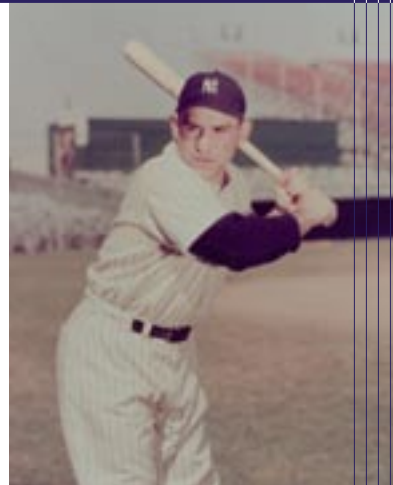




Now and then: Yogi Berra today and (OPPOSITE) striking a pose in Yankee pinstripes, circa 1952.

MORE THAN 40 YEARS AFTER
PLAYING HIS LAST MAJOR LEAGUE
GAME, YOGI BERRA, THE PRIDE
OF MONTCLAIR, REMAINS FIXED
IN THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION.
WHO'D-A THUNK IT?

By Christopher Hann



It Ain't Over

THE GREATEST LIVING YANKEE IS LEADING ME ON A TOUR OF THE MUSEUM

that bears his name. It's a Monday—the joint is closed—so I've got Yogi Berra all to myself. It's not a big space, but for true Yankee fans the Yogi Berra Museum & Learning Center, on the campus of Montclair State University, must resemble their notion of heaven on heaven's best day. It's a shrine to a bygone dynasty from a bygone day, when Lawrence Peter Berra and his Yankee teammates dominated Major League baseball through the middle of the twentieth century. Displays honor the glorious history of those gilded years with a royal treasure of Yankee memorabilia—signed baseballs, Most Valuable Player trophies, World Series rings, even World Series trophies. On walls and inside glass cases hang dated magazine covers and black-and-white photographs of the best players to play for some of the best baseball teams ever assembled: Joe DiMaggio, Mickey Mantle, Phil Rizzuto, Whitey Ford, Roger Maris, Elston Howard.

Pausing at a kiosk with snapshots of his boyhood in St. Louis or pointing to a photo of his teammates, all crew cuts and skinny ties, posing on the steps of the team plane, just landed in Milwaukee for the start of the 1958 World Series, Berra seems to bask in the company. Not that he's effusive about it; he's never enjoyed chatting up strangers and hates speaking in public. But in these friendly surroundings—after all, his teammates were some of his best friends—he enjoys a measure of comfort. Gesturing toward a poster-size photo of himself as a teenager stealing home in a 1942 sandlot game, he asks whether I recognize the catcher whose tag he's so deftly avoiding. When I can't summon a name, he gives me a hint: This guy went on to manage the Phillies and the Expos. But still I'm stumped. Then he touches my elbow, smiles, and gives it up: Gene Mauch.

Damn! Gene Mauch! Of course that's Gene Mauch!

Seventy-five minutes after our tour begins, after Berra has escorted me past renderings of all those baseball gods in their prime, past all the glass cases brimming with all that history, it's over. The greatest living Yankee walks stoop-shouldered down a hall that leads to offices at the rear of the museum. When we reach the end of the hall, I ask whether he might find the time to sit with me on another day so that I might pose more questions. "What are ya," he says, "writin' a book?"

PHOTO BY JOHN EMERSON

IN MARCH HE FLEW DOWN TO TAMPA, WHERE HE'S BECOME A STAPLE AT SPRING TRAINING. IN APRIL HE THREW OUT THE FIRST PITCH AT THE YANKS' HOME OPENER. IN OCTOBER, SHOULD THE TEAM RETURN TO THE WORLD SERIES, EXPECT TO SEE HIM BACK IN THE BRONX, BUNDLED UP IN A NAVY-BLUE SATIN YANKEE JACKET, TOSSING OUT ANOTHER. HOW MANY OCTOGENARIANS GET TREATED LIKE ROCK STARS?



