



BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

## Two on Yogi Berra: A Catcher of Character

His enduring appeal? He was 90% great athlete and the other half goofball.

By Edward Kosner

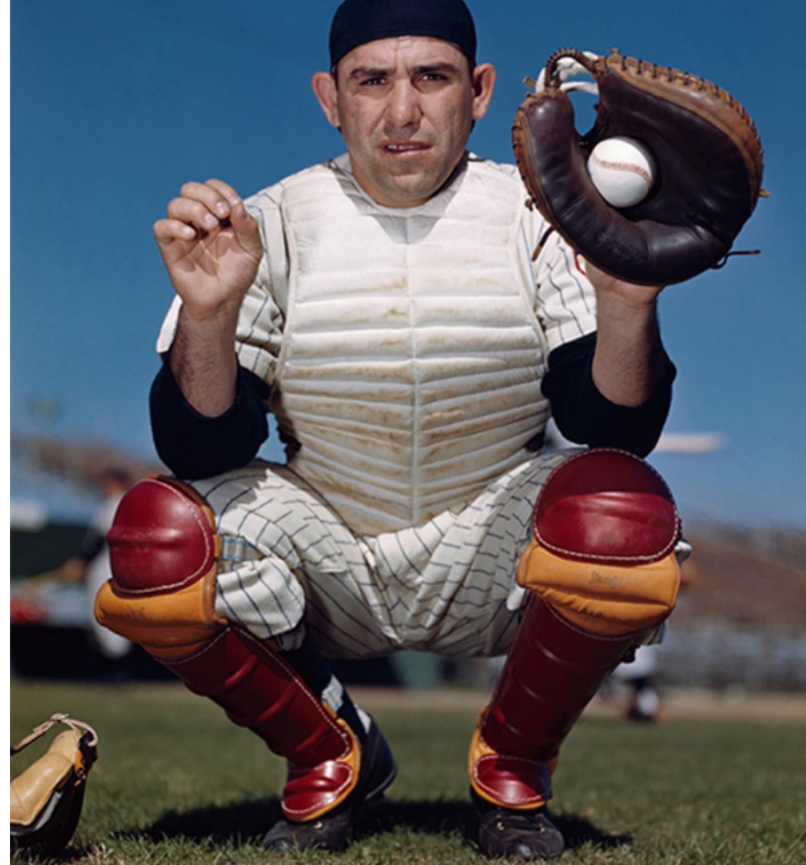
Updated April 10, 2020 5:47 pm ET

SAVE PRINT TEXT

49

Perched in a place of honor on my desk as I write this is a holy relic: a shellacked Rawlings baseball signed by the 1948 New York Yankees. If you look closely, you can make out the signatures of Joe DiMaggio, Vic Raschi, Joe Page, Bobby Brown and the rest. And there in an inconspicuous spot is “Larry Berra”—modest Yogi on the brink of his great fame.

Lorenzo Pietro Berra, later Lawrence Peter—always “Lawdie” to his immigrant parents, who couldn’t pronounce Larry—is the most beloved baseball player of the postwar period, and perhaps of all time, Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Jackie Robinson and a few other others notwithstanding. He would join other great Yankees in the sequence Ruth, Gehrig, DiMaggio, Mantle, Jeter and Rivera—had his 18-year career not been overshadowed first by the Yankee Clipper and later by the Mick.



Yogi Berra was a baseball lifer who played in 18 All-Star games and 10 World Series championships.

PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE

### YOGI: A LIFE BEHIND THE MASK

By Jon Pessah

Little, Brown, 567 pages, \$30

### MY DAD, YOGI

By Dale Berra

Hachette, 237 pages, \$27

major-league game now instead of recycled classics during this plague year. But Mr. Pessah’s book is as good a proxy for baseball pleasure as you’re going to find.

It’s a relaxed, sprawling affair—like those Yankee Stadium Sunday double-headers in the 1950s against the lowly Washington Senators and Philadelphia Athletics that lasted until dinner time, with the score in the second game 14-3 Yankees. This is a heart-warming narrative with a heroic protagonist who overcomes every imaginable obstacle to achieve greatness. There are no steroids, garbage-can-banging cheaters or “Baseball Annies,” those complainant women who trawled the corridors of the hotels where the teams stayed. There’s barely a mention of the “greenies”—amphetamine pills—that players gobbled to sharpen up after postcurfew bar crawls or of hard drugs, except in the case of Yogi’s cocaine-addicted son, Dale, an infielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates shuffled off to the Berra-managed Yankees.

Dale has written his own paean, “My Dad, Yogi,” that confirms nearly all of Mr. Pessah’s portrait of his father. But his book is essentially an addiction memoir in which he describes the shame of playing for his father when his skills were already being sabotaged by his off-season coke-snorting. He credits Yogi for the family intervention that finally set him right.

