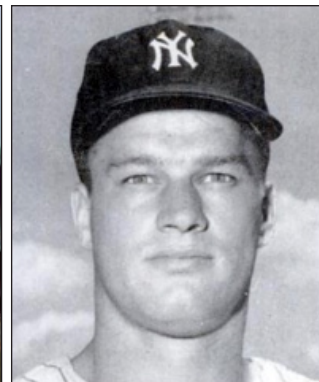
Let's look at what turned the 1964 American League Champions into 1965 also-rans and 1966 cellar-dwellers. The following circumstances are not in any order, but are grouped into similar situations:

-- Three key players -- Roger Maris, Jim Bouton and Tom Tresh -- were forced by management to play through injuries, in each case, ruining them as productive players.

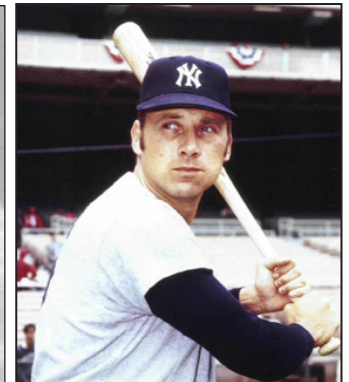
(1) Maris was 29 years old in 1964. He played 141 games with the triple crown stats of .281 26 71 and a 128 OPS-plus (meaning he was 28 percent better than the average AL hitter that season). He was no longer the superstar who had won back-to-back MVP awards in 1960 and 1961, but he was still an outstanding Major League outfielder -- rivaling Detroit's Al Kaline as a superb defender in right and renowned as a player who would do the little things like take an extra base or break up a double play.



Roger Maris



Jim Bouton



Tom Tresh

In May of 1965, Maris was hit by a pitch in his right hand. The team had him x-rayed in Washington, again in Minnesota and for a third time back in New York. The team told Maris -- and the media -- that the x-rays showed nothing. They urged him to play. Although he missed quite a few games, Maris, labeled a malingerer, continued to take fielding and batting practice. It wasn't until September that Maris found out that he had in fact broken a bone in his hand. He played with bone chips and suffered a detached ligament.

The untreated injury essentially robbed Maris of all his power. He never again could grip the bat properly with his right hand. He hit just eight home runs in 46 games in 1965 and 13 in 119 games a year later.

Now, it's impossible to tell whether or not prompt treatment would have fixed the problem. But the point is that Maris didn't get that treatment. Instead, with the Yankees struggling, he was lied to and was pressured to play.

Adding to the Yankees mistake, the team's disgraceful treatment of him soured Maris on the game and the franchise. He retired after the 1966 season, but was lured back into the game by Augie Busch, the owner of the Cardinals. Maris, with no strength left in his right hand, no longer had any power, but he remained an effective all-around player. He platooned with a young Bobby Tolan in rightfield for Cardinal teams that won the world championship in 1967 and the NL pennant in 1968.

(2) Bouton's case may be more tragic. The young pitcher was an all-star in 1963 when, as a 24-year-old, he finished 21-7 with a 2.53 ERA. A year later, Bouton had early season arm troubles and got off to a poor start. But he pitched through it and caught fire after the all-star break. He and Stottlemyre were the team's two best pitchers down the stretch. Bouton finished with an 18-13 record in 271.1 innings with a 3.07 ERA. He added two wins over the Cardinals in the World Series.

Bouton, who had thrown 23 complete games and more than 520 innings in the two previous seasons, opened the 1965 season with another sore arm. But perhaps remembering how he had pitched out of it the year before, the Yankees continued to push him to pitch with the pain.

The Demise of the New York Yankees, 1964-66 [6 of 13]:

"It was like a dull toothache that would never go away," Bouton told Golenbock.

Bouton pitched 151 innings that season and finished 4-15 with a 4.82 ERA. His arm was never the same and at age 26, his career was essentially over (although he would famously try to revive it by throwing a knuckleball as he documented in his best-selling book *Ball Four*).

