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Asterisk (*) on Honesty: the Tragedy of Roger Maris

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My paper describes the ordeal and tragedy of the great home run hitter, Roger Maris. In 1961, as a member of the New York Yankees, Roger Maris hit 61 home runs in a single season, thus breaking the legendary Babe Ruth's mark of 60. Instead of being celebrated, Maris was criticized by many people all over the United States, especially those in New York. Moreover, the then-commissioner of Major League Baseball basically put an asterisk next to his record as if he did something shameful. The main focus here is on Maris, the introverted but honest young man from Fargo, North Dakota, and the pressures of playing in New York.

Hitting a home run in any kind of baseball game, whether professional or amateur, is regarded as something special because nearly all home runs fly past the boundaries of the baseball field. Moreover, a home run is considered legitimate in the sense that it is nearly always outside the realm of a fielding error by a member of the opposing team or an umpire's call. However, there is a heroic dimension to hitting a home run. As one writer put it best, "To hit a home run in a major league baseball game is to defy the edges of the expected [...] One home run is a great victory. To surpass all men in all recorded history in home runs struck in a single season is beyond belief. And beyond belief is where heroism is found" (Kern 2004: 2).

The home run in Major League Baseball (MLB) is not only heroic but also historically important. The home run helped save baseball in the 1920s. After the infamous Black Sox Scandal when eight members of the Chicago White Sox were suspended for life from baseball because of their involvement in a conspiracy to throw the 1919 World Series to their opponent, the Cincinnati Reds, baseball was at its nadir. Almost miraculously a man by the name of George Herman "Babe" Ruth, who was sold by the Boston Red Sox to the New York Yankees at the end of the 1919 season, changed baseball's image overnight. Ruth consistently hit several home runs in nearly every season he played, including a then-record 60 home runs in 1927. In addition, he turned a losing franchise that had never been to a World Series into perennial fixtures there. Yankee Stadium became commonly known as "the house that Ruth built" and a mystique about playing there was developed. By the time Babe Ruth retired in

1935, he had hit 714 homeruns in his career and, along with his 60 home runs in 1927, these records were not only considered phenomenal, but unbreakable too.¹

The New York Yankees dominated the American League in which they played long after Babe Ruth had retired. Between 1921 and 1964, the Yankees won 29 American League pennants and then proceeded to beat the National League pennant winners 20 out of 29 times in the World Series. Every player who put on a Yankee uniform knew that winning was everything—and if he didn't, he found out the hard way very quickly from both the Yankee management and his teammates! Tommy Henrich, a star player on the Yankees from 1937 to 1950, had one word to describe the Yankee teams he played for and that was *tough* (Halberstam 1989: 134). David Halberstam, an excellent historian on baseball as well as American politics, wrote that as late as 1964

The Yankee players themselves had come to believe in their invincibility. They were not merely the best; they were the toughest players as well: they almost always won the big games, and because they had played in so many big games, they were therefore better prepared for the terrible pressure of a pennant race or a World Series. It was simply part of being a Yankee (Halberstam 1995: 3-4).

Moreover, since Yankee management, at the behest of the owners of the team, were stingy with even their star players over their salaries at contract time, a winner's share in the World Series was very important in those years. If a young player made the Yankees and did not play hard enough, the veteran players on the team would say, "That's my money you're playing with." Even veteran players who were traded from another team to the Yankees felt this pressure on the need to win the pennant and the World Series (Halberstam 1989: 134-5). In addition, a World Series victory got a player not only a bonus check that could help build a house, but also a World Series ring. In 1963 a rookie pitcher named Steve Hamilton was shown a ring from one of the veteran players who had four already and was told "Listen, Steve, the good thing about the Yankees is that you don't just get a ring for yourself. You get yours the first year, then you get one the next year for your wife, and the year after that for your oldest kid, and after that for your other kids" (Halberstam 1995: 4).

This was only a part of the Yankee lore that a young man named Roger Eugene Maris entered when he was traded to New York from the Kansas City Athletics in December 1959. Roger Maris was born on September 10, 1934 in Hibbing, Minnesota, but at the age of seven his family moved to Fargo, North Dakota, and he basically identified himself with this town.² "He was a small-town boy raised in Fargo, North Dakota, and he remained a small-town boy the rest of his life" in the view of many people (Halberstam 1995: 159). Maris was an All American boy in Fargo who also played football, but it was a career in baseball that he chose. The Cleveland Indians signed him in 1953, whereupon he played in the minor leagues, including for a while in Fargo, and finally made the major league team in 1957. In June 1958 Maris was traded for the first time in his career to Kansas City where he spent the next season and half.

