

Taking on the Yankees: Winning and Losing in the Business of Baseball, 1903–2003. *By Henry D. Fetter.* New York: Norton, 2003. xi + 461pp. Photographs, notes, index. Cloth, \$25.95. ISBN 0-393-05719-4.

Reviewed by Steven A. Riess

The Yankees have long been the premier franchise in baseball, and they may well be the outstanding team in American sport history, having won twenty-six world championships in their first one hundred and one seasons. Author Henry D. Fetter, who studied history at Harvard and the University of California at Berkeley before graduating from Harvard Law School, has written a smart, nicely researched book, based primarily on material culled from newspapers and legal cases that debunks some of the conventional wisdom about the baseball business.

Fetter argues that the Yankee dynasty was a product of management strategies, economic forces, social changes, and political and legal pressures. These developments were part of the sport's ongoing struggle to respond to social, economic, and legal challenges that developed over time, such as the advent of Sunday baseball, the growth of radio and television, the erosion of the color line, the relocation of franchises, and, in the 1970s, the shift in bargaining power from management to labor. Invariably the Yankees were better able to adapt to the new circumstances, enabling them to establish, maintain, and, recently, regain their supremacy in the sport.

Although the book is in part a business history of the Yankees, it is primarily an account of three National League rivals: the New York Giants in the 1920s, the St. Louis Cardinals in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and the Brooklyn Dodgers after World War II. Fetter claims that no team could overtake the Yankees, whose stellar performance on the field he attributes more to the club's wealth and the shortcomings of its competitors than to its innovative management skills, strategy, and style.

The origin of the Yankees' success is traced to the ownership of Jacob Ruppert, proprietor of a major brewery and Tammany politician, and fellow millionaire Tillinghast Huston, who took over the team in late 1914, imposing a new management style and structure on the sport. They were fans who wanted the team to win, and they were willing

to spend money to build up their stable of players, but they were smart enough to allow knowledgeable professionals, manager Miller Huggins and general manager Ed Barrow, to run the team without interference. They found a ready source of players in the Boston Red Sox, formerly a top team but on the decline at the time. Readers will be interested in Fetter's analysis of Yankee trades with the Red Sox. He argues, for example, that Babe Ruth's volatile behavior had made him a disruptive force in Boston and that his value to the New York team was enhanced by the legalization of Sunday baseball. Ruth was bought in 1925 for \$100,000 and a \$300,000 loan, which Sox owner Harry Frazee used to pay off the mortgage on Fenway Park, not, as widely believed, to produce the musical *No, No Nanette*.

The Yankees pioneered a new style of team management, in which spheres of authority and lines of responsibility were clearly delineated. Owner, general manager, and field manager kept within the bounds of their own roles. Fetter points out that other clubs soon were unable to compete, most notably the Giants, where the lines between owner and manager, on-field decision-making and acquisition of players, local politics and baseball politics were blurred (p. 9). The Yankees not only made more money but, more critically, reinvested their profits in the team, while the Giants put a much smaller percentage of their earnings back into the club. However, Fetter too easily dismisses the Giants, who did win four straight pennants between 1921 and 1924.

Fetter claims that the Cardinals' success, demonstrated by four pennants between 1926 and 1934, was the product of Branch Rickey's exceptional ability to spot talent and not of the team's newly remodeled organization as a vertically integrated farm system. Rickey built his first champion teams the old-fashioned way, by trading and buying players. Yet the farm system did contribute to the Cardinals' pennant winners of 1934, 1942, and 1943, and it produced both talent and revenue from player sales. The author devotes little space to the Yankees' success in rebuilding themselves in the late 1930s through their own productive farm system.

Rickey moved on to the Dodgers, who dominated the National League from 1947 through 1956, eventually beating the Yankees in the 1955 World Series. Under Walter O'Malley, the Dodgers solicited government support for their new ballpark in Los

Angeles. Fetter describes at some length the team's move west, focusing on O'Malley's management style.

The Yankees went into a nosedive in the mid-1960s when their experienced managers were fired or retired and their successors failed to replace aging veterans. CBS bought the team in 1964 but made no effort to finance the team adequately or to restore the necessary chain of command. George Steinbrenner bought the team for \$10 million in 1973, bringing new energy, strong leadership, and a willingness to spend. In the new expansion age, traditional baseball economics was altered by free agency, soaring team values, and new revenues from bigger crowds, higher prices, and cable television. Management skills became even more essential. Steinbrenner mastered the new conditions better than anyone else, restoring the Yankees to preeminence in the late 1970s. In the 1980s, dysfunctional leadership and recruitment of over-the-hill players undermined the team. However, in the late 1990s, the Yankees rallied and began recruiting and training excellent young talent and signing top free agents, advancing once again to a position of dominance.

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