

SPORTS

THE REBUILDING

By Justin Remus

People expect a lot out of the Bronx Bombers, for whom anything short of a World Series victory is seen as a crushing defeat. With many shakeups in their roster, will this be the year that they reclaim their former glory?

The Yankees have such a legacy of domination that it's hard to remember that they weren't always a playoff juggernaut. After gambling on multiple high-priced free agents during the 1980s with little to show for it, the bottom fell out in 1990, when they won only 67 games and lost 95, finishing last in the American League East. With George Steinbrenner banned for the year from the day-to-day business operations of the team by MLB, the Yankees temporarily kicked their addiction to marquee names and went back to basics, nurturing talent through their farm system. That produced Derek Jeter, Mariano Rivera, Andy Pettitte, and Jorge Posada: the Core Four.

The results paid off big in 1996, their first World Series championship since 1978. Three more titles followed in the next four years, the most recent one in 2009. They've missed the postseason only twice since 1994, including last year, which led to an orgy of spending in the off-season on expensive talent. Like every team, the Yankees always want more trophy hardware, but ticket sales and suite licenses have dropped almost \$60 million since 2012. Since Steinbrenner's demise in 2010, the team has been run more

like a corporation by his sons Hank and Hal. The emphasis is on the bottom line. Playoffs appearances create a jump in concession and merchandise sales as well as ticket sales, but the Yanks also knew they had to shore up their base. Fans need an incentive to support the team.

Injury-riddled and aging, the Bombers overachieved and won 85 games last year, finishing third in the AL East. Manager Joe Girardi was rewarded with a \$16 million extension, but the team was 30 and 16 in one-run games. The Yankee brass wasn't fooled and signed catcher Brian McCann and outfielders Jacoby Ellsbury and Carlos Beltran for a combined \$283 million. But their biggest free agent conquest was Mashahiro Tanaka, the superstar pitcher from Japan, who cost \$175 million.

Japanese players transitioning to MLB are always an unknown. Hideki Matsui was a formidable power hitter with the Yomiuri Giants and was smart enough to adapt to an excellent line-drive hitter in Yankees pinstripes. Ichiro Suzuki, now a Yankee as well, while not as dominant in Japan was still a hitting machine. But there have been epic failures, too, like infielder Kazuo Matsui, and



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the list of pitching disappointments includes Hideki Irabu, Kei Igawa, and Daisuke Matsuzaka. Tanaka will join countryman Hiroki Kuroda, perhaps the best pitching import from Japan so far, aside from Texas' Yu Darvish. "There are risks with pitchers from Japan," Yankees General Manager Brian Cashman has admitted. "There's a different ball, a different work load, a different strike zone, different opposing lineups." The Yankees are willing to take that risk, however. To be fair, no pitcher is a sure thing, but Tanaka will have to cope with a completely different language and culture, in addition to playing against better competition with different rules. Few in MLB see Tanaka as a bust. The worst-case scenario is that he will be a second starter, not an ace.

While the Yankees have added McCann, Ellsbury, Beltran, and Tanaka, they may feel the impact of the loss of pitchers Andy Pettitte and Mariano Rivera, both of whom retired in 2013. (Jorge Posada hung up his spikes the year before.) At the very least, the team will project a different image. When Pettitte made his last start two days after Rivera's final appearance in late September, the Core Four was down to one: Jeter, who announced on Facebook in February that 2014 would be his final season. Characteristically, there were no tears and no drama at the ensuing press conference. Always media savvy, he emphasized that his focus was on winning one more World Series. "I have feelings," he said. "I'm not emotionally stunted. I was just pretty good at hiding my emotions throughout the years. But it's different.

It's not the end of the season yet. We still have a long way to go."

Why, people asked, was he retiring when he was still performing at such a high level? Jeter led the league with 216 hits in 2012, his last full season. (In 2013, a fractured left ankle kept him on the bench except for 17 games.) "Because the time is right," he responded. He said he wanted to start a family, among other things but shared no details. Jeter has been the face of the Yankees for years—and

for good reason. In addition to winning Rookie of the Year, he holds team records for most games played and most hits. His legend was forged by his flip play against Oakland in the 2001 ALDS and plunging headfirst into the stands for a foul ball against archrival Boston. When asked about his best memory, he refused to take the bait, saying, "Every time we win. And I'm not just saying that. I've done a lot of things personally in my career, but if you ask me what stands out the most, it's winning."

The Captain will be without his double-play partner, five-time All-Star second baseman Robinson Cano, who rejected a \$175 million offer during the offseason. "I didn't feel respect," Cano said at a press conference with Jay Z nearby, whose Roc Nation agents secured Cano's \$240 million, 10-year deal with the Seattle Mariners. His replacement is Brian Roberts, a career .278 hitter with several standout seasons for the Baltimore Orioles. He is 36 and injury-prone the last few years, but the Yankees have had success resuscitating older players who were supposedly washed up, like Andruw Jones and Eric Chavez. They are hoping Roberts will experience a similar resurgence and were skittish about offering a 10-year contract after doling out the same to A-Rod in 2007, whose deal still has close to \$67 million in guaranteed money left on it, despite his dwindling production. Originally suspended by MLB for 211 games for allegedly using steroids, the penalty was later reduced to 162 games, which amounts to the entire 2014 season. In A-Rod's absence, Kelly Johnson will start at the hot corner or be platooned with utility man Yangervis Solarte, who beat out Eduardo Nunez for the final roster spot.



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Solarte can also substitute for Jeter at shortstop to keep his legs fresh.

For the Yankees, the bar is always set high, perhaps too high. If they don't take home a 28th World Series championship, the season will be deemed a failure. Luckily for Girardi, the infusion of new talent will mean he won't have to be as creative as last year to win ballgames. He has four leadoff hitters to choose from: Jacoby Ellsbury, Jeter, Brett Gardner, and Brian Roberts. Depending on who is on a hot streak or matches up best against an opposing pitcher, any of them can be used to spark the offense. With many switch hitters available, Girardi has several combinations to shuffle the lineup. Adding Ellsbury and Carlos Beltran to an outfield that includes Gardner, Ichiro, and Alfonso Soriano, who experienced a late season renaissance in 2013, gives the Yanks more speed and power. Ichiro will occasionally spell Soriano as designated hitter, as will Jeter, and both are still adequate defensively as corner outfielders. The three to five spots in the lineup can be rotated amongst Beltran, McCann, and first baseman Mark Teixeira, who was out for much of last year and, when healthy, is a potent home run and RBI producer.

The Tanaka signing bolsters an already good rotation of Sabathia, Kuroda, and Ivan Nova. Michael Pineda had a great rookie year in Seattle, striking out 173 batters in 171 innings, but injuries have sidelined him for his entire Yankee career. He could move up from the fifth rotation spot if he stays healthy. The loss of Rivera is more than symbolic, a vir-



tual lock to finish games right up to the end, but the Yanks were confident enough to promote from within, making set-up man David Robertson the new closer. He was overpowering last season, with a fastball that breaks and looks faster than it really is because he releases it closer to home plate than most pitchers. The only unknown is if he has the

mental toughness to win in high-pressure situations. That could be pivotal if the Yankees are to go deep into October.

Sometimes a legacy is a blessing and sometimes it's a curse. The upside is that there's always another chance to rebuild. The Yankees have proved this time and again, and they might just bring home another title in 2014.