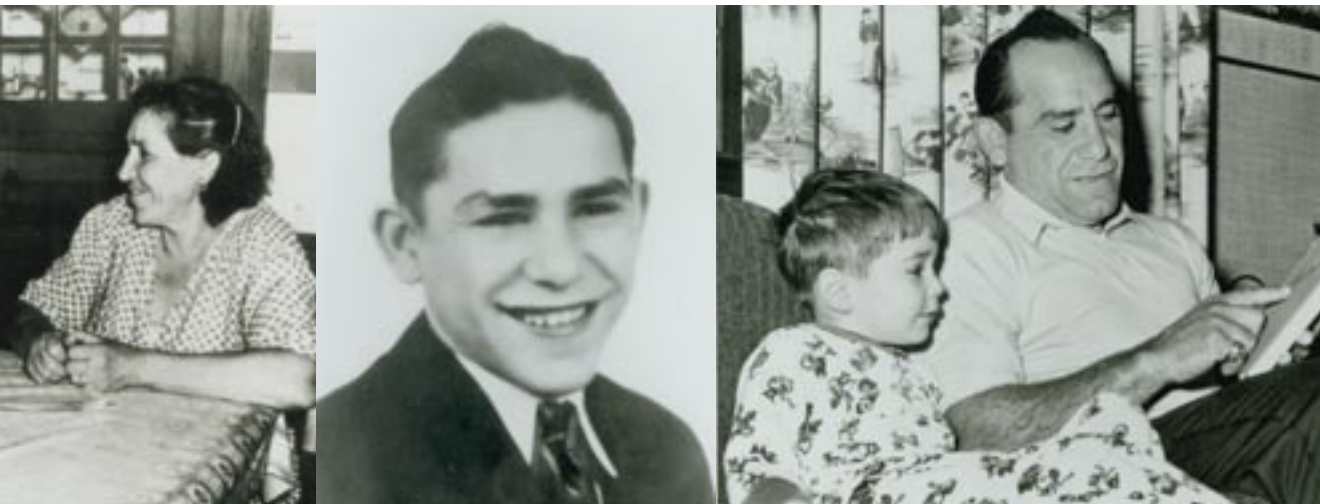
With that friendly riposte, designed to draw an indisputable line in the sand yet delivered with a grandfather's smile, I'm reminded how much we like to think we know Yogi Berra, and how much we really don't. For all the familiar highlights of his Hall of Fame career, for all the public appearances and TV commercials and vaguely mystical pearls he may or may not have uttered since first slipping his unlikely frame into Yankee pinstripes nearly 60 years ago, this popculture icon remains an intensely shy and private man. Public expressions of the inner Yogi are just not his style. Still, one thing seems certain: The naïve simpleton he's so often portrayed as just doesn't fly.

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE, BUT THE GREATEST LIVING YANKEE turned 81 in May. It's an age that tends to nudge deeper into shadows even former big-league ballplayers who once walked in the blinding glare of fame. Berra's friend and Yankee teammate Elston Howard, who lived nearby in Teaneck, died of heart disease in 1980 at age 51. Roger Maris was the same age when he died five years later. Billy Martin lost his life in a car crash on Christmas Day 1989. Mickey Mantle died of liver cancer in 1995, and Joe DiMaggio passed on four years after that. Phil Rizzuto, the Hall of Fame shortstop and godfather to Berra's oldest son, Larry, still lives nearby

in Hillside, but the Scooter turns 90 in September, and he doesn't get around much anymore.

Yet even at fourscore plus one, Yogi Berra remains one of the most recognized figures in American life. We've known him as a championship ballplayer, pennant-winning manager, and pitchman for Yoo-hoo, Miller Lite, and Aflac insurance. His 80th birthday occasioned fawning treatment from the *Star-Ledger* and *New York Times* and an invitation to throw out a ceremonial first pitch at Yankee Stadium. In Montclair, where he and his wife, Carmen, have lived for nearly a half-century, where they raised their three boys and sent them to the local public schools, he's the namesake of a gem of a ballpark beside his namesake museum. Strangers still approach him all the time, still want to shake his hand, chat him up, snap his picture, score his autograph. Last summer the Berras rode as grand marshals in Montclair's Fourth of July parade. (Parade organizers, planning to make an ice-cream cake for the occasion, asked Berra for his favorite flavor; "frozen yogurt," came the reply.) A few years ago, when he and Carmen left early from a theatrical production that debuted the new performing arts center at Montclair State, the night's star attraction, one Mikhail Baryshnikov, expressed great disappointment on learning that he had missed an opportunity to meet the greatest living Yankee.





