

The Old Man

BY GEORGE VECSEY

THE OLD MAN TALKS TO ME EVERY DAY, in that raspy whisky voice of his.

He would clamp his paw on your forearm, like one of those so-called Denver Boots the police put on the tires of illegally parked cars. You could not pry him off.

“Wait a minute,” he would bellow. “I’m trying to tell you something.”

What was Casey Stengel trying to tell us? Usually, something practical relating to baseball, but often it was about the weirdness of baseball, the intricacies of it, like life itself.

The Old Man used to say, “Every day in baseball you see something you never saw before.”

Early in the 2004 season, on national television, Roger Clemens of the Houston Astros was pitching to Barry Bonds of the San Francisco Giants. The broadcasters said it was the first time in baseball history that a pitcher with 300 victories had ever pitched to a slugger with 600 home runs.

Right away I thought: “The Old Man.”

It happens a lot. A ball takes a squirrelly path, a player commits a gaffe, and I find myself muttering, “I’ve never quite seen *that* before.”

Strange things happened around Casey, and he was alive enough and alert enough to sputter or laugh about them.

Of all the managers and coaches I’ve been around, Casey

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Stengel taught me the most. I was part of that motley band Casey called “my writers.” Some of his ballplayers were wise enough to learn from him, too.

“You knew when he was being funny,” said Ron Swoboda, who played one season for Casey with the Mets, and still treasured it four decades later. “And you knew when he was serious.”

Swoboda was under no illusions, then or now. He was a raw kid with a bit of power, and he was the best Casey had. The Old Man had managed DiMaggio and Berra and Mantle, and now he had a player he called “Suh-boda.”

But somehow or other, Casey Stengel, in his four years with the dreadful Mets, performed a more amazing job than he had with the lordly Yankees. For this new franchise he created an image of lovability that has barely eroded decades later.

Managers and coaches are often handed the burden of being role models, doing that job for the rest of society. Molding character was not exactly Casey’s goal in life. He was no kindly Mr. Chips. He referred to himself as “the slickest manager in baseball”—and he expected others to be slick, too.

Ron Swoboda learned that lesson in 1965. He was a husky rookie out of Baltimore, not yet twenty-one years old, bright and outspoken, but in baseball experience still a busher.

In an early-season game in old Busch Stadium in St. Louis, the Mets had a three-run lead in the ninth. Swoboda was playing right field as the rain ended and a strong sun emerged, directly in his eyes.

“The smart thing would have been to call time and get my sunglasses,” Swoboda recalled in 2004. “But I figure, ‘One more out, I can handle it.’ Then Dal Maxvill hits a little flair that either would have been a single or I would have caught it, but I lose sight of it, and I have no clue how to play it, so three runs score and the game is tied.

“I know I screwed up,” Swoboda recalled, “and I come up to bat the next inning and I make out and by now I am an emotional bomb. I stomp on my old fiberglass helmet. I’m gonna

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crush it. But the open end is facing up, and my foot gets caught, and it closes around my foot and I'm jumping around on my other foot."

The description from somebody in the dugout was that Swoboda resembled "a demented chicken."

"Casey comes up the stairs like he's twenty-five," Swoboda recalled, "and he grabs me with his good hand. He had broken his wrist that spring, and I figure he's going to hit me with his cast. He's yelling, 'When you screwed up the fly ball, I didn't go into your locker and break your watch, so don't you break the team's equipment!' Then he said, 'Go sit down!'"

"You know the movie *A League of Their Own*, where Tom Hanks says, 'There's no crying in baseball'? Bullshit. I sat there and cried. I figured my career was over."

Only later did Swoboda figure out that Casey had affection for him, the way he did for a few of his brighter young players. He could be tough on the Youth of America, but he was preparing them.

It made him nuts if ballplayers didn't listen. He loved to tell the story about when he was managing the Yankees in 1951 and escorted young Mickey Mantle out to right field before an exhibition in Ebbets Field in Brooklyn. Casey wanted to show Mantle the complexities of the wall, but Mantle mostly stared at him, unable to fathom that his manager had once patrolled this very field.

"He thinks I was born old," Casey muttered to "my writers," who functioned as his Greek chorus. The writers' job was to hum appropriately when he made a good point.

Casey's outlook was based on his experiences. He'd been to Europe and Japan before it was convenient. He was born in the late nineteenth century and he still buzzes in my head early in the twenty-first century.

People said he spoke in Stengelese, a dialect straight out of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky." Other times he spoke blunt Anglo-Saxon that had earthy folk wisdom to it.