Maris liked both playing and living in Kansas City a lot and was upset about the major trade that landed him with the Yankees, and he wasn't shy to express his feelings. He told the New York writers "I'm not all that happy about coming to New York. I liked Kansas City, I expected to play out my career there" (Halberstam 1995: 158-9). Moreover, from the start he found New York City as an alien and inhospitable place to live. The moment he arrived at La Guardia Airport Maris got an idea of what life would be like for him in New York. Maris arrived without a sports jacket, and wearing a sweater, a polo shirt and a pair of inexpensive Pat Boone shoes.³ He was told by an agent of the franchise that "the Yankees don't dress like that. They wear jackets and shirts and ties." Maris replied in a way in which he was later

known for: “If they don’t like the way I dress they can send me back to Kansas City” (Halberstam 1995: 159). The Yankee *look* was not for him.

He (Maris) did not lightly accommodate to anything that was different, nor was he ever anxious to change his ways. He was what he was, and the world of New York owners, New York sportswriters, New York fans, and even New York baseball players would have to take him for that or find someone else. The more he was pressured to change, the more he resented that very pressure, and the less flexible he became (Halberstam 1995: 159).

Ironically, all this pressure would never have occurred if Maris had just been a better than average player. Even Maris once said “All I wanted is to be a good player and hit twenty-five or thirty homers, drive in a hundred runs, hit .280 and help my club win pennants. I just wanted to be one of the guys, an average player having a good season” (*Baseball Almanac*). If he had been such a player, Maris would have been in the limelight only occasionally and sportswriters and fans would have concentrated more on the other Yankee stars of the time, like Mickey Mantle and Yogi Berra, for example. But it was part of the irony of Maris’s difficult career in New York that he was made to order for Yankee Stadium and its short right-field fence. Maris was a great pull hitter and was capable of hitting many home runs, as he proved in his first season with the Yankees in 1960 when he hit 39 home runs.⁴

However, it was the following year that proved fateful for Roger Maris and baseball history. After a slow start, Maris went on a hot streak and began hitting home runs in abundance and by the mid-way point of the 1961 season both he and Mickey Mantle were on track to break Babe Ruth’s 60-home run record. Naturally, both Maris and Mantle attracted a lot of media attention, not to mention the interest of baseball fans all over America. Mantle, who had already been a star for years, was used to such attention, but Maris definitely was not. Moreover, his chase of Babe Ruth’s record came when the medium of attention had already begun the shift from newspapers and radio to television. Maris “involuntarily became one of the first modern athletes caught in the glare of the new media society.” As a result

Maris, a man of old-fashioned values and loyalties, an honorable man who tried to live within his own code, was completely unprepared for this new definition of the athlete. Unfortunately, his assault upon Ruth’s record was probably the first great sustained sports story in the age of modern media. At first printer reporters seized on it, which soon whetted the appetite for television coverage, and as television coverage followed the chase with an ever more watchful eye that inspired even greater print coverage [...] They did not [...] care whether or not he had hit an inside curveball or a low fastball [...] Millions of Americans wanted to know what Roger Maris was really like, and they wanted to know every day for more than two months (Halberstam 1995: 163-4).

Though he gave one-to-one interviews to those reporters he trusted, Maris was sometimes curt and often perplexed by the media. For example, when asked once that season if he thought he had a chance of breaking Ruth’s record he just said “How the f--- do I know?” Also, when the press coverage started getting more personal, Maris, a married man whose wife was pregnant that year for the fourth of their eventual six children, was even asked by a reporter from *Time* magazine if he “played around on the road” (Halberstam 1995: 162,165).

It was the reaction of the baseball world towards his assault on Ruth’s record that created the greatest stress on Roger Maris. The worst reaction in my opinion was that of Commissioner Ford Frick. Frick, who was an old friend of Babe Ruth, worried that either

Maris or Mantle would break the home run record, especially due to the new 162-game schedule as a result of expansion in the American League in 1961. A trouble-making *New York Daily News* sports columnist Dick Young advised a troubled Frick to: “Use an asterisk on the new record. Everyone does that when there’s a difference of opinion.” Acting on this advice, Frick announced at a press conference in July of that year: “If the player (Maris or Mantle) does not hit more than 60 until after his club has played 154 games, there would have to be some distinctive mark in the records to show that Babe Ruth’s record was set under a 154-game schedule” (Barra, *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 March 2004). Even though many have argued that Frick had no authority to officially place such an asterisk on any record, the die was cast and most sportswriters and fans began the countdown to the 154th game of the Yankees schedule.