In the unnerving weeks after 9/11, Berra appeared in one of a series of TV ads meant to lure tourists back to Manhattan. After conducting the New York Philharmonic in Ravel's *La Valse*, he turns to the camera and deadpans, "Who in the heck is this guy Phil Harmonic?" He and Carmen spend each January in Palm Springs, where he plays in the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic charity golf tournament. In March he flew to Tampa, where he's become a staple at spring training. In April he threw out the first pitch at the Yanks' home opener. In October, should the team return to the World Series, expect to see him back in the Bronx, bundled up in a navy-blue Yankee jacket, tossing out another. How many octogenarians get treated like rock stars? "He deals with it every day of his life," Carmen Berra says. "I'm so accustomed to it. The women are worse than the men—all ages. It's amazing."

The funny thing is, spend five minutes with Yogi Berra and you get the feeling that he'd be just as happy to dwell in anonymity. He accepts just a handful of the few hundred golf tournaments he's invited to each year and he declines most interview requests, his terse, mumbled responses invariably frustrating the rare inquisitor to whom he grants an audience.

Yet he's perfectly at ease in the company of fellow ballplayers past and present, dozens of whom show up each June to play in the museum's annual fundraiser at Montclair Country Club. (Who says no to Yogi Berra?)

Berra still works out at the Richard J. Codey Arena at South Mountain in West Orange, still gets his morning cup of joe at his favorite coffee shop in Verona, still savors a single vodka on the rocks every night. He still plays cards Wednesday nights at Montclair Country Club and golfs there every chance he gets. Even those closest to him marvel at his steadfast ways. "The most secure person I've ever known," Carmen Berra says of her husband. "He accomplished what he set out to do since he was five years old. He's just very happy with what he's done. He's happy with his three kids." She pauses for comic effect. "The only problem is *me*."

The Berras still frequent Pals Cabin, the venerable West Orange steak house where they shared many dinners with the late John McMullen, once the owner of the Devils and Houston Astros, and his wife, Jackie. McMullen, who grew up in Montclair and lived in town nearly his whole life, came to know his

(continued on page 71)

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Berra with his parents, Pietro and Paulina, at their home in St. Louis, 1947; Nine-year-old Lawrence Peter Berra; Reading to his son Larry, 1954; With Derek Jeter on Yogi Berra Day, July 1999; Back in the dugout on opening day 1999 with coach Don Zimmer; Making peace with George Steinbrenner, January 1999; With Mickey Mantle and Joe DiMaggio, 1962; As a Yankee rookie, 1947.

(PHOTO WITH ZIMMER, LOWER RIGHT) CHRISTIE JOHNSTON.



(continued from page 59)

fellow townie after Berra was dumped as Yankee manager in 1985, a firing that has become the stuff of legend. The '85 Yanks stocked some serious talent: Dave Winfield, Don Mattingly, Don Baylor, Rickey Henderson, Ron Guidry, Dave Righetti. They'd also signed third baseman Dale Berra, allowing his father the dream of managing his youngest son in the Major Leagues. But the Yankees stumbled early that season, and on the last weekend in April they dropped three straight games to the White Sox in Chicago. After the finale, a 4–3 ninth-inning heartbreaker, owner George Steinbrenner sent general manager Clyde King to inform the manager that his services were no longer needed. Word spread fast through the locker room. Dale Berra looked around and saw grown men with tears in their eyes. He walked into the



The future Yankee (FRONT ROW, FAR RIGHT) with his parents, three brothers, and sister, in 1934.

manager's office. "I'll be alright," his father told him. "Tomorrow I'll play golf."