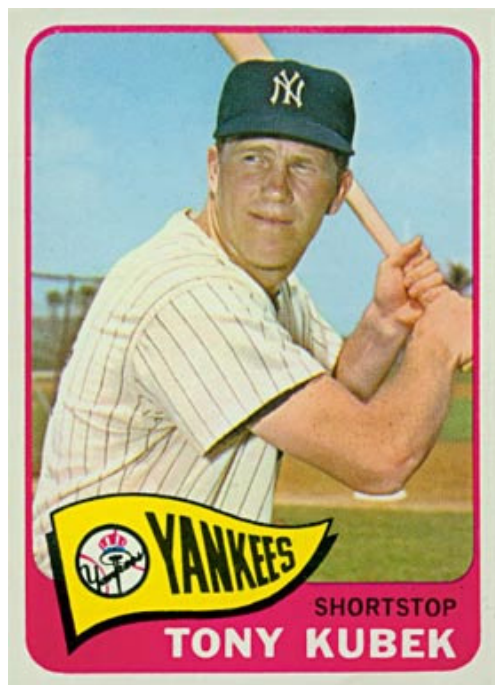
(3) When Tom Tresh came up in 1962, he looked like the successor to Mickey Mantle – a versatile star who could play anything from shortstop to centerfield. He won the rookie of the year award in '62 and was a key member of the Yankee pennant winning teams in 1963 and 1964.

As the team slumped in 1965, Tresh was probably the team's best player. He won a gold glove in leftfield (although he also filled in at center and right), hit .279 with 26 homers and 74 RBIs (134 OPS plus). Those were strong numbers in that offensively challenged era.

But in the second spring training game the next March, Tresh tore the cartilage in his right knee. An operation at that moment – even with 1966 medical knowledge – almost certainly would have repaired the knee, although he would have been sidelined most or all of the 1966 season. But with the Yankees struggling again, Tresh was asked to play through the injury. He ended up playing 151 games in 1966. His average dropped to .233, but he hit 27 home runs.

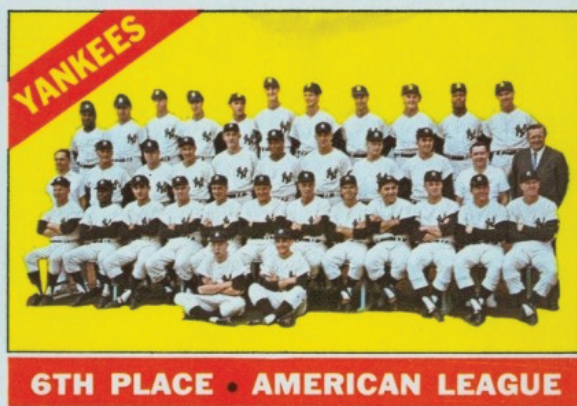
Still, he was a cripple at age 27 – and was out of baseball after two more lackluster seasons.

That's three significant players ruined by injury in what should have been the prime of their careers. In each case, it was an injury that might have responded to prompt treatment and proper care. The Yankee management, intent on shoring up their fading franchise, insisted on forcing their crippled stars to keep playing – throwing their careers away.



1965 SEASON

American League				
	W.	L.	Pct.	GB
Minnesota	102	60	.630	...
Chicago	95	67	.586	7
Baltimore	94	68	.580	8
Detroit	89	73	.549	13
Cleveland	87	75	.537	15
New York	77	85	.475	25
California	75	87	.463	27
Washington	70	92	.432	32
Boston	62	100	.383	40
Kansas City	59	103	.364	43



-- Not all the injuries problems were the fault of the Yankee management.

Between his debut at age 21 in 1957 and the end of the 1962 season, Tony Kubek was building a Hall of Fame resume. He was a superb defensive shortstop – with the versatility to play third base and the outfield – who consistently posted 90-plus OPS-plus averages (good for a great defensive shortstop). He was rookie of the year in 1957 and played in three all-star games. In 1960, while he missed the all-star game, Kubek finished 11th in the AL MVP vote.

When Casey Stengel left the Yankees after the 1960 season, he said of Kubek, "Who could be more valuable in my 50 years of life?"

