

George Steinbrenner, Who Built Yankees Into Powerhouse, Dies at 80

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George Steinbrenner, who bought a declining Yankees team in 1973, promised to stay out of its daily affairs and then, in an often tumultuous reign, placed his formidable stamp on 7 World Series championship teams, 11 pennant winners and a sporting world powerhouse valued at perhaps \$1.6 billion, died Tuesday morning. He was 80 and lived in Tampa, Fla. The Yankees announced the death without giving a cause.

"He was an incredible and charitable man," the family said in a statement.

"He was a visionary and a giant in the world of sports. He took a great but struggling franchise and turned it into a champion again."

Mr. Steinbrenner's death came eight months after the Yankees won their first World Series title since 2000, clinching their six-game victory over the Philadelphia Phillies at his new Yankee Stadium, and two days after the team's longtime public-address announcer Bob Sheppard died at age 99.

Mr. Steinbrenner had been in failing health for the past several years and rarely appeared in public. He attended the opening game at the new stadium in April 2009, sitting in his suite with his wife, Joan (pronounced Jo-ann). When he was introduced and received an ovation, his shoulders shook and he cried.

He next appeared at the Yankees' new home for the first two games of the World Series, then made his final appearance at the 2010 home opener, when Manager Joe Girardi and shortstop Derek Jeter, the team captain, came to his suite to present him with his 2009 World Series championship ring.

Mr. Steinbrenner spoke for only 25 seconds at the stadium's groundbreaking ceremony in August 2006.

The blustering owner long familiar to Yankees fans and foes briefly re-emerged in October 2007 in a newspaper interview, when he threatened to fire Manager Joe Torre if the team did not advance beyond the first round of the American League playoffs. The Yankees were eliminated by the Cleveland Indians in that round, and soon afterward Torre departed after rejecting a one-year contract extension with a cut in his guaranteed salary.

In the eyes of Yankees figures from Mr. Steinbrenner's heyday, his aura endured despite his frailty.

"He's arguably the most recognized owner in all of sports," Jeter said after Mr. Steinbrenner was driven onto the field in a golf cart in a ceremony before the 2008 All-Star Game at the old stadium.

"To be able to deliver this to the Boss, to the stadium he created and the atmosphere he created around here, it's very gratifying to all of us," Girardi said after the Yankees' World Series victory at the new stadium.

Mr. Steinbrenner, the Yankees' principal owner and chairman, had ceded increasing authority to his sons, Hal and Hank, who became co-chairmen in May 2008. Hal Steinbrenner, the Yankees' managing general partner as well, was given control of the team in November 2008 in a unanimous vote by the major league club owners, who acted on his father's request.

Mr. Steinbrenner was the central figure in a syndicate that bought the Yankees from CBS for \$10 million. When he arrived in New York on Jan. 3, 1973, he said he would not "be active in the day-to-day operations of the club at all." Having made his money as head of the American Shipbuilding Company, based in Cleveland, he declared, "I'll stick to building ships."

But four months later, Michael Burke, who had been running the Yankees for CBS and had stayed on to help manage the franchise, departed after clashing with Mr. Steinbrenner. John McMullen, a minority owner in the syndicate, soon remarked that "nothing is as limited as being a limited partner of George's."

Mr. Steinbrenner emerged as one of the most powerful, influential and, in the eyes of many, notorious executives in sports. He was the senior club owner in baseball at his death, the man known as the Boss.

A pioneer of modern sports ownership, Mr. Steinbrenner started the wave of high spending for playing talent when free agency arrived in the mid-1970s, and he continued to spend freely through the Yankees' revival in the late '70s and early '80s, the long stretch without a pennant and then renewed triumphs under Torre and General Manager Brian Cashman.

The Yankees' approximately \$210 million payroll in 2009 dwarfed all others in baseball, and the team paid out millions in baseball's luxury tax and revenue-sharing with small-market teams.

In the frenetic '70s and '80s, when general managers, field managers and pitching coaches were sent spinning through Mr. Steinbrenner's revolving personnel door (Billy Martin had five stints as manager), the franchise became known as the Bronx Zoo. In December 2002, Mr. Steinbrenner's enterprise had grown so rich that the president of the Boston Red Sox, Larry Lucchino, frustrated over losing pitcher Jose Contreras to the Yankees, called them the "evil empire";

But Mr. Steinbrenner and the Yankees thrived through all the arguments, all the turmoil, all the bombast. Having been without a pennant since 1964 when Mr. Steinbrenner bought them, enduring sagging attendance while the upstart Mets thrived, the Yankees once again became America's marquee sporting franchise.