He'd been fired before—once each by the Yanks and Mets. Hell, in his rookie year as skipper, he'd managed the '64 Yankees to within a game of a World Series title, and still he got canned. (Baseball, it's a tough racket.) No, what made him angry was the way it was done, the boss sending his proxy. Berra vowed never to return to Yankee Stadium as long as George III owned the team. Call it stubborn, call it short-sighted, call it what you will. Berra's stance was rooted in a pretty simple value system on which Steinbrenner had trampled: *If you're going to fire me, be a man and do it yourself.*

For the next fourteen years, Berra stayed away from the august green temple in the Bronx, where once upon a time he and his teammates had run roughshod over all comers. He missed the opening days, the Old-Timer's Days, even a couple of World Series championships. It couldn't have been easy; he *loved* the Yankees, old and new, *loved* being a part of that storied franchise. Who *wouldn't* love it? But he stuck to his guns. He took all that history and all that glory and told the boss to shove it up his pinstripes. And who else, over the past 30 years, has ever done that?

McMullen hired him the next year as a coach with the Astros. In the off-season, Berra, a hockey fan, became a regular at Devils games, often chatting with McMullen in the owner's private box at what was then Brendan Byrne Arena. They might have seemed an odd pairing—the ballplayer with the eighth-grade education and the Naval Academy graduate with a doctorate in mechanical engineering—but McMullen believed their friendship transcended their differences. "He's a very broad individual, unlike the public perception," McMullen said before his death last September. "You'll never find him saying a bad word about anybody. I would have to say that I consider him one of the best friends I have." When McMullen sold the Devils in 2000, a provision in the sale stipulated that he and Berra would continue to have access to the training facilities at the team's practice arena.

LARRY BERRA STILL REMEMBERS THE TIME HE mused aloud about trying to get tickets to a Frank Sinatra concert. His father said he'd see what he could do. "Who are you going to call?" Larry asked.

"I'll call Frank," his father said.

Larry was dumbstruck. "I've been your son for 21 years," he muttered, "and I didn't even know you knew *Frank Sinatra*?"

If the American public were queried on the subject, it's likely there would be near universal agreement that Yogi Berra's appeal is rooted in his humility, his humanity, his *everyman-ity*. "He would be just as good a friend with the guy who pumps gas in his car as he would with the chief executive of a major corporation in New York," Dale Berra says of his father. "He would not even distinguish the two."

He grew up as the youngest son of im-

YOGI BERRA

migrant parents in a poor Italian neighborhood in St. Louis known as Dago Hill. His favorite player was Carteret native and future Hall of Famer Joe “Ducky” Medwick, then playing for Berra’s hometown Cardinals. During World War II, Berra enlisted in the Navy, and on June 6, 1944, his rocket boat capsized off the coast of Omaha Beach. He’d just turned nineteen.

In 1955, when Berra won the last of his three Most Valuable Player awards, he befriended rookie Elston Howard, the first black Yankee and a fellow St. Louis native—never mind that the tall, handsome kid had shown such promise that he appeared destined to replace Berra as the next in a long line of great Yankee catchers. When Berra moved to Montclair four years later, he counted among his neighbors future Hall-of-Famer Larry Doby, the first black player in the American League.

Berra’s loyalty to his former teammates seems both wide and deep. At the request of Howard’s widow, Arlene, he contributed a foreword to her book *Elston and Me: The Story of the First Black Yankee* (University of Missouri Press, 2001). “Truly one of the greatest guys I ever knew,” he wrote. “If you were Elston Howard’s teammate, you were a friend for life.” Last year, when Berra got up to speak during the opening ceremony of an exhibit honoring Howard in White Plains, New York, the tug of friendship and memory proved too strong; the words jammed in his throat and his eyes filled with tears. It had happened before, when the Toms River team that won the 1998 Little League World Series visited the museum. Berra, addressing the young ballplayers, could not contain his emotions. Afterward, he told Dave Kaplan, the museum director, “Don’t make me talk to kids.”