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In his monologues, he called other people “Doctor,” so we referred to him as “the Doctor.” If we debated him, he would frequently say, “You’re full of shit and I’ll tell you why.” He was the first person I remember who used the term “you asshole” as a debating point, without incurring harsh feelings—no easy trick. And when the umpires’ decisions and logic went against the Mets in those early gruesome years, Casey used to say, “They screw us because we’re horseshit.” And he was right. The umpires did, and the Mets were.

He could ramble on, if he wanted to. In 1958, he captivated a Senate hearing into the fairness of baseball’s antitrust exemption, filibustering until the senators laughingly begged for mercy.

Casey’s testimony is an American classic, right up there with Nixon’s “Checkers” speech and Marilyn Monroe singing “Happy Birthday, Mr. President,” well worth seeking out with a simple Google search. Somehow, if you listened long enough, you figured it out.

Charles Dillon Stengel (born July 30, 1890, in Kansas City, Missouri) took a circuitous route to being one of the immortal sports figures in his country. He was a quite decent outfielder in the National League and then he was burdened with the stigma of failure as a manager. In nine horrendous seasons with the Brooklyn Dodgers and Boston Braves, he never once finished in the top half of the eight-team league.

He then managed well enough in the fast Pacific Coast League to earn the Yankees’ call in 1949. Joe DiMaggio and many of the older Yankees thought he was a clown, a minor leaguer, but he soon showed he had enough nerve to run the Yankees his way.

“He had his funny moments with the Yankees, but he wasn’t this lovable old clown, either,” said Swoboda, who later became a broadcaster and a student of his sport, particularly Casey’s career.

“He was a tough old bastard,” Swoboda added.

Foisted upon the older Yankees, Stengel showed no fear of

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improvising and tinkering and taking command. He ran a platoon system at some positions like left field, alternating a left-handed hitter like Gene Woodling with the right-handed Hank Bauer. Neither of these crusty warhorses liked being platooned, except when they cashed their World Series check almost every autumn. He even put the great DiMaggio on first base for one game, just to prove he could.

In World Series games, he was not afraid to go a long way with hot relief pitchers like Joe Page, or use one of his best starters, Allie Reynolds, in relief, or bring in an obscure pitcher like Bob Kuzava in a tight situation. He was utterly fearless, and he answered to no one.

His main disciple with the Yankees was a scrappy little infielder named Billy Martin, who had known Stengel back in the Pacific Coast League.

“I love that old man with the ball in his sock,” Martin would say, referring to a lump on Casey’s ankle, a souvenir from having been hit by a taxi one rainy night in Boston. (One columnist nominated the cabbie as the man who did the most for Boston sports that year.)

Martin loved Casey right up to the moment Martin was involved in a brawl in a nightclub, the Copacabana, along with several more valuable Yankees. The Yankees’ front office traded Martin away, but Martin blamed Casey and did not talk to him for a decade.

There was very little parental about Casey Stengel. Casey and his wife, Edna Lawson Stengel, did not have children, for reasons only they knew. People did not discuss such things back then. She had been an actress in New York, but they settled near her affluent banking family in Glendale, California. I remember her as willowy, cultured, and friendly, a grand old lady in my youthful eyes, and formidable enough to deflate some of Casey’s bluster.

I encountered Casey during his last pennant run in 1960. I was twenty years old, just graduating from Hofstra College, and my

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boss at *Newsday*, Jack Mann, thought it was time for me to cover my first major league game up at Yankee Stadium.

It was a day game, and by 11 a.m. Casey was chattering to the writers in the dugout, blending tales from the olden days with fresh insights into the previous night's game. He was in the process of moving Clete Boyer into the regular lineup at third base, benching the veteran Gil McDougald, and he discussed it at great length, with apologies to nobody.

The pregame drill is very different today in the age of the microphone and the camera and the tight security. Joe Torre conducts a useful fifteen-minute update to the media swarm before the game, seated in the dugout while the Yankee Stadium sound system blares its inanities.

Back then, Casey held court. On my first day covering the Yankees, I was so fascinated with him that I sat in the dugout and gaped, not noticing that I was the only writer left.

Finally Casey turned to me and said, "Young man, you'll have to leave now because otherwise I'll have to put you in the starting lineup." It was about five minutes to game time.

His action revealed the essential Stengel. He could have made me feel like an idiot for staying too long, but he let me off the hook with a joke. He was not like some managers then and now who delight in bullying a newcomer. He saved his best stuff for his bosses, or his stars, or lions of the media like Dick Young or Howard Cosell, or critics like Jackie Robinson.