Clearly, he was a superior player.

But soon after the 1961 season ended, Kubek's National Guard unit was activated. He would miss half of the 1962 season before returning for the last 45 games and the World Series.

The Demise of the New York Yankees, 1964-66 [7 of 13]:

The missed time wasn't important, but the back injury that Kubek suffered playing touch football with his army buddies was significant and would shorten his career. It's funny, but when he returned late in the 1962 season, both Kubek's hitting (115 OPS) and his range at short improved in that half-season.

It was an illusion. Kubek remained a solid (but no longer great) defensive shortstop in '63 and '64, but his offense dropped off to Mark Belanger like levels. By 1965, he his back problems made it impossible for the once-great shortstop to perform at a high level either at the plate or in the field.

Kubek was finished at age 29.

Injuries also crippled a number of significant pitchers. Ralph Terry, Bill Stafford and Rollie Sheldon were all victims of arm woes.

Stafford won 28 games in two seasons at the ages of 21 and 22. Then he hurt his arm and never won more than five games in a season again. Sheldon won 11 games as a 24-year-old rookie in 1961, but was in and out of the rotation with arm problems for the rest of his brief career.

Terry was an ace in 1961 and 1962, when he was a combined 29-15. He was almost as good in 1963, when he recorded a bad-luck season, finishing 17-15 with a solid 3.22 ERA. But he developed arm problems in 1964, when he was 28 years old, and won just 20 games over the rest of his career.

Those are the kind of things that happen to a lot of teams. Indeed, the Yankees have seen a number of bright pitching stars over the years crippled by untimely injury – Bob Turley, Johnny Kucks and Bob Grim were pitching stars of the previous decade whose careers were shortened by injuries.

It's just that the 1965-67 Yankees were less able to absorb those normal injury problems.

-- The decision to replace Yogi Berra with Johnny Keane turned out to have disastrous consequences – especially with the two cornerstones of the Yankee infield.

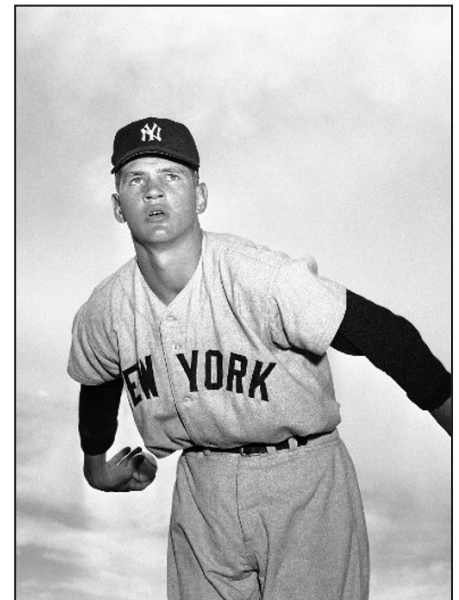
Keane was in the bizarre situation of coaching the Cardinals in the 1964 World Series against a Yankee team that he had already privately agreed to manage in 1965. He was essentially fired by Augie Busch in August, when the Cards seemed hopelessly out of the pennant race (that was the year of the Phillies' epic collapse). Berra was in the same situation as the Yankees seemed out of it in August.

The behind the scenes machinations that brought Keane to New York are beyond the scope of this study. However, his impact on the Yankees is extremely relevant.

Berra battled to gain the respect of players who remembered him as a slightly goofy teammate. Keane had a different problem – he pushed the Yankee veterans as if they were rookies. He insisted that everybody play – and play all out – in spring training. He insisted that players play even with minor injuries. The decision to push Maris and Bouton to play hurt – ending their careers – was only the most outrageous example. It certainly didn't help the physically fragile Mantle.

Keane's attitude alienated almost everybody on the team, but drove two young stars to distraction.

Clete Boyer was the second-best third baseman in the American League in 1964. No shame in being second to future Hall of Famer Brooks Robinson. Boyer wasn't the offensive player that Robinson was, but he was very close defensively to the player regarded as the greatest defensive third baseman in history – some stat freaks rate him ahead of Robinson in several seasons in the 1960s.