Yankee Stadium underwent a major renovation in the mid-1970s, but that did not satisfy Mr. Steinbrenner with the passing of years and the building of many new stadiums with luxury boxes catering to corporate America. He cast an eye toward New Jersey, pressed for a new stadium in Manhattan and ultimately got a \$1.5 billion stadium built in the Bronx, alongside the original House That Ruth Built.

Mr. Steinbrenner found new revenue streams from cable television, first in a longtime deal with the Madison Square Garden network and then with the creation of the Yankees' YES network. The franchise also engineered lucrative marketing deals, notably a 10-year, \$95 million apparel agreement with Adidas.

In 2005, the Yankees became the second American League team to top the four million mark in home attendance (the Toronto Blue Jays did it from 1991 to 1993), drawing a league-record 4,090,696. Their home attendance rose during the next three years, reaching a league-record 4,298,655 in 2008. But attendance dipped to 3,719,358 in the first year at the new stadium, which had fewer seats and higher ticket prices.

Mr. Steinbrenner lived year-round in Tampa, but he became a New York celebrity and a figure in popular culture. He was lampooned, with his permission, by a caricature in the sitcom "Seinfeld," portrayed by the actor Lee Bear, who was always photographed from behind at the Boss's desk, flailing his arms and suitably imperious, while Larry David, the show's co-creator, provided the voice. George Costanza (Jason Alexander) became the assistant to the team's traveling secretary, whose duties included fetching calzones for Mr. Steinbrenner.

Mr. Steinbrenner also appeared in a Visa commercial with Jeter, calling him into his office to admonish him. "You're our starting shortstop," Mr. Steinbrenner said. "How can you possibly afford to spend two nights dancing, two nights eating out and three nights just carousing with your friends?" Jeter responded by holding up a Visa card. Mr. Steinbrenner exclaimed "Oh!" and the scene shifted to Mr. Steinbrenner in a dance line with Jeter at a night spot.

Mr. Steinbrenner usually adored his players but at times insulted them. He called outfielder Paul O'Neill "the ultimate warrior" (Steinbrenner idolized Generals MacArthur and Patton.) But he derided the star outfielder Dave Winfield, with whom he feuded, calling him Mr. May, pointedly contrasting him with Reggie Jackson, who had been known as Mr. October for his clutch hitting in the postseason. He denounced the portly pitcher Hideki Irabu as a fat toad when he was late covering first base in an exhibition game.

Mr. Steinbrenner feuded with his fellow club owners, baseball commissioners and umpires. He was twice barred from baseball, once after pleading guilty to making illegal political campaign contributions. By October 1995, when he was fined for complaining about the umpires in a playoff series with the Seattle Mariners, Mr. Steinbrenner had accumulated disciplinary costs of \$645,000.

When he was not phoning his general managers and managers with complaints or advice, he meddled in the smallest matters of ballpark maintenance. He was often portrayed by the news media as a blowhard and a baseball know-nothing.

"George is a great guy, unless you have to work for him," Lou Piniella, who managed the Yankees twice in the 1980s, told Sports Illustrated in 2004. Mr. Steinbrenner saw himself as sticking up for the everyday New Yorker, though the price of Yankees tickets kept rising.

"I care about New York dearly," he told Sports Illustrated in 2004. "I like every cab driver, every guy that stops the car and honks, every truck driver. I feed on that."

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.

Mr. Steinbrenner, who was vice president of the United States Olympic Committee from 1989 to 1996, viewed himself

as a patriot. He continued to have "God Bless America" played during the seventh-inning stretch at Yankee Stadium when other teams had dropped such touches, begun after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. But he opposed American involvement in the inaugural World Baseball Classic of 2006, fearing that his star players might be injured in it. He was pleased when his left fielder Hideki Matsui declined to join the Japanese team.

Bud Selig, the baseball commissioner, once remarked: "George has been a very charismatic, controversial owner. But look, he did what he set out to do. He restored the New York Yankees franchise."

George Michael Steinbrenner III, named for a grandfather, was born on July 4, 1930, the oldest of three children, and reared in the Cleveland suburb of Bay Village. His father, Henry Steinbrenner, graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a degree in naval architecture and engineering and starred as a collegiate hurdler before taking over the family's maritime shipping business.

Young George tried to please his father by taking up hurdling and running a home-based business that raised chickens and sold their eggs.