In both books, Berra has all the Boy Scout virtues: He’s trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent—and miraculously, that appears to be accurate. It’s also clear that the caricature Yogi—the lovable, knuckle-dragging, comic book-devouring primitive with an otherworldly gift for hitting baseballs and coining garbled aphorisms—was always a media construct. I’ve known this forever. With the Yogi myth in full bloom at midcentury, I collected autographs at one of those “Meet the Yankees” fan dinners. I tiptoed up behind Berra, who was in deep conversation with Jerry Coleman, the Yankees’ stylish new second baseman, and couldn’t help overhearing Yogi giving Coleman tips on how to play . . . the stock market. No fool, Yogi.

“Yogi: A Life Behind the Mask” has special resonance for me because Berra first became a Yankee in 1946, at precisely the moment that I began following baseball as a Yankee fan. After a strong season in Triple A, Yogi had “a cup of coffee”—a couple of games—with the big club in September. In 22 at bats in seven games, the 21-year-old hit .364 with a double, two home runs and four runs batted in.

That Berra made it to the major leagues, much less the Hall of Fame, was miraculous in itself. He grew up in an Italian working-class neighborhood in St. Louis called the Hill—or, less politely, Dago Hill—across the street from Joe Garagiola, who was also honored by the Hall of Fame, not as a catcher, but as a major-league broadcaster. All Berra and his older brothers wanted to do was play baseball, but their father, Pietro, a brickyard laborer, ordered him to go to work. Young Lawdie finally prevailed, but he was passed over by Branch Rickey, the baseball wizard then running the St. Louis Cardinals, who signed Garagiola instead to a \$500 contract. But talent can’t be denied, and eventually Berra found himself a Yankee, tutored as a catcher by the great Bill Dickey, whose position and number 8 he would eventually inherit. Just before that, like so many others, World War II interrupted his baseball trajectory and Berra served with valor on an armed Navy landing craft on D-Day.

Mr. Pessah tells the Berra saga chronologically—season by season, triumphs and heartbreaks, World Series euphoria and the humiliation of being fired as a manager three times, the last by the mendacious Yankee owner George Steinbrenner. We are on the field as Berra fails to throw out Al Gionfriddo stealing second base with two outs in the ninth inning of Bill Bevens’s messy 1947 World Series no-hitter against the Dodgers at Ebbets Field—only to have pinch-hitter Cookie Lavagetto win the game with a double off the right-field wall. Four years later, Berra cooks Ted Williams’s foul pop up with two outs in the ninth, forcing Allie Reynolds to get Williams to pop up to Yogi a second time to seal his no-hitter. But World Series highlights more than make up for the miscues, especially Don Larsen’s 1956 perfect game, with the classic photo of Berra leaping into Larsen’s arms after the final out.

The Yogi origin story is an essential part of any Berra book. At 16, Berra was playing on an American Legion club. Teammate Bobby Hofman, later a major-league infielder, thought Berra sat waiting to bat like the Yankee yogs in a movie he saw. The nickname stuck, but it didn’t insulate Berra from a torrent of ridicule as a big-league rookie and long into his career. “Nature Boy,” “Quasimodo” and “The Ape” were one strain of abuse, “Dago,” “Wop” and “Guinea” another. Opposing players hung by one arm from the dugout roof when he came to bat. Bananas flew onto the field from the opposing benches. It ate at Berra, but he was stoic and retorted with a Yogi-ism: “I never saw anyone hit with their face.”

Berra’s fractured philosophy was mutually beneficial to him and the sportswriters who made up some of it. The sagacity of many Yogi-isms was no fluke. He was a shrewd man—a sharp judge of character and a hard bargainer. He was a bold holdout for raises throughout his baseball career, making him for years one of the three highest-paid players in the majors. One of the first athletes to have a commercial agent, he scored lucrative deals with Yoo-hoo chocolate drink and other products, and cleaned up at baseball-card shows and Hall of Fame weekends in Cooperstown. He partnered with Phil Rizzuto, his best Yankee patsan, on a money-making New Jersey bowling alley and lived with his wife, Carmen, for years in a big house in Montclair, N.J., with CEOs as neighbors.

When his playing days with the Yankees were over after 18 years, he embarked on a nearly three-decade second career in the dugout. He was a popular and effective coach, but as a manager Yogi excelled as a martyr. At just 38, he took over the Yankees in 1964. His team won 99 games to reach the World Series, but lost in the seventh game to the St. Louis Cardinals, whose manager, a baseball lifer named Johnny Keane, was promptly named to replace Berra. Yogi moved crosstown to be a coach (and make the briefest cameo as a player) for the comical New York Mets, who were routinely losing a hundred games a year under Berra’s old Yankee manager, Casey Stengel. When Stengel’s successor, Gil Hodges, died of a heart attack at 47, Yogi found himself a manager again.

His 1973 season leading the Mets spawned two of the most famous lines in baseball history. After his team fell to last place in June, Yogi sagely observed, “It ain’t over till it’s over.” Then the Mets caught fire late in the summer with Tug McGraw, the star relief pitcher, intoning “Ya gotta believe!”—an instant mantra for underdogs everywhere. New York lost the World Series to the Oakland A’s, and after two mediocre seasons, Berra was booted again.