At one point on our museum tour, Berra stops to admire a photograph of Joe DiMaggio celebrating another World Series win. “The great DiMaggio,” Hemingway had called him, and even today Berra regards his most hallowed teammate with a measure of respect that borders on awe. DiMaggio’s reputation took a posthumous mud bath in Richard Ben Cramer’s 2000 book *Joe DiMaggio: The Hero’s Life* (Simon & Schuster), which cast the Yankee Clipper as something of an empty vessel, greedy and myopic, a misanthrope who insisted that he always be introduced as “the greatest

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living ballplayer.” Berra will have none of the heresy. Joe D., he insists, was the best player he ever saw. He remembers DiMaggio sitting in the clubhouse with his legs crossed, sipping a cup of coffee, smoking a cigarette. Sure, he didn’t like to talk to people he didn’t know, but on the train headed for Boston or Cleveland or Chicago, DiMaggio would play cards with the rest of the fellas. And when you ate dinner with DiMaggio, you never paid a dime; the Dago, as he called himself, always picked up the tab. That’s the bigger-than-life teammate that Berra remembers. “He’d get off the train in another city,” he says, “and a car would be there to take him to the hotel, while the rest of the guys waited for the team bus.”

Last year, on the day before he turned 80, Berra’s loyalty did not prevent him from leaving a Yankee game in the sixth inning. He’d agreed to appear at a museum function for the minor league New Jersey Jackals later that day—punctuality, too, is a priority—and he wanted to be sure he’d get back to Montclair on time. Yankee officials asked him to wait until the seventh-inning stretch, but to no avail, so the greatest living Yankee missed hearing 47,844 fans sing “Happy Birthday.”

THEY MET IN 1948 IN ST. LOUIS. CARMEN was a waitress on the lunch shift at Biggie’s, a restaurant owned by Cardinals’ star outfielder Stan Musial. As Carmen remembers it, he walked into the restaurant from a round of golf, or so she surmised, as he was still wearing his spikes. He wasn’t exactly a Gary Cooper look-alike—5 feet 8, with floppy ears, an overdeveloped snout, and a gap-toothed smile. As for eighteen-year-old Carmen Short, let’s just say that she possessed the sort of looks that make blind men pray for miracles. In January 1949, the ballplayer and the bombshell were married. They settled in Montclair ten years later, moving first into a seven-bedroom Tudor-style home with a big front yard, a pool, and large patios where Mantle, Rizzuto, Ford, and other Yankee teammates would gather for barbecues after Saturday afternoon games at the stadium.

The Berras moved to a smaller Montclair house in 1974, a modest home by Montclair standards, notwithstanding the twin Jaguars parked in the driveway.

HE TAKES HIS GOOD NAME SERIOUSLY, AND HE AND HE AND HIS FAMILY GO TO LENGTHS TO PROTECT IT. BERRA'S SONS OPERATE LTD ENTERPRISES, CREATED TO PREVENT WHAT LARRY, TIM, AND DALE PERCEIVED AS RAMPANT ABUSE OF THEIR FATHER'S NAME.

Carmen and I are sitting in the tastefully decorated living room devoid of any overt evidence of her husband's baseball career. Framed photos of their sons and ten grandchildren abound on windowsills, desktops, the fireplace mantel. In a stack of books on a table, *The History of Art* sits atop *Yankee Encyclopedia*. Carmen's voice retains a hint of her Missouri roots, and for the ensuing 60 minutes she is exceedingly charming, if not entirely forthcoming. When I ask about the rift between her husband and George Steinbrenner, she wants to change the subject. "Oh, why go into that?" she says. "It was a natural process. People make peace."

But the standoff endured. Ford and Mantle implored Berra to return to Yankee Stadium. From time to time his sons tried to coax their dad; their kids—his grandchildren—were growing older, and they'd never really known Yogi Berra the Yankee. But he didn't budge. "I kept saying, 'Why are you mad at George?'" Carmen recalls. "He'd say, 'Oh, you don't understand.'"

Finally, in 1999, the radio broadcaster Suzyn Waldman brokered a deal. Steinbrenner would reach out to Berra personally, to apologize for the firing and to welcome back Ol' Number 8 into the warm embrace of the Yankee family. It's not incidental that their summit took place at the museum—Yogi's turf, not George's. When Steinbrenner arrived fifteen minutes behind schedule, Berra greeted him at the front door. "George," he said, "you're late."