Ralph Terry

The Demise of the New York Yankees, 1964-66 [8 of 13]:

Boyer turned 28 years old just before spring training in 1965. He should have been entering his prime. In many ways, he was – his offensive production would peak in 1967 when he hit 26 homers and drove in 94 runs.

But he wouldn't do that for the Yankees.

Boyer Goes to Braves in Yanks' Deal

Staff Special

COLUMBUS — The New York Yankees last night traded third baseman Clete Boyer to the Atlanta Braves for minor league outfielder Bill Robinson, who last season played for Richmond of the International League where he was runnerup for the league's batting championship.

The Yankees' Syracuse farm club of the IL also will receive Chi Chi Oliva from Braves' Richmond team of the same league.

AT A LATER date, the Yankees will deliver a minor league player to the Braves. Robinson hit .312 in 139 games at Richmond. He's 23 and bats righthanded.

Boyer, a drinker who clashed with the ultra-religious Keane, was embittered by the experience. Even the return of Ralph Houk – a manager that Boyer said he loved – couldn't salvage his relationship with the team. After the 1966 season, he was traded to the Atlanta Braves for minor league outfielder Bill Robinson.

Emotion, Not Strategy, Fired Keane

That transaction raises questions about the ability of the Yankees to evaluate talent – questions we'll address next.

But first, we need to look at the sad tale of Joe Pepitone.

The slender native New Yorker replaced Moose Skowron as the Yankees' regular first baseman in 1963. He was an immediate defensive upgrade – Pepitone was a superb fielder who would win three gold gloves in his career. He was also an effective hitter – he hit 55 home runs and had 189 RBIs in his first two years as a starter.

And best of all, he was a mere 23 years old in 1964 when he made the first of his three all-star game appearances.

But Pepitone was a flake who enjoyed the night life and was famous for bringing a hair dryer into the clubhouse. Nobody had more problems with Keane than Pepitone – the two clashed almost immediately. Even the replacement of Keane with Houk in early 1966 did little to soothe the growing

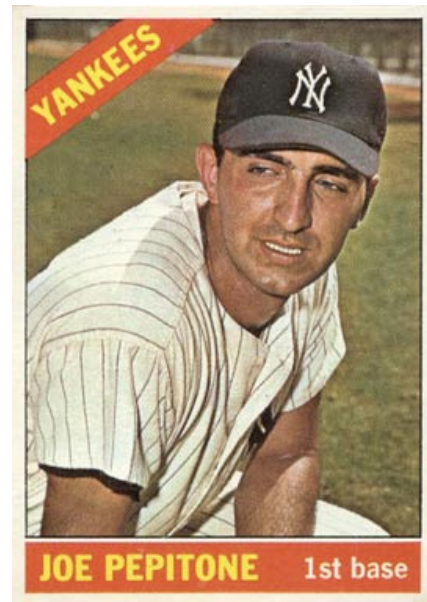
tension between management and the fun-loving first baseman.

Pepitone remained with the team for another four years, but was viewed as a malcontent. He admitted that he lost his zest for the game – and occasionally his focus on the field. His last years with the Yankees were a sad tale of inconsistent performance.

He was eventually traded to the Houston Astros for outfielder Curt Blefary, an outfielder who was originally signed by the Yankees, but had his best years after being drafted out of the Yankee farm system by the Baltimore Orioles. Blefary was essentially washed up by the time he returned to New York.

-- The Boyer for Robinson deal proved to be the most egregious of a series of disastrous personnel decisions made by the Yankee management team after the forced retirement of general manager George Weiss, the architect of the post WWII Yankees.

Before looking at any of those deals, it's worth understanding something the Yankee management never did. The mid-1960s were a unique period in baseball history. Largely because of the small strike zone and the high pitching mounds, the period became the lowest-scoring era since the dead ball. Indeed, Three-Finger Brown and Walter Johnson would have felt right at home in 1968, when the pitchers dominated the game.