(Robinson—who had been the favorite player in my Dodger-centric household—criticized Stengel in his Mets years, saying Casey tended to snooze in the dugout. "Tell Robi'son he's Chock full o' Nuts," Stengel blurted, aptly referring to the coffee company Robinson had represented.)

Most of the Yankees kept their distance, judging Casey as one lucky eccentric to be able to manage the Berras, Fords, and Mantles.

Casey would not win a popularity contest in his clubhouse.

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Clete Boyer will never forget kneeling in the on-deck circle in the second inning of the first game of the 1960 World Series.

Then he heard the Old Man shout, “Hold the gun!” Casey was sending up Dale Long to hit for Boyer, because the Yankees had fallen behind, 3–1, and had two runners on base. The Old Man’s move was not only unorthodox, it was cold.

The Yankees lost that Series in seven games, and Stengel was blasted for not starting his ace, Whitey Ford, until the third game. Ford wound up pitching two shutouts, in the third and sixth games, and critics said he theoretically could have pitched three times if he had opened the Series.

The Yankees dismissed Casey immediately afterward. He said he would never again make the mistake of turning seventy.

On his body of work—ten pennants and seven World Championships in twelve seasons with the Yankees—Stengel was now one of the great managers in baseball history. He could have stomped off to California and lived very nicely representing his brother-in-law’s banks.

However, he was not ready for the civilian world. He still needed “the baseball business” at least as much as it needed him. He was saving up a last act as manager that was, in its own way, more spectacular than his time with the Yankees.

Casey returned to Yankee Stadium in the fall of 1961 to attend a World Series game with the Cincinnati Reds. I remember the buzz as he strode through the cheering crowd of New Yorkers, his formerly gray hair now shockingly reddish. (Milton Gross of the *New York Post* referred to Casey as “Bixby,” the name of a shoe polish of the distant past.)

New York got Casey back in 1962, after the New York Mets had been formed in an expansion draft.

There had been a terrible gap in New York after the Dodgers moved to Los Angeles and the Giants moved to San Francisco after the 1957 season. There was nothing like today’s glut of televised games and sports highlight shows to keep up with Mays, Clemente, Aaron, and Robinson.

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In 1962, the National League stars were coming back to New York to play the Mets, who included some of the worst culls and rejects from other farm systems. Would haughty New York tolerate a dismal baseball team? That was why the man with the rubbery face and the equally flexible syntax had been brought back from California.

“There was a huge longing for National League ball,” Swoboda said. “Casey bought time by taking advantage of this.”

Casey’s job was to teach baseball, win a game here and there, entertain desperate New Yorkers, and sell some tickets. He tried the flim-flam approach at times. Dismissing a young pitcher during spring training of 1962, Casey said the Mets wanted to compete for the pennant and could not afford inexperienced players.

This was pure poppycock. Most of the time, Stengel caustically referred to how “the attendance got trimmed,” meaning, in his lexicon, that the paying customers had been shortchanged.

Casey also fought publicly with his general manager, George M. Weiss, who had been his boss with the Yankees and had now rescued him from enforced retirement. Casey probably was grateful. But whenever the frugal Weiss tried to retain a player in whom he had invested a few dollars, Stengel thundered that the player was “a fraud.”

I can picture him naked, a tough old bird in his early seventies, his Mets uniform lying discarded on the floor of his office, while he pounded his burly chest and proclaimed the entire franchise was “a fraud.”

Casey was doing something no other man in “the baseball business” had ever done—he was managing and performing vaudeville at the same time. He was creating a personality for a bad baseball team in the toughest market in the country. He was inventing the New York Mets on the fly.

“He sacrificed some of his legend to keep the media and the fans from turning on the team,” Swoboda said.

At the same time, Casey was talking baseball to the fans, the writers, and the players.

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“Why wouldn’t ya wanna . . . ?” was Casey’s Socratic prelude to a lecture about some nuance of his business.

The writers and fans tended to get more out of Casey than many of his players. Casey discovered this one day during batting practice when he was delivering a lecture on the batting technique he called “the butcher boy”—chopping downward to knock the ball through a hole in the infield.

Casey looked around at the blank looks of his own players. Then he spotted one pair of alert, intelligent eyes watching his every move, absorbing his every word.

Unfortunately, those eyes belonged to Maury Wills, the short-stop for the Dodgers, the Mets’ opponent later in the day. Wills had already won one World Series in 1959 with his resourcefulness, and was not above eavesdropping on Casey’s seminar. Needless to say, the Old Man did not run Wills off. He was a baseball man, teaching baseball.