"He was a tough taskmaster," Mr. Steinbrenner once said of his father. "You know, if I ran four races in track, won three and lost one, he'd say, 'Now go sit down and study that one race and see why you lost it.'"

His mother, Rita, offered a contrasting presence. "It was my mom who gave me compassion for the underdog and for people in need," Mr. Steinbrenner was quoted saying by Bill Madden in "Steinbrenner: The Last Lion of Baseball" in an apparent reference to what would be his many charitable endeavors.

Mr. Steinbrenner attended Culver Military Academy in Indiana in the mid-1940s. His father, who idolized the Yankees' Joe DiMaggio and Bill Dickey, took him to Cleveland to watch Indians games, especially when the Yankees came to town. "We were in awe of the Yankees," Mr. Steinbrenner said.

Mr. Steinbrenner graduated from Williams College in Massachusetts with a degree in English, and he ran hurdles and played football, as a halfback. He served as an Air Force officer, coached high school football and basketball in Ohio, and was briefly an assistant football coach at Northwestern and Purdue.

He returned to Cleveland in 1957 to join the family's longtime shipping firm, Kinsman Marine Transit, which carried Great Lakes cargo. He also operated the Cleveland Pipers, a professional basketball team.

In 1967, Mr. Steinbrenner began obtaining stock in the American Shipbuilding Company, based in Lorain, Ohio. He eventually took it over, merging it with Kinsman. By the time he gained control of the Yankees six years later, the company had greatly strengthened its operations.

Gabe Paul, a veteran baseball executive who helped arrange Mr. Steinbrenner's purchase of the Yankees (shortly after a failed bid to buy the Indians) and became a limited partner in the team and then the Yankees president, and Lee MacPhail, the holdover general manager from the CBS years, were expected to make the personnel decisions when Mr. Steinbrenner arrived. But he quickly became immersed in baseball decisions and craved the celebrity aura that could never have come his way as a wealthy shipping executive. He began to spend large sums to end the long pennant drought, starting with the acquisition of the star pitcher Catfish Hunter.

Mr. Steinbrenner, meanwhile, ran into trouble in a matter far beyond the ball fields. In November 1974, Commissioner Bowie Kuhn suspended him for two years — a term later reduced to 15 months — after he pleaded guilty to two charges, one a felony and the other a misdemeanor: conspiring to make illegal corporate contributions to President Richard M. Nixon's 1972 re-election campaign, and trying to "influence and intimidate employees" of his shipbuilding company to lie to a grand jury about the matter. He was fined \$15,000 in the criminal case but given no jail time.

"Everybody has dents in his armor," Mr. Steinbrenner told The New York Times in 1987. "That's something I have to live with." President Ronald Reagan pardoned him in January 1989, during his final days in office.

When free agency arrived as a result of an arbitrator's decision in 1975 that nullified the reserve clause, which had bound players to their teams, Mr. Steinbrenner stepped up his spending.

The Yankees signed the slugger Reggie Jackson and the ace relief pitcher Goose Gossage, and they won the World Series in 1977 and 1978.

Mr. Steinbrenner changed managers and general managers with abandon, punctuated by the bizarre comings and goings of Martin. The oddest sequence began on July 24, 1978, when Martin resigned as manager, presumably a step

ahead of being fired, after saying of Jackson and Mr. Steinbrenner: "The two of them deserve each other. One's a born liar; the other's convicted," a reference to Mr. Steinbrenner's guilty plea in the illegal-contributions case.

Only five days later, on Old-Timers' Day at Yankee Stadium, Martin was introduced as the Yankees' manager for 1980. Instead he returned in June 1979, replacing the fired Bob Lemon, only to be fired himself a month after that season ended.

Dick Howser was named manager in 1980 and led the Yankees to a division championship, but soon after the season concluded, Mr. Steinbrenner announced that Howser was leaving to pursue "an outstanding offer in real estate," an opportunity that remained a mystery.

After the Yankees lost to the Dodgers in Game 5 of the 1981 World Series at Los Angeles, Mr. Steinbrenner broke his hand. He said he had punched two men who insulted him and the Yankees in a hotel elevator. But the supposed assailants were never identified.

Another furor arose in 1985, this one surrounding Yogi Berra, the Yankees' Hall of Fame catcher, who had become the manager. After declaring that "Yogi will be the manager the entire season, win or lose," Mr. Steinbrenner fired him with the team off to a 6-10 start and dispatched the Yankees executive Clyde King to give Berra the news. Berra, furious, refused to set foot inside Yankee Stadium until Steinbrenner apologized 14 years later.

