

The Mick

I became a Yankee fan when I was nine for the 1963 season. Mickey Mantle was already past his prime, but the lore and legend of Mantle was well established. Most believed that if Mick didn't hurt his knee in 1951 and other later injuries, he would have challenged records for steals, let alone Ruth for Home Runs. I barely missed any games on WPIX TV from 1964 through 1967 with Joe Garagiola announcing regularly with the Phil Rizzuto (the Scooter) in 1964 and 1965. The Scooter spoke only of the Yankee Clipper in more reverent tones than Mick. He could not mention Yogi without laughing.

I attended several games during the 1965 season with my good friend Walter. They allowed large banners then, even full-sized bed sheets like the one we had that summer day. They allowed you to walk around with it in the stadium as long as you kept moving. I always had a strange sense of humor, including the idea for a banner that said, "Joe Gariagola wears a Hairpiece." The full head of haired Scooter loved teasing Joe G. about his hair or more so the almost absolute lack of it, so we figured at least the Scooter would enjoy the banner. He did, getting us on TV repeatedly according to friends, busting on Joe on the radio too, which we listened to on our transistor radio during the game during the three innings they were on radio as announcers went back and forth often at the time.

During the 7th inning stretch, Phil asked a security guard to come get us and bring us to the booth for a postgame radio interview at the end of the game. Mick hit a tape measure home run that bright summer day, so we shared the postgame interview with our hero. We didn't have much to say when asked; just smiled as the Scooter continued razing on Joe for his lack of hair.

During the winter of 1988-89, almost 24 years later, I met Mick again. The evening started out at the Baseball Writers Annual dinner at the New York Sheraton where every major Baseball award was awarded, with the Cy Young and Rookie of Year awards the exceptions at the time. Dave, his one-year younger brother Dick, Dick's best friend Jimmy and I went all out, with Tuxedos and a couple nice rooms at the Marriott Marquis, as we had no intentions of driving after drinking. I had not seen Jimmy in 16 years, who was a bigger fan of the Yankees and Mick than I was.

It was a huge event of a few thousand people, a who's who of baseball on the dais giving the awards and in the audience. The Mick was on the end next to Whitey. It was almost three hours before Whitey presented Mick with the Toast of the Town to cap the evening. Mick was already quite buzzed and in rare form and was quite funny, busting on everyone on the dais. He concluded, "I want all of you to promise to come down to my place on Central Park south, Mickey Mantle's Restaurant and have a night cap." Many fans, players, coaches, writers, and others accepted his invitation.

Many from the awards show were at Mickey Mantle's place later that night. After a short while, Mickey sat at a table in the rear of this elongated restaurant and started signing autographs. The line got long quickly. I got in line, but not before betting Jimmy shots of Berenzen for the night for all four of us that Mick will ask me to sit down with him.

When I got up to the Mick, I had nothing for him to sign, forcing him to look up to me and say, “What do you want me to sign kid?”

I responded, “Mick, I got your autograph when I was eleven up in the booth with the Scooter and Joe G. Do you remember the banner that said, “Joe Garagiola wears a Hairpiece,” I asked.

“That was you...have a seat kid,” as the lengthy line stopped dead. After laughs as he recalled that night, he spoke personally for a few minutes before a toast with me and then sending me to his agent, Greer Johnson. She gave me her business card with a color picture of Mick from his 1951 rookie Topps Card on one side.

As the evening progressed, we eventually got a table and a great table at that. It was on the upper tier, looking over the restaurant’s lower tier with a splendid view of Mick’s table in the rear and the who’s who of baseball people that continued to pay their respects as the night continued. Since we were not driving, we were all consuming plenty of shots of apple snaps on Jimmy. Mick was surely keeping up in the rear.

The bathroom was just to the left below us, and people were passing by us on the way there, eye level as we sat above the lower tier. Mick got up to go to the bathroom and remembered me from our earlier conversation. He also saw Jimmy staring at him with his nose a couple inches from the Plexiglas. Mick headed straight at us and walked into the Plexiglas, spread eagled his body and mashed his face on the Plexiglas inches from Jimmy who was staring at him as he is approaching. Everyone in view burst out laughing as Mick froze in that position for a while as Jimmy’s eyes become as wide as saucers.

Soon after, Dick and I had enough (or too much) to drink and returned to the hotel. In the AM we found out that after we left, Mick had invited them down to his table and they drank, partied, and listened to his stories long after closing time, with about a dozen others including the ex-manager, Dick Williams.

Postscript for the Mick: Later in life, Mick went public to tell his fans not to live a life of the alcoholic he was, a great concluding chapter of a New York icon.

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