The Demise of the New York Yankees, 1964-66 [9 of 13]:

One side result of the phenomenon was the decline in the traditional offensive numbers. In the four seasons between 1965 and 1968, the American League produced just 10 .300 hitters – Carl Yastrzemski's .301 average in 1968 was the only one that season over .290! In 1965, the two AL home run leaders hit 32 and 30 home runs.

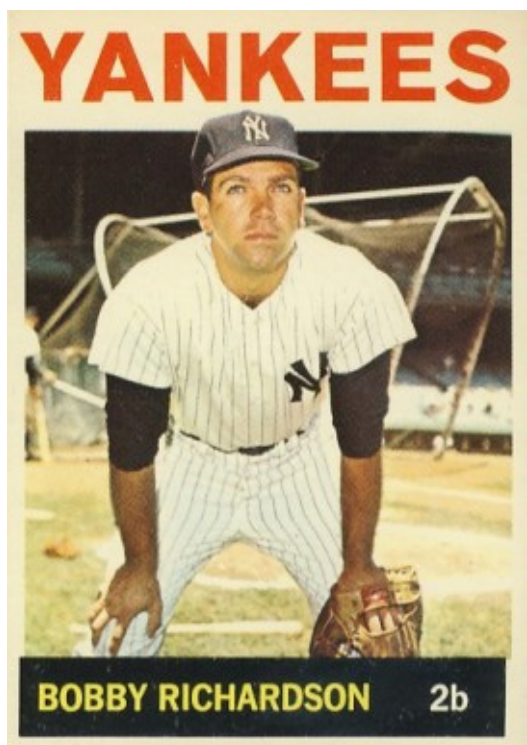
The Yankee management should have looked at its players' stats in the context of their times. Take Mickey Mantle, for instance.

Quite clearly, the Mick had his last great year in 1964, when he hit .303 with 35 home runs and 111 RBIs. His OPS was a sterling 1.015 and his OPS-plus was an outstanding 178.

A year later, his average dropped to .255 and he managed just 19 home runs and 46 RBIs in an injury plagued season. Well, the injuries were a real problem, but his offensive numbers weren't quite as bad as they looked. He still managed a .831 OPS and a 137 OPS-plus. Even in his final dismal season of 1968 when Mantle hit .237 with 18 homers and 54 RBIs, he walked 106 times, enjoyed a .385 OBP and finished with a .782 OPS – which translated into a 142 OPS plus in that offensively-challenged season. He still had the eighth-best OPS-plus in the American League!!



Now, Mantle retired because his crippled knees wouldn't support him any longer, not because of his declining offensive skills. But the misunderstanding of statistics that led the Yankees to moan about Mantle's "decline" led to some serious misjudgments in a couple of cases.



The same myopia has led to the historical perception of Horace Clarke as the epitome of Yankee mediocrity in this era. Yet, when you examine the numbers more closely, you'll see that Clarke was every bit as good – and maybe better – than his celebrated predecessor at second base for the Yankees – Bobby Richardson.

In a 12-year career (nine years as a regular) Richardson hit .266 with a .634 OPS, while Clarke hit .256 with a .621 OPS in 10 seasons (seven as a regular). Neither player had any power and neither walked much. But when you factor in the fact that Richardson played in a slightly more offensive-friendly era, you'll see that his career OPS-plus of 77 is lower than Clarke's 83.

Defensively, Clarke had a superior range factor per nine innings (5.54 to 5.12) and a better fielding percentage (.983 to .979). Richardson did turn more double plays per game -- .72 to .63. Clarke was by far the better baserunner.

Yet, Richardson played in nine all-star games and won six gold gloves. Clarke never played in an all-star game nor won a gold glove.


The misperception of Clarke – like the misperception of Mantle – didn't hurt the Yankees. However, the failure to understand what was going on in baseball did have some negative consequences.

Perhaps the most serious was Clete Boyer.

The Demise of the New York Yankees, 1964-66 [10 of 13]:

It's true that Boyer was an acerbic pain-in-the-butt for management. It's also true that he was one of the great defensive third basemen in history. All that was known at the time.