The Yankees struck a major financial coup in 1988 with a 12-year, \$486 million TV deal with the Madison Square Garden network. But the team had been without a pennant since 1981 — a split season because of a players' strike — and free agents had been reluctant to enter Mr. Steinbrenner's turbulent domain. By 1990, he had switched managers 18 times and hired 13 general managers.

Then came more trouble. In July 1990, Commissioner Fay Vincent ordered Mr. Steinbrenner to step aside as the Yankees' managing partner for making a \$40,000 payment to a confessed gambler named Howard Spira in return for Mr. Spira's seeking damaging information about Winfield. Mr. Steinbrenner had been displeased with Winfield's performance on the field, and the two had feuded over contributions Mr. Steinbrenner was to make to Winfield's philanthropic foundation.

Mr. Steinbrenner resumed control of the Yankees in 1993, and three years later they were World Series champions again, beginning a long run of dominance.

By the 1990s, with free agents becoming ever more expensive, Mr. Steinbrenner acknowledged the need to develop the Yankees' minor league system. The Yankees swept to championships with home-grown talent like Jeter, center fielder Bernie Williams, catcher Jorge Posada and pitchers Andy Pettitte and Mariano Rivera. But they also assumed more than \$100 million in payments owed to Alex Rodriguez, who arrived in a trade with the Texas Rangers, and obtained the high-priced Jason Giambi, Roger Clemens and Randy Johnson.

In 2002, an investment group that included the Yankees formed the YES network to carry many games and broadcast Yankees-related programming. YES had \$257 million in revenue in 2005, for the first time surpassing MSG as the country's top regional sports network, according to Kagan Research.

The Yankees' management achieved stability in the last decade as the team captured World Series championships in 1996 and every year from 1998 to 2000. But the Yankees faltered after that in their bid for another World Series title, and when they were knocked out of the playoffs by the upstart Detroit Tigers in 2006, speculation arose that Mr. Steinbrenner would fire Torre.

Torre, the manager since 1996, stayed on, and Mr. Cashman, the general manager since 1998 and a frequent object of Mr. Steinbrenner's criticism, remained as well.

Even in his earliest days running the Yankees, Mr. Steinbrenner acknowledged that he seemed to rule through fear.

"Some guys can lead through real, genuine respect," he told Cleveland magazine in 1974. "There are some guys who people would walk through a wall for, O.K., but I'm not that kind of a leader." He likened himself to George Patton: "He was a gruff son of a bitch and he led through fear. I hope I don't lead through fear, and I would hope it was more love and respect, but maybe it isn't."

Mr. Steinbrenner's wrath often extended to the workers at Yankee Stadium. During an interview with The Times at his office in 1998, he called in two food-service employees and pushed a pretzel at them. "You call that fresh?" he said.

Always fastidious about his own grooming, he insisted that his players shun unruly hair and beards, displaying

something of the disciplinarian he had been at home, with his children. He admitted he had been overbearing and even verbally abusive toward them. His daughter Jennifer said in 2004 that her brothers had absorbed the brunt. "Let's put it this way: he had very high expectations of us," she said.

In addition to his wife, Joan (pronounced Jo-ann), his sons Hal and Hank, and his daughter Jennifer Steinbrenner Swindal, Mr. Steinbrenner is survived by his daughter Jessica Steinbrenner; two sisters, Susan Norpell and Judy Kamm, and several grandchildren.

In his later years Mr. Steinbrenner spent most of his time in Tampa, with his own corps of Yankees advisers, an arrangement that created a rift with the New York hierarchy headed by Mr. Cashman. He had divested himself of most of his business interests. American Shipbuilding filed for bankruptcy in 1993, but he owned a stud farm in Ocala, Fla., and had entered six horses in the Kentucky Derby over the years.

In April 2010, Forbes magazine estimated the Yankees' value at \$1.6 billion. The Red Sox had the second-highest value among major league teams, according to Forbes, far behind the Yankees at \$870 million, with the Mets third at \$858 million.

In his last years, Mr. Steinbrenner seemed to mellow some, and he spoke of the deaths of many friends. He cried in public on several occasions, including the time he walked past a group of West Point cadets who cheered for him at the Yankees' 2004 home opener. He cried again in a television interview that day.

"This is a very important thing that we hold the string to," he said of the Yankees, his voice cracking. "This is the people's team."

In building it into a fabulously successful and exceedingly lucrative enterprise, he never lost sight of his credo. As he told The New York Times in 1998: "I hate to lose. Hate, hate, hate to lose."

(The New York Times)