The museum first opened its doors in 1998, adjacent to Yogi Berra Stadium, home to both the Montclair State baseball team and the Jackals, of the Can-Am League. Next year an expansion project will double the size of the museum, whose stated mission goes far beyond mere displays of baseball trinkets: "...to preserve and promote the values of respect, sportsmanship, social justice, and excellence through inclusive, culturally diverse, sports-based educational programs and exhibits." The American public may associate Berra with his Yogi-

isms—"It ain't over 'til it's over," he said of the 1973 pennant race, and he was right—but the museum's credo seems to reveal something vital about the greatest living Yankee. In six decades as a public figure, Berra has managed to remain untainted by scandal or vice, his reputation—and his marketability—only burnished by time.

He takes his good name seriously, and he and his family go to lengths to protect it. In an office at the museum, Berra's sons operate LTD Enterprises, created to prevent what Larry, Tim, and Dale perceived as rampant abuse of their father's name in the multibillion-dollar sports-memorabilia industry. LTD sells photographs, baseballs, T-shirts, and books, all with a guaranteed-authentic Yogi Berra autograph; the "It Ain't Over 'Til It's Over" bat will set you back \$350. For a premium, he'll even personalize the autograph. "The business is nothing more than the Berra family taking care of its own," Dale Berra says.

Last year his father filed a \$10 million lawsuit against the Turner Broadcasting System after one of Berra's granddaughters noticed ads for the hit TV show *Sex and the City* on buses in Manhattan. *Yogasm*, the ad posed cryptically, followed by a selection of answers that included "Sex with Yogi Berra." The lawsuit claimed that the ad had sullied the reputation of "a deeply religious man who has maintained and continues to maintain a moral lifestyle." The *New York Post* splashed the story across the front page, bumping a dying Pope John Paul II to a thin strip across the top. Following mediation, the suit was settled for a sum that Berra's lawyer described as "substantial."

In 2003 a one-man play about Berra, written by Brooklyn-born playwright Tom Lysaght, was about to debut off-Broadway. Actor Ben Gazzara, born on Manhattan's Lower East Side, the son of Sicilian immigrants, was set to play Berra. Lysaght and Gazzara arranged to meet with Yogi and Carmen, to seek their blessing, if you will, for their production of *Nobody Don't*

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YOGI BERRA



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Like Yogi. The play takes place on Opening Day 1999, as Berra makes his much ballyhooed return to Yankee Stadium. Alone in the Yankee clubhouse, nervously awaiting his introduction before a capacity crowd, he reminisces about his good fortune—for being a Yankee, for marrying Carm, for his three boys, for the grandkids—and he revisits a few ghosts as well. He remembers an argument with Steinbrenner, the boss making disparaging remarks about Dale. He remembers the cruel things that opponents and even teammates called him—ugly was just the start of it—in his rookie season. He questions his own merits as a father: *Was I too tough? Was I tough enough?* It's tender and funny and maybe a little corny—"a celebration," Lysaght calls it.

But not long after he and Gazzara met with the Berras, Lysaght received a phone call from Dale Berra. Without elaborating, Dale told Lysaght that his parents did not want to endorse the play. "Dale said, 'My father didn't want to revisit the whole George thing,'" Lysaght recalls. "It was sort of ironically in character."

Of course, in real life, the team held Yogi Berra Day, in celebration of his return to Yankee Stadium, on July 18, 1999. Plenty of Berra's former teammates showed up, including Don Larsen, whose appearance brought everyone back to October 1956, when the journeyman right-hander tossed nine innings' worth of aspirins past the brawny Brooklyn Dodgers—no hits, no walks, no nothing—a World Series perfect game, still the only one. Berra caught Larsen's perfection that day, and the photo of him leaping into Larsen's lanky arms in the delirious aftermath of the final out belongs among the defining images of American sport. For Berra, who won ten World Series titles, more than any other player in the game's history, Larsen's no-hitter still ranks as his most exciting day in baseball.

So what happens on Yogi Berra Day? David Cone is on the mound, Joe Girardi is behind the plate, and the Montreal Expos are in the opposing dugout, not a single one of whom has ever faced a pitch from Cone. And wouldn't you know it? The crafty right-hander mows down 27 straight Expos, another perfect game—on Yogi Berra Day!

Too preposterous to conceive? Nah. Funny stuff happens all the time when you're the greatest living Yankee. ■