But he was also regarded as a weak hitter. One Yankee management type explained when Boyer was dealt to Atlanta, "that his glove can't carry his .240 bat."



The image shows the 1966 New York Yankees team photo. The players are arranged in several rows, wearing their white home uniforms with pinstripes. The word "YANKEES" is printed in large, bold, red letters at the bottom of the photo.

1966 STANDINGS				
American League				
Final Standings				
	W.	L.	Pct.	G.B.
Baltimore	97	63	.606	—
Minnesota	89	73	.549	9
Detroit	88	74	.543	10
Chicago	83	79	.512	15
Cleveland	81	81	.500	17
California	80	82	.494	18
Kansas City	74	86	.463	23
Wash'n.	71	88	.447	25½
Boston	72	90	.444	26
New York	70	89	.440	26½

Well, Boyer did hit .240 in 1966, his last year with the Yankees. Of course, he hit .224 when he started at third for the mighty '61 Yankees and .218 in 1964, when he started for that pennant winning Yankee team. His averages in 1965 (.251) and 1966 (.240) were better than that. And more significantly, his OPS-plus in those years was a solid 106 and 101 – meaning that far from being a detriment at

the plate, Boyer was a slightly above-average American League hitter. Coupled with his great glove, he should have been a player the Yankees clung to.

Instead, they traded him to the Braves for minor-league phenom Bill Robinson, who hit .196, .240 and .171 in his three seasons with the Yankees (his OPS-plus peaked at 107 in 1968, but was 63 and 44 the other two years). Boyer was replaced at third base by journeyman Charley Smith, acquired from the Cards for letting them sign Maris. Smith hit .224 (85-OPS plus).

(Note: I won't criticize that deal, since it wasn't really a trade. Maris was going to retire. The Yankees acquired Smith for allowing the Cards to sign him. In essence, they got a little something – a very little something -- for nothing).

Adding to the decline in offensive production at third base, the Yankees found they had traded a third baseman who had seven errors and a 4.99 range-per-nine-innings for one who had 21 errors and a 3.44 range-per-nine innings.

That kind of myopia characterized the Yankee management of that era.

It's important to understand that the 45-year dynasty of 1920-64 was to a large degree built on the foundation of two great general managers. Ed Barrow, the man who discovered Honus Wagner and later converted Babe Ruth from a pitcher to an outfielder, built the great Yankee teams of the '20s and '30s. After World War II, George Weiss, originally hired by Barrow to build the Yankee farm system, built the teams that dominated in the 1950s and early 1960s.

To be sure, both men were supported by the team's wealthy ownership – Barrow could rely on Jake Ruppert to buy the players he wanted; Weiss benefited from the deep bankroll of Del Webb and Dan Topping.

Still, baseball history is replete with spendthrifts who couldn't buy a winner – Tom Yawkey spent a fortune on the Red Sox with little success; George Steinbrenner has singlehandedly demonstrated at different times the benefits of throwing money at problems and the futility of doing it.

Money or not, it comes down to good decision making.

When Ed Barrow was trying to rebuild his team after its one-year collapse in 1925, he made a number of astute deals. True, he used Ruppert's money to sign Columbia University star Lou Gehrig (a renowned prospect – the Yankees

The Demise of the New York Yankees, 1964-66 [11 of 13]:

simply outbid everybody else for him) and to buy minor-league stars Tony Lazzeri from Salt Lake City and Earl Combs from Louisville. But he also traded washed up pitcher Joe Bush and two minor players to St. Louis for Urban Shocker, a 34-year-old pitcher with a 4.20 ERA the previous year. Shocker would win 49 games for the Yanks in the next three seasons with an improving ERA every year.

Barrow plucked unknown Wilcy Moore out of a Class C league and promoted him straight to the Yankees (he won 19 games and saved 13 as a rookie in 1927). He later traded for 26-year-old Red Ruffing, who was 39-96 with the Red Sox – Ruffing would win 231 (and lose just 124) with the Yankees in the 1930s. Barrow gambled big money on Joe DiMaggio after his knee injury scared off most suitors. He signed Phil Rizzuto after Brooklyn manager Casey Stengel chased the kid off, telling him he was “too small.”