He bounced back to the Yankees for one of the most fraught episodes in the Legend of Yogi. Steinbrenner, the blustery Cleveland shipbuilder, now owned the Yankees, and he chose a new manager nearly every year, most of them named Billy Martin. It was Yogi’s turn for the ’84 season, and the Boss tormented Berra from the start, overruling him on player decisions and spreading word that he was about to dump him as the team founder. Yogi, for once, exploded. Mr. Pessah renders the scene with cinematic flair. As Steinbrenner berated Yogi, he writes, “Berra listens to the tirade with his head down, staring at his fists, which he keeps clenching, then opening, trying to keep his anger from boiling over.” Suddenly, he leaps up and fires his pack of cigarettes at the owner. “You put this f—ing team together,” he screams. “And then you just sit back and wait for us to lose so you can blame everybody else because you’re a chickens—liar!” Steinbrenner bided his time. The Yankees rallied in 1984, and the Boss told Yogi that he would manage for ’85. But when the team struggled at the start of the next season, he fired Berra after just 16 games.

Yogi refused to show up at the stadium for the next 14 years. He and the team finally reconciled, and on July 18, 1999, the Yankees staged a lavish Yogi Berra Day at the stadium. David Cone pitched for the Yankees against the Montreal Expos. With Don Larsen in the crowd of Yankee heroes, Mr. Cone threw a perfect game. There is a baseball God, and he loved Yogi Berra.

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

SHOW CONVERSATION (49) ▼

### SPONSORED OFFERS

WALMART: Walmart coupon: \$10 off all departments

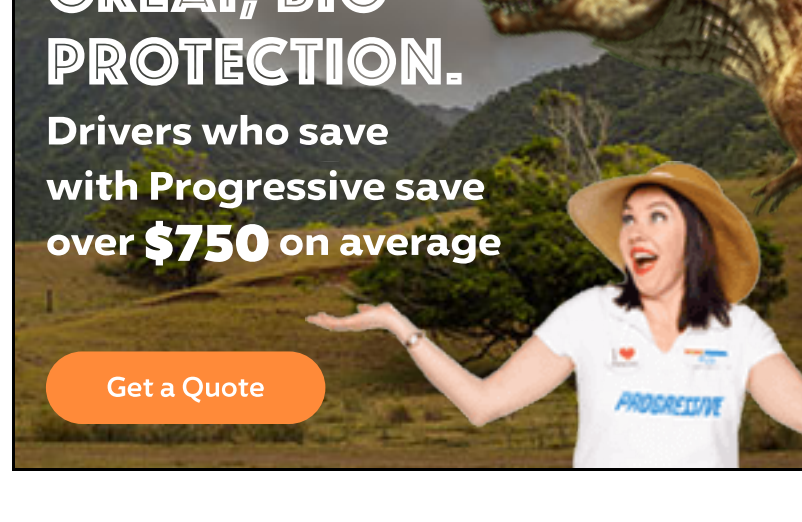
KOHL’S: 20% off your entire order with Kohl’s coupon

EXPEDIA: Expedia promo: 50% off fully-refundable hotel bookings

EBAY: Up to 15% off branded sneakers & more with eBay coupon

HOME DEPOT: 10% off furniture using Home Depot coupon code

TARGET: Target baby registry - 15% off sitewide + \$80 of coupons



### RECOMMENDED VIDEOS

1. Inside Beirut’s Blast Site Days After the Explosion
2. What Kamala Harris Brings to Biden’s Ticket
3. Joe Biden and Kamala Harris Officially Launch Presidential Ticket
4. This 30-Ton Robot Could Help Scientists Produce the Crops of the Future
5. Joe Biden Picks Kamala Harris as Running Mate

### WSJ MEMBER MESSAGE

## Press a Button and This Plane Lands Itself

Garmin’s auto-land capabilities take over in the event of a pilot’s medical emergency. Discover its potential impact on the future of transportation.

READ MORE

### JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Suburban Home Prices Are Rising. But So Are Most Urban Home Prices

A Deadly Coronavirus Was Inevitable. Why Was No One Ready?

Weekly Unemployment Claims Drop Below One Million for First Time Since March

Young Wuhan Evacuee Finds No Refuge From Coronavirus in U.S.

Stir-Crazy Travelers Are Ordering Airline Food to Relive the Flying Experience

What Happens to All of the Unsold Clothes?

Admit It, You Do Laundry During Work Video Calls

‘The Gold Standard’: Why Chinese Startups Still Flock to the U.S. for IPOs

WSJ News Exclusive | TikTok Tracked User Data Using Tactic Banned by Google

New U.S. Coronavirus Cases Tick Up Again as Back-to-School Worries Intensify

BACK TO TOP ▲

### Customer Service

Customer Center  
Contact Us

### Tools & Features

Emails & Alerts  
Guides  
My News  
RSS Feeds  
Video Center  
Watchlist  
Podcasts

### Ads

Advertise  
Commercial Real Estate Ads  
Place a Classified Ad  
Sell Your Business  
Sell Your Home  
Recruitment & Career Ads  
Coupons

### More

About the Newsroom  
Content Partnerships  
Corrections  
Jobs at WSJ  
Masthead  
News Archive  
Register for Free  
Reprints  
Buy Issues