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Few and Chosen: Defining Yankee Greatness Across the Eras

Phil Pepe
Whitey Ford
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Next to the Marines, the New York Yankees are the epitome of “the few and the proud.” Throughout their major league existence—more precisely since they “stole” Babe Ruth from the Boston Red Sox in 1920—the Yankees have been the class of the game. Love them or hate them—it was once said that rooting for the Yankees was like rooting for U.S. Steel—their tradition of winning and producing some of the most legendary ballplayers in the game is well deserved.

The author was the premier lefthanded pitcher for the Bronx Bombers during one of their most successful periods (fourteen American League pennants and nine world championships between 1949 and 1964). Ford has taken up the difficult but pleasant challenge of picking his dream Yankees—the most outstanding of a long line of worthy candidates. Along with his co-author, one of the nation’s most respected sports journalists, he selects the top five Yankees for each position on the field.

Lou Gehrig is tops at first base, based on his legendary career as “The Iron Horse.” His teammate, Tony Lazzeri, gets the nod at second for his stellar play during the Yankees “Murderer’s Row” epoch. Ford rounds out the infield with a current Yankee and another fine fielder.

With a lot to choose from for the outfield, Ford narrows it down to a 2001 Hall of Fame inductee, a player who was named the Greatest Living Ballplayer in 1969, and, of course, the Babe. Behind the plate is Ford’s long-time catcher, the noted linguist Yogi Berra. The pitching corps is composed of current and past greats (Ford, with one of the highest winning percentages in the game, modestly excludes himself from the top five altogether). The author also selected an all-time manager.

More than 50 photographs give the book the appearance of a treasured family album. The writing style is companionable, like sitting down and conversing with a friend over a few beers.

Ford offers both anecdotal and statistical “evidence” to justify his choices. Whittling down the final few from all who played with the team was no doubt an arduous task. Of one difficult choice, he writes: “I have a dilemma. Who is the Yankees’ greatest center fielder? My heart says Mickey Mantle, my buddy, my teammate, my running mate. He was the brother I never had. But my head says Joe DiMaggio.” Doubtless, some readers will argue with his final choices, but one of the constant joys of the national pastime has always been the debates that ensue from such proclamations.

There have been many books written about the Yankees over the years; Few and Chosen will take its place as one of the better salutes to one of the best teams.

RON KAPLAN (January / February 2002)

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