Yanks Finish Last; Twins, Tigers Tied

Money helped, but Barrow used Ruppert's money wisely.

For the most part, Weiss gave Webb and Topping good value for their bucks.

It started with his controversial decision to name Stengel as the team's manager in 1949. He loaded the farm system with talent – for the most part avoiding the high-priced prospects and spreading his money among dozens of less-touted prospects.

When the team needed a lift, he acted decisively. After the 1954 Yankees won 103 games, yet finished second to the Cleveland Indians, Weiss thought his aging pitching corps needed an infusion of fresh arms. He engineered a 17-player swap with the new Baltimore Orioles that sent the ex-Browns such established players as Gene Woodling and Gus Triandos. In return, he got young right-handers Bob Turley and Don Larsen. What made the deal interesting is that the two hurlers were a combined 17-36 with the Orioles in 1954.

Yet, the two ex-Orioles became stalwarts for the Yankees, helping the team win four straight pennants before the team slumped to third place in 1959. Again, Weiss acted decisively, packaging Larsen, all-star outfielder Norm Siebern, over-the-hill veteran Hank Bauer and prospect Marv Throneberry to Kansas City for slugging outfielder Roger Maris.

But Weiss was forced to retire after the 1960 pennant, along with Stengel. A new management team took over. First, Weiss' protégé Roy Hamey handled the job, but after the 1963 season, he retired and Ralph Houk moved from manager to general manager.

In hindsight, this was a disastrous mistake.

In the first place, Houk had been a very popular and successful manager. Most of the players loved him because they thought he was on their side. They were stunned at his new combative attitude toward them during contract negotiations. They felt betrayed – an attitude that didn't help when Houk tried to return as manager early in the 1966 season.

But exacerbating the problem, neither Houk nor Hamey had the same knack of spotting talent that had made both Barrow and Weiss so formidable.

There were no Red Ruffing nor Roger Maris deals in this era. Hamey tried to do something like that when he traded Moose Skowron to Los Angeles for pitcher Stan Williams, a 26-year-old righthander who seemed to have a bright future after winning 43 games in the three previous seasons. But maybe Hamey didn't notice that Williams had a 4.46 ERA – working in the best pitchers park in baseball. The move flopped – and was rubbed in the Yankee faces when ex-Yanks Skowron and Larsen helped the Dodgers beat the Yankees in the '63 World Series.

It's hard to pinpoint a major trade that worked for the Yankees during this period. Probably the most successful was the acquisition of reliever Pedro Ramos in September of 1964. The 29-year-old Cuban certainly played a huge role in the Yankee rally for the pennant – winning one game and saving eight more in the final 21 games of the season. The

The Demise of the New York Yankees, 1964-66 [12 of 13]:

only trouble is that it's hard to credit Houk for this move – Berra had to beg him to make the deal. Houk thought it was a waste of time since the Yankees were out of the race. Indeed, if Houk had made the deal when Berra first requested it in late August, Ramos would have been eligible for the World Series – and that easily could have tipped the balance in that close seven-game series.

In contrast to the Ramos deal that Houk resisted making, it's almost painful to watch the machinations he went through in an effort to find a catcher to replace the aging Howard.

Elston Howard is the one Yankee who DID get old – his performance dropping off sharply after the 1964 season (he went from a 128 OPS plus to 77 in one season). Unfortunately, gifted backup John Blanchard, who had blasted 50

home runs in limited duty between 1961-63, was also aging. By 1965, he was just 32, but he was washed up – hitting .137 when he was shipped to Kansas City (along with former pitching star Rollie Sheldon) for catcher Doc Edwards. Not to be confused with Johnny Edwards, the standout catcher for the Reds and Astros, Doc Edwards was a 28-year-old journeyman who was also hitting well below .200. He hit .190 with the Yankees.