Some Mets appreciated him. One was Richie Ashburn, the feisty old center fielder who ran into walls, fought with umpires, batted .306, and brought out the humorous side of an itinerant first baseman named Marvelous Marv Throneberry, who became the personification of the Mets—inept, but also comical. Ashburn hated to lose, and he understood that the Old Man did, too. Nobody blamed him when he bailed for a broadcasting job after one season.

Another player who totally got Casey was Rod Kanehl, a vagabond utility player whom Casey had once noticed years earlier at the Yankees’ minor league complex. Casey kept him around the Mets for three seasons because Kanehl hustled and would play any position (seven, ultimately). Kanehl also took up Casey’s standing offer of \$50 for getting hit by a pitch with the bases loaded.

A midwesterner like Stengel, Kanehl felt the same fascination with the big city that Stengel once had. As a young Dodger, Stengel had enticed teammates into the rudimentary subway system, blithely losing them and forcing them to find their way

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back to their hotel. Kanehl also acted as subway tour guide to other Mets, who called him “the Mole.” Kanehl absorbed Casey’s wisdom; he just didn’t have enough talent to execute the lessons.

Casey did not escape criticism. In addition to the old sleeping-in-the-dugout charge—why wouldn’t you want to snooze out of sheer escapism?—Casey was said to confuse players’ identities. One former Met has said that Casey once ordered “Blanchard” to pinch-hit and that the coaches had to tactfully tell Casey that Johnny Blanchard was still employed across the Harlem River with the Yankees. More likely, Casey just mixed up names. He had two pitchers named Bob Miller that first season, so he called one of them “Nelson,” either by design or accident.

A nap or a wrong name didn’t matter much. The Mets won 40 games and lost 120 in that first season, with two games mercifully rained out.

Casey was managing the worst team in the history of baseball. “You could look it up,” Casey often said, a phrase he either borrowed from Ring Lardner, or Ring Lardner borrowed from him.

One catch phrase for that 1962 Mets team was created by a boisterous raconteur with a gift for language. I am speaking here not of Casey Stengel but of Jimmy Breslin.

A gifted writer from New York, Breslin showed up on assignment from *Sports Illustrated* one hot, humid July weekend of 1962. The Mets threw a seventy-second birthday party for Casey in the Chase Park Plaza Hotel, then the garden spot of St. Louis. (The headwaiter had once pitched batting practice before Cardinals games; Casey treated him like an equal, even imitating his pitching form.)

Casey spent the reception standing up, drink in hand, commenting on the multi-ineptitudes of his team. Blessed with youthful kidneys, I stayed by his elbow the entire evening.

A year later, a Breslin book came out, entitled *Can’t Anyone Here Play This Game?* a plea ostensibly uttered by Casey during his long monologue that evening in St. Louis.

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Not long afterward, Breslin called me for a phone number or something and at the end I said, “Jimmy, just curious, I was at that party for Casey, never left his side, and I don’t remember him ever saying, ‘Can’t anyone here play this game?’”

Long pause.

“What are you, the FBI?” Breslin asked.

Breslin has since admitted he just might have exercised some creative license. Casey never complained about being misquoted. He would have said it if he had thought of it.

I stuck as close as possible to Casey those years. I wasn’t looking for a parent or a mentor but I think I was just wise enough to know I would never meet anybody like him again.

There have been entire volumes devoted to those wonderful early days of Casey and the Mets. (I wrote one myself, long out of print, entitled *Joy in Mudville*.) If I could distill the entire four years into one madcap experience, it would be the night of May 4, 1964, in Milwaukee.

By this time, the Mets were marginally better, partially because Casey had spotted a scrappy second baseman named Ron Hunt in spring training of 1963, and installed him at the top of the lineup. On this nippy night in Milwaukee, Hunt tried to score with two outs in the ninth, but was tagged out at home in a rough collision. Then he and the catcher, Ed Bailey, began to mix it up, as both teams milled around home plate.

In the midst of the scrum, a Milwaukee infielder named Denis Menke felt a pair of powerful arms trying to pry him away from the plate. Menke shrugged the man loose. Then he looked down at his assailant and saw the Mount Rushmore profile of the Mets’ manager, tangled in a bunch of legs. Menke envisioned the next day’s front page—“Menke Kills Casey Stengel”—and helped pick up the Old Man, who was still sputtering.

