

# JOE DIMAGGIO: THE YANKEE CLIPPER HAS LEFT AND GONE AWAY

*Richard Dewland and Joseph Majka*

"He is no saint, but DiMaggio has carried something with him throughout his playing career, throughout his public life- it is called grace. . . . Through it all, he has just been Joe DiMaggio."<sup>1</sup>

Just what was it like to be Joe DiMaggio? Perhaps, it was hitting safely in fifty-six straight games, establishing a record that will never be broken. Maybe, it was belting 361 career home runs while only striking out 369 times. Possibly, it was having Marilyn Monroe as your bride. Conceivably, it was winning ten American League Pennants and nine World Championships in thirteen years. Perhaps, it was inheriting Babe Ruth's legacy as the greatest player on baseball's best team. Maybe, it was effortlessly navigating the vast, seemingly boundless sea of green that was centerfield at Yankee Stadium. Finally, perhaps it was receiving reverent references in Simon and Garfunkel's "Mrs. Robinson"<sup>2</sup> and in Earnest Hemmingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*.<sup>3</sup>

But maybe being Joe DiMaggio was not about the awards, accolades or achievements. Rather, it may have been the ability to perform baseball's fundamental tasks with dignity and poise: never having to dive for a ball because he was always a step ahead; never losing his cap while stretching a double into a triple with his long graceful strides; insisting that he always be introduced as "baseball's greatest living

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1. *A Living Legend* (visited Dec. 30, 1999) <[http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CLASS/AM483\\_97/projects/vizzuso/final10.html](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CLASS/AM483_97/projects/vizzuso/final10.html)> (quoting sportswriter Mike Lupica).

2. Simon & Garfunkel, *Mrs. Robinson* (Columbia Records 1972).

3. See ERNEST HEMINGWAY, *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA* 75 (Charles Scribner's Sons 1960). Hemingway wrote: "I must have confidence and I must be worthy of the great DiMaggio who does all things perfectly even with the pain of the bone spur in his heel." *Id.*

ballplayer.”<sup>4</sup>

Joseph Paul DiMaggio was born on November 25, 1914, in Martinez, California. Before ending his incredible playing career, DiMaggio compiled an impressive array of numbers. His lifetime batting average was .325. Along with his 369 home runs, DiMaggio drove in 1,537 base runners. He received three American League Most Valuable Player Awards. During his thirteen seasons, DiMaggio led his New York Yankees to ten Pennants and nine World Championships. Major League Baseball inducted him into the Hall of Fame in 1955. And in 1969, the honor of “greatest living ballplayer” was bestowed upon him.<sup>5</sup> For someone with Joe’s humble beginnings, it was hard to fathom this rapid ascension to stardom.

Despite his rapid ascension, many observers of a young Joe DiMaggio sensed his athletic gift. By 1933, he had already achieved superstar status in the minor leagues while playing for the San Francisco Seals of the Pacific Coast League. In that season, one in which he attracted scouts from all sixteen major league teams, an eighteen-year-old DiMaggio, batted .340, smacked twenty-eight home runs, batted in 169 runs, and hit safely in sixty-one consecutive games.<sup>6</sup> Although impressive, these statistics merely foreshadowed one of the greatest careers in major league baseball history.

In 1936, DiMaggio signed a contract with the fabled New York Yankees for the modest sum of \$25,000. He had a successful rookie campaign, posting a batting average of .323, with twenty-nine home runs and 125 runs batted in. More importantly, DiMaggio helped lead the Yankees to a World Series victory over the New York Giants, his first of ten trips to the Fall Classic. Years later, Edward G. Barrow, the Yankees’ business and general manager who signed Joe to a contract remarked, “It was the best deal I ever made.”<sup>7</sup>

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4. Joseph Durso, *Joe DiMaggio, the Yankee Clipper and an American Icon, Dies at 84* (last modified March 8, 1999) <<http://www.nytimes.com/library/sports/baseball/bbo-dimaggio-obit.html>>. Baseball assigned this moniker to DiMaggio in 1969, the centennial of the sport. See *id.*

5. See *id.*

6. See John Helfers and Russell Davis, *The DiMaggio Era: Baseball From 1936-1951*, in JOLTIN’ JOE DIMAGGIO 54 (Richard Gilliam ed., 1999).