Houk tried again, sending promising young outfielder Roger Repoz, former pitching star Bill Stafford and 19-year-old pitching prospect Gil Blanco to Kansas City for journeyman pitcher Fred Talbot and Billy Bryan, a 27-year-old catcher who was hitting .132 at the time of the trade. He did improve that to .217 with the Yankees, but a year later, he was at .167.

Of course, none of this would have been necessary if Jake Gibbs, signed with great fanfare because of his fame as quarterback at Ole Miss, had not taken so long to arrive. He was signed as a free agent by Hamey in 1961 and was given brief trials with the Yankees in 1962-63-64.

Gibbs got into 37 games in '65, but hit a disappointing .221. A year later, he played in 62 games and finally seemed to be showing some promise – he hit .258 with a 97 OPS-plus. Given the starting job a year later, the former football star hit .233 with a 76 OPS-plus. He was worse in 1968 -- .213 with a 69 OPS. And his defense was mediocre at best.

Catcher would remain a black hole for the Yankees until Thurman Munson, the No. 4 pick in the 1968 draft (some benefits of being lousy) arrived as a starter in 1970.

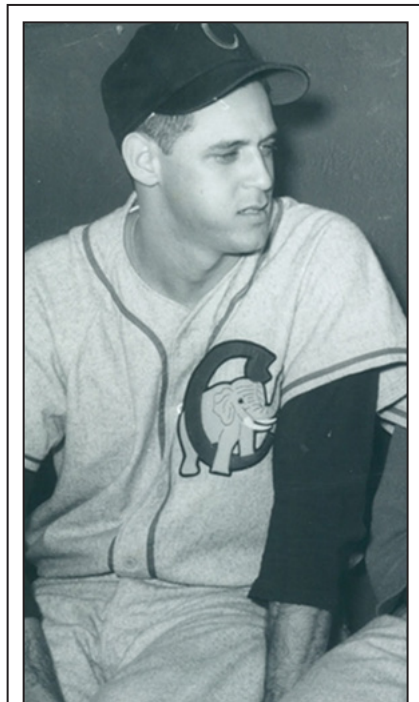
But it was just symptomatic of the inability of the team's management to address problems in the mid-1960s.

The Rise of the new New York Yankees

It took a decade for New York to return to contention in the American League.

Between 1966 and 1975, the team averaged less than 85 wins. The best seasons in that span were a 90-69 record in 1970, which was good for a distant (15 games) second-place finish, and an 89-win season in 1974 that left the Yankees just two games back of the division-winning Orioles.

When the team did return to championship caliber in 1976, it was with a different ownership (George Steinbrenner), different management (Gabe Paul) and a new cast of players – painfully assembled via the draft (Munson, Roy White, Ron Guidry) or traditional trades (Graig Nettles and Chris Chambliss from the Indians, Mickey Rivers and Ed Figueuroa from the Angels, Sparky Lyle from the Red Sox, Willie Randolph and Dock Ellis from the Pirates). Catfish Hunter was the only free agent on that '76 pennant winner (although Reggie Jackson would start the real parade of high-priced purchases in 1977).



Pedro Ramos pitched for Cienfuegos during seven Cuban League seasons (1954-61) and was elected to the Cuban Baseball Hall of Fame in 1981.

The Demise of the New York Yankees, 1964-66 [13 of 13]:

In the three-plus decades since the Yankee recovery, Steinbrenner has used the free agent market to keep the team competitive. Once again, the team's great wealth has helped it – but as the team's mini-slump in the late 1980s and early 1990s proved, money alone is still not enough.

Still, even when Steinbrenner was overruling his baseball people and spending huge sums on the likes of Dave Collins and Steve Kemp or trading bright young talent for mediocre veterans -- as George Costanza's father once famously screamed on Seinfeld: "Jay Buhner for Ken Phelps .. what were you thinking"? -- the new Yankees have almost always been a factor in the AL East race.

That points to the amazing demise of the franchise in the mid-1960s. It's been almost a century since the Yankees became a major force in American sports, but that century has seen nothing else to compare to the sudden and shocking collapse of sports greatest winner, starting in 1965.

Note: Thanks to Jim Sumner, whose observations led the author to pursue this story.