The Yankee organization made matters worse when they gave Maris no help or protection against the media and their persistent questions. Maris had no press officer to help filter questions or set aside certain times for him to deal with the press. Also, the Yankee players themselves were rooting for Mickey Mantle to break the record. It was not that they disliked Maris – in fact, they understood the great stress he was under – but as a former Yankee second baseman Bobby Richardson said: “Mickey (Mantle) was thought of as a *true* Yankee. Roger had been traded in from Kansas City. I think Roger understood” (Gildea, *Washington Post*, 17 August 1998). Mantle himself got along well with Maris. He knew the pressures of being a Yankee and the fickleness of both the press and fans in New York. He had often been compared unfavorably to the legendary Joe DiMaggio in his early years and was many times booed. It was an irony “The glory that should so readily have been Mantle’s, the acclamation of the New York fans of his greatness and of his ability to carry the team year after year, came only after a decade of play and only when Roger Maris challenged him in 1961.” When he heard Maris booed that year, Mantle noted with amusement, “Roger has stolen my fans” (Halberstam 1995: 11).

The fact that the New York media and fans were critical of Maris began to color the view of Americans all over the country. Oliver Keuchle of the *Milwaukee Journal* wrote cruelly after Maris hit his 59th home run: “If the [home run] record is to be broken, it should be done by someone of greater baseball stature and greater color and public appeal [...] Maris is colorless [...] There just isn’t anything deeply heroic about the man”⁵ (Gildea, *Washington Post*, 17 August 1998). As a result, Maris was often booed in other cities where he played. As one later writer put it: “Maris might have been the first underdog in the history of America who didn’t capture the hearts of the nation” (Sangimino 2001). In spite of all this, Maris eventually hit 61 home runs, but the 61st one came in the 163rd and last game of the season.⁶

It would be a major omission here if I failed to mention that Maris *was* actually celebrated by many after breaking Ruth’s record. President Kennedy invited him to the White House where both men posed together during a photo opportunity as Maris signed a baseball for the President. The then-famous actress, Doris Day, posed with both Maris and Mantle during their cameo appearance with her in a forgettable film, *That Touch of Mink*. Many of the younger sportswriters also wrote favorably about Maris’s accomplishment, in comparison to their older colleagues. However, Maris was never at ease even under these circumstances. The stress of breaking Ruth’s record, where he even lost patches of hair by the end of the season, was too much. Also, Maris liked his privacy and felt uncomfortable about the constant exposure he received. In one unfortunate incident, Maris, a church-going Roman Catholic, walked out of a church in New York after the priest noticed him in the back and announced to the parishioners that Roger Maris was among them. Finally, Maris was, as one teammate described, one “who never heard the cheers but always remembered the boos” (Halberstam 1995: 159-60, 169).

And the boos would come in greater numbers in 1962. Maris had posted such good numbers statistically during the previous two seasons (in fact, he was voted Most Valuable Player in the American League after both seasons) that it would have been difficult to replicate them. In fact, he did hit 33 home runs and drove in 100 runs that year, but this fell far short what Yankee fans expected after his remarkable feat in 1961. Halberstam, among others, have often noted that it would have been easier on Maris after 1961 if he had come close to Ruth's record and just missed it (like Mantle who had hit 54). "In that case he would have been seen as a sympathetic figure who had just fallen short of an elusive goal. Instead, he was cast as an ordinary ball player who had the temerity to break a record of which he was not worthy" (Halberstam 1995: 170-1). Maris, in response to attacks from the press and fans in New York, reacted defiantly. The clearest incident of such a nature occurred during a doubleheader at Yankee Stadium on 30 July 1962. Some fans threw golf balls at Maris in right field and he picked them up and threw them right back. The situation got so ugly that the umpires had to escort him to the outfield by the end of second game. After the doubleheader Maris told reporters that he was through trying to win friends and influence people in New York (Halberstam 1995: 180).

Maris's relationship with the Yankee front office was even worse. As would be expected, the Yankees were parsimonious with him. Maris commented bitterly to a reporter in later years about the Yankee owner of the time, Dan Topping:

You know what I got from Topping for hitting those sixty-one homers that year? Nothing. Not a cent. Not a gift. Nothing. I don't know what the Yankees drew (they had their largest attendance in ten years), but they gave me nothing" (Halberstam 1995: 169-70).