7. *Id.* at 55 (quoting New York Yankee business and general counsel, Edward

Undoubtedly, DiMaggio's greatest on-the-field personal accomplishment occurred during the 1941 season. As the Yankees surprisingly slumped to begin the season, DiMaggio embarked upon a streak that would captivate a nation. It all started rather innocently, with a single to left field during a game against the Chicago White Sox on May 3. From there the hitting streak gained impetus, as DiMaggio laced singles, doubles and triples while he tried to resuscitate the Yankees from their early season doldrums. It captured the attention of both the media and the fans. The common question on every American's mind that magical summer was, "Did he get a hit?"<sup>8</sup> At Boston's legendary Fenway Park, DiMaggio's rival, friend, and fellow superstar Ted Williams,<sup>9</sup> closely watched the scoreboard every day with a mixture of pride and envy as Joltin' Joe amassed base hit after base hit. "According to sportscaster and author, Maury Allen, 'It had become the single most important event in America.'"<sup>10</sup> On June 29, DiMaggio shattered George Sisler's<sup>11</sup> nineteen-year-old American League record of hitting safely in forty-one straight games in a doubleheader against the Washington Senators. Then, on July 1, DiMaggio broke the modern day record of hitting safely in forty-four consecutive games set by Wee Willie Keeler in 1897. Fittingly, DiMaggio accomplished this feat by blasting a home run against Ted Williams' Boston Red Sox.

The streak sat at an unbelievable fifty-six consecutive games when the Yankees rolled into Cleveland on July 17 for

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G. Barrow).

8. *56 Was The Number Everyone Was Talking About That Year...* (visited Dec. 30, 1999). <[http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CLASS/AM483\\_97/projects/vizzuso/final3.html](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CLASS/AM483_97/projects/vizzuso/final3.html)>.

9. Many regard Ted Williams as the greatest pure hitter in baseball's history. He won six batting titles, four homerun crowns, and four RBI titles in the American League. See *Ted Williams* (visited Jan. 21, 2000) <<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0109754.html>>. In addition, Williams won baseball's Triple Crown and MVP award twice. See *id.* Over nineteen seasons with the Boston Red Sox, Williams compiled a lifetime batting average of .344 and slugged 521 homeruns. See *id.*

10. See *56 Was the Number Everyone Was Talking About That Year...*, *supra* note 8 (quoting sportscaster Maury Allen).

11. A first baseman for the St. Louis Browns, George Sisler still holds the record for most hits in a season, 257. See George De Gregorio, *A Hitting Streak Not Soon Forgotten*, in *JOLTIN' JOE DIMAGGIO* 8 (Richard Gilliam ed., 1999); *George Sisler* (visited Jan. 20, 2000) <<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0109646.html>>.

a contest with the Indians. As he had done since May 3, DiMaggio hit the ball hard. However, Indian's third baseman Ken Keltner robbed the Yankee Clipper by making two stupendous diving stabs in the hole, and the streak finally died. Incredibly, DiMaggio hit safely in another sixteen straight games after his historic streak. Although the Yankees captured another World Championship, and DiMaggio earned the American League's Most Valuable Player trophy, everyone focused on the number fifty-six that year. In every city, messengers brought the good news of another DiMaggio base hit to the masses. During the summer of 1941, when the war in Europe threatened America's peace, Joe DiMaggio provided relief and respite with his sweet, graceful swing.

By the 1943 season, it was obvious that Joe was destined for the Hall of Fame. However, as the United States became embroiled in the battle to stop Hitler, DiMaggio faced a decision that required him to balance the interests of his career against the interests of his country. Joe subsequently enlisted in the Air Force in January of 1943, joining the likes of Ted Williams, Hank Greenberg<sup>12</sup> and Luke Appling<sup>13</sup> in the war effort. Joe served in the Air Force for the next three years. This detour into the armed services deprived Joe of three prime baseball seasons. In later years, Joe would muse about the heights he might have achieved had he not served in the Air Force.<sup>14</sup> However, to decline to serve his country in a time of crisis would be to breach the virtues of duty and loyalty that he held so sacred. Joe chose to put his baseball career on hold.

The New York Yankees soon discovered what an indispensable ingredient DiMaggio was to their ball club. He was the spark that ignited the Yankees' engine, and the

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12. Greenberg, while playing first base for Detroit, twice earned MVP honors. See *Hank Greenberg* (visited Jan. 14, 2000) <<http://infoplease.com/ipa/A0109236.html>>. Four times Greenburg led the American League in homeruns and RBI's. See *id.*

13. Appling played shortstop for the Chicago White Sox for twenty years. See *White Sox in the Hall of Fame* (visited Jan. 14, 2000) <<http://fastball.com/whitesox/archives/hall/>>. He twice led the American League in batting average. See *American League* (visited Jan. 21, 2000) <<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0759695.html>>.