After order was restored, Casey totally denied having been anywhere near the fight. However, a couple of his players raved about the combativeness of the Old Man. Casey’s story was dis-

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credited when he stripped to take a shower, revealing a few new bruises and scrapes.

After getting tossed around like that, most seventy-three-year-old men might retire to their hotel room and take a long hot bath. Casey went out drinking with his writers. We found some bar, where Casey gave a vivid imitation of a tornado that hit Milwaukee twenty years earlier, his battered body getting blown across the barroom by the imaginary high winds.

When the bar closed, eight of us found a rib joint, which turned out to be the hangout of a motorcycle gang. At first I was a little concerned we might be in for trouble, until one of the cyclists spotted Casey and came over with his girlfriend, who appeared to be sixteen years old, and respectfully asked for an autograph.

Casey, who had gotten bored with his writers, now engaged the motorcyclists in a debate over whether the Braves were willing to trade their brilliant but aging shortstop, Roy McMillan.

“Now, you want to give me McMillan, who is thirty-three, and we don’t know if he can throw. Then who do you want, Hook?”

(Jay Hook was a sweet Northwestern graduate with advanced degrees in physics, who could explain why a curveball curved, but could not throw one.)

“Hook has won a lot of games for me and he has a lovely family,” Casey told the motorcyclists. “Edna says I can’t trade him. Would you like to talk to Edna for me?”

Casey and the cyclists talked baseball for about an hour or so, until the writers began falling asleep on the bar.

The next morning I dragged myself down to the coffee shop around nine o’clock. There was the Old Man, finishing a full breakfast, talking baseball with the customers.

As I think about Casey these days, I am struck by the vast amount of alcohol consumed by him and his traveling chorus. Alcohol had no hold over me but in those days you drank to be sociable. I had not yet figured out that you can sip a club soda and

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lime rather than a scotch and soda, and will feel much better the next morning.

Casey used to say, “Whiskey makes you sick when you’re well—and well when you’re sick.”

He also had an expression for people who lost their composure when they drank too much: “Whiskey-slick.” Even with his amazing constitution, Casey could become garrulous or argumentative, might need a friendly arm to get him from the taxi to the hotel elevator.

Having a lot of friends who are alcoholics, recovering or otherwise, I would say that Casey was nowhere near the state of powerlessness that defines alcoholism. The Old Man surely drank a bit, but at the same time he was skillfully ducking or answering questions from his writers.

He kept up his guard, but occasionally you would see a glimpse of emotion. Casey had a great deal of respect for Fred Hutchinson, the burly manager of the Reds, who had once battled the Yankees as a pitcher with the Tigers. I will never forget Casey shuddering when he spotted his friend and rival, emaciated from cancer, being taken around the ballpark on a golf cart in 1964. There was no joking from the Old Man that day. The next year, Hutchinson was dead.

That same spring Casey broke a wrist when he slipped on a wet patch during an exhibition game. Then, late at night on July 25, 1965, Casey fell and broke his hip, and needed an artificial ball inserted in his hip socket. On August 30, he called a press conference to say he would resume managing but would not return the following season. At that conference, he horrified Edna by abruptly crossing one leg over another to demonstrate what a good job the surgeons had done.

“Casey!” she blurted, the way wives will.

They stayed home in Glendale after 1965, although Casey was a fixture every spring training in Florida. My daughter, now a sports columnist with the *Baltimore Sun*, can recall being a little girl, sitting on a barstool at the old Colonial Inn at St. Peters-

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burg Beach, holding a ginger ale and chatting with that nice old couple, Casey and Edna.

In 1969, Casey was around to celebrate the Mets' improbable World Championship, with Gil Hodges now the manager. Ron Swoboda, the Youth of America, made an epic diving catch in right field to help win one game.

The final years were not kind. One season Casey visited the Mets and confided that Edna was fine—"from the neck down," meaning her wit and reason were gone.

Casey died in 1975 and Edna lived three years longer. I see them every day. My wife has made a large montage of our family photographs and she included a photo of Casey and Edna circa 1965, in a hansom cab, he doffing a top hat, she chucking him under the chin, a striking mixture of aging prophet and ageless beauty.

To this day, when I am taking an iconoclastic stance in my column, I remember asking the Old Man why he was not afraid.

"I can make a living telling the truth," he would bellow.

I think of him every day.

GEORGE VECSEY, sports columnist with the *New York Times*, covered his first Yankee game in 1960, a month before his twenty-first birthday. He is the author of over a dozen books, including *Joy in Mudville*, a history of the Mets, published in 1970, with Casey Stengel as its central figure.