Maris felt he deserved a bonus of \$50,000 for his 61 home runs: management instead offered him a \$50,000 contract (Maris had made \$37,500 the year before – after an MVP season) and no bonus! This led to a lot of haggling and in the end Maris received a contract of \$72,500. In the end, both sides felt offended by the behavior of the other. However, Maris stayed a Yankee until the end of the 1966 season when he was traded to the St. Louis Cardinals. Despite injuries which had cut down his playing time and home run ability since 1963, Maris was happy in St. Louis. In the two seasons he was there the Cardinals made it to the World Series, winning the one in 1967. After the 1968 season, Maris retired and, as a show of appreciation from the then-owner of the Cardinals, Gussie Busch, he received a beer distributorship in Florida to take care of him and his family in retirement.

Roger Maris died at the age of 51 of cancer on 14 December 1985. However, his passing hardly created a ripple in America, even in the baseball world. Moreover, he died with the asterisk still on his record (it was not *verbally* removed until 1991 by then-Commissioner Fay Vincent) and without being voted into the Hall of Fame. The only real dignified thing done for him by the Yankees was the decision by the present-day owner, George Steinbrenner, to retire his number at Yankee Stadium in 1984. However, in years since he died there has been a greater appreciation in what Maris accomplished in 1961. His name came up often in 1998 when both Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa broke his home run record with 70 and 66, respectively (a record which was then broken by Barry Bonds in 2001 when he hit 73 homers). But with recent revelations on the suspected steroid-use of these three players (along with Sosa's corking of his bat), the luster of his 61 home runs has increased and taken on a new meaning. Even earlier, a nostalgia and sentimentality for him had already begun to form, often in conjunction with Mickey Mantle which was best symbolized in actor-director Billy Crystal's film *61**.

This writer has developed nostalgia for former times in baseball too. But one cannot let nostalgia and sentimentality totally rewrite history or interpret it in the wrong way. Sometimes in making amends to Roger Maris, some writers tend to come up with interpretations of his personality and his time in New York which deserve greater scrutiny. Maris's North Dakota roots have led to a *populist* interpretation of his difficulties in New York. David Halberstam and opinions of other people collected by him for his chapter on Maris in his book, *October 1964*, have tended to veer in that direction. While there is some truth with this interpretation, it can be a bit exaggerated too. First, Maris was of Croatian descent and a Roman Catholic, not a northern European Protestant. Second, he might have been colorless and boring in interviews, but it does not make Maris a hick from Fargo who could not bear the big city. After all, he loved Kansas City and wanted to play and live there the rest of his life: a city which in the 1930s during the time of the Pendergasts was considered an *open* one.⁷ Finally, even Halberstam noted in his chapter on him that Maris regularly ate breakfasts with Julie Issacson (the man who commented on Maris's clothes earlier) at a famous Jewish deli in the theater district whenever the Yankees played at home – not exactly the thing a real Populist would do!

If I had to make an interpretation of Maris and New York and his difficulties there, I would turn to Billy Wilder's award-winning film, *The Apartment*. This film came out at the very time Maris arrived in the city and involved a young man, C.C. "Bud" Baxter (played by Jack Lemmon) who works in a large, impersonal insurance company in New York where Baxter tries to get ahead by letting his employers use him by borrowing the key to his apartment to bring their mistresses there. In the end, though it meant throwing away an excellent promotion, he refuses to lend his key to the chief executive of the company because he decides to follow the advice of his helpful neighbor, Dr Dreyfus, and become a *mensch* (the Yiddish word for "a human being"). And in that respect, I feel I can conclude here and say that in this sad, even tragic, episode in baseball history, Roger Maris was definitely *the mensch* of this story.

Endnotes

- ¹ Henry ("Hank") Aaron has the record today with 755 home runs in his career.
- ² Even the eggs and baloney he ate every day for breakfast was referred to as *Fargo* style!
- ³ Pat Boone was a popular actor-singer during the 1950s in the United States. But for a New Yorker to make such a reference to a man from a small town in 1960 would be, in my opinion, the equivalent of saying a woman at that time was like the actress, Sandra Dee – the sarcastic insult used in the musical, *Grease*.
- ⁴ Maris's total was only one behind teammate Mickey Mantle who hit 40 homers in 1960.
- ⁵ According to William Gildea's article, Keuchle's words still hurt in the Maris family.
- ⁶ One Yankee game ended in a rare tie in baseball and had to be replayed.
- ⁷ See pages dealing with Kansas City during the Pendergast era in David McCullough, *Truman*, 1992.

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