14. See Helfers and Davis, *supra* note 6, at 71.

driving force that galvanized their success. DiMaggio's dogged tenacity and presence served to invigorate and inspire his teammates. His prolonged absence created a void that would not be filled until his return. As a result, the Yankees would not return to the World Series until Joltin' Joe was back, firmly ensconced in the middle of their lineup.

By 1951, Joe noticed that his once phenomenal ability had eroded to an unacceptable level. Rather than play with diminished skills, Joe decided to retire while still on top of his game. On December 11, 1951, at a press conference to announce his retirement, DiMaggio said, "I once made a solemn promise to myself that I wouldn't try to hang on once the end was in sight. I've seen too many beat-up players struggle to stay up there, and it's always a sad spectacle."<sup>15</sup> Thus ended the career of the Yankee Clipper. However, the reluctant and intensely private hero would remain in the public eye for the rest of his life.

Though Joe DiMaggio generally attempted to escape public scrutiny, this became unrealistic in 1954 with his marriage to Marilyn Monroe, the most glamorous and audacious woman in Hollywood. To millions of Americans, it seemed like the perfect union. But, there was insurmountable tension from the outset. While on honeymoon in Japan, Marilyn was asked to perform for American troops fighting in Korea. Returning to Joe in Japan she marveled over the ovations she received from the troops, "Joe, Joe it was wonderful, the troops loved me. You have never heard such cheering.' His reply: 'Yes, yes darling, I have.'"<sup>16</sup> Marilyn was unable to grasp the sheer magnitude and power of Joe's aura as a retired legend. Joe was unable to accept Marilyn's unquenchable thirst for the spotlight. Unfortunately, in less than one year, America's sweetheart couple separated and filed for divorce.

Though much is written about their turbulent marriage, it was how Joe DiMaggio treated Marilyn Monroe after their divorce that revealed the quality of his character. He

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15. William Simmons, *Joe DiMaggio And The American Ideal*, in JOLTIN' JOE DIMAGGIO 24 (Richard Gilliam ed., 1999).

16. *American Icons* (visited Dec. 30, 1999) <[http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CLASS/AM483\\_97/projects/vizzuso/final4.html](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CLASS/AM483_97/projects/vizzuso/final4.html)>.

remained steadfastly in love with Marilyn until the very end. Despite numerous offers, Joe refused to cash in and write a "tell-all" book exploiting his relationship with Marilyn. He made it clear that his memories were not for sale. After Monroe's suicide, Joe took charge of the funeral arrangements, refusing to allow it to degrade into a Hollywood spectacle. Thereafter, he placed a rose on her grave once a year. Although the fairytale relationship ended tragically, DiMaggio did what was necessary to protect and preserve its integrity.

DiMaggio tried to retreat into his own private, personal domain. He shunned the bright lights and kept a low profile, but never completely disappeared from the public eye. This only enhanced his mystique, and heightened his stature. DiMaggio always seemed to emerge at just the right time, just the right moment to remind us of his presence, and that his legend would never die. Sadly, on March 8, 1999, Joe DiMaggio passed away due to complications from lung cancer at the age of 84. His passing had a profound impact not only on the baseball world, but also on society as a whole. As veteran sportswriter Frank Deford observed, "It was really quite extraordinary . . . how much attention was paid to the old man, as he lay dying a few months ago. As if he were some great head of state, bulletins were issued regularly as he came in and out of a coma, on and off life support."<sup>17</sup>

As those words evidence, Joe DiMaggio was something more than just an outstanding baseball player. He was the son of Italian immigrants in the San Francisco Bay area who was taught the values of modesty and humility. He was an ambassador to a past era of innocence and morality before the turbulent and chaotic times of discord choked the nation. He was an American icon who represented elegance, sophistication and class. He served as a role model and an inspiration to Italian-Americans who were themselves victims of harsh discrimination in the early 20th century. He conducted himself as a professional both on the field and off, always impeccably dressed in handsome, finely tailored

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17. Frank Deford, *Our Nation Turns Its Lonely Eyes To You* (visited Dec. 29, 1999) <[http://www.cnn.com/inside\\_game/deford/990303](http://www.cnn.com/inside_game/deford/990303)>.

suits. He stood at the zenith of his profession in the capital of the world – New York City – yet was careful not to overexpose himself like so many present-day celebrities. No, Joe DiMaggio was something special, something magnificent, something regal. His legacy will be cherished, not forgotten. He was baseball's version of Camelot. He was the Yankee Clipper.

A rose for you, Joe D.