



Yogi Berra

By David Brandenburg, Golf Course Manager, Rolling Meadows Golf Course

The recent closing of Yankee Stadium and the baseball playoff season reminded me of the great players baseball has seen over the years. It is easy to know the great ones contributions to the game and their life after baseball but often we forget or don't find the time to look up what got them there. Who are these guys and how were they made?

As we get older we look back at the decisions we made in our youth, the challenges and success we had and how that molded us into the people we are today. I have picked to highlight the life of Lawrence Peter "Yogi" Berra after seeing him run onto Yankee Stadium for the last time this week.

Often Berra is remembered for his Yogi-isms or funny commercials. But this Hall of Fame Catcher has lived a full life. Born in a primarily Italian neighborhood called "The Hill" in St. Louis to immigrant parents Yogi grew up playing all kinds of sports with the neighborhood kids.

Baseball quickly became Yogi's favorite sport and one he enjoyed with neighbor Joe Garagiola who he attended South Side Catholic School with. That block now called "Hall of Fame Place" was also home to the late baseball broadcaster Jack Buck.

In 1942 Berra and Garagiola tried out for the St. Louis Cardinals and after Garagiola was signed to a \$500 contract Yogi turned down the \$250 offer from General Manager Branch Rickey. Some reports say Rickey did it on purpose with the knowledge he would be leaving St. Louis for the Brooklyn Dodgers and that he wanted to sign Yogi to his new



team. He never had the chance.

Soon the New York Yankees had offered the \$500 and Yogi signed with them to start a long relationship with the fans of New York. Yogi was assigned to the Norfolk Tars of the Class B Piedmont League. While at Piedmont, Yogi had perhaps his most productive game ever as he was credited with driving in 23 runs that day.

As with many stars of that time, baseball would have to wait as World War II was in full swing. Yogi was now 18 and enlisted to served his country as a Navy Gunners Mate. Yogi was part of the D-Day invasion of Normandy on a rocket ship that was capsized off Omaha Beach before serving in Italy, North Africa and stateside.

After the war, Yogi returned to baseball and played with the New London, CT club. It is said it was there that Mel Ott, the Giants Manager saw him play and attempted to offer the Yankees \$50,000 for Yogi's contract. Yankee GM Larry MacPhail had no idea who Yogi was, but figured that if Mel Ott wanted him that badly, he had to be worth keeping, and he was.

In 1946 Yogi was apprenticed to the Newark Bears of the International League before beginning his career with the Yankees later that year. He joined the team as a platoon catcher with Aaron Robinson, Charlie Silvera and Gus Niarhos.

Immediately and throughout his career Yogi was known as a wild swinger and a tough out. He could get hits from balls at his feet or at his eyebrows. Paul Richards who competed against Berra as a catcher said "He is the toughest man in baseball in the last three innings." Berra proved this best in 1950 when he only struck out 12 times in 597 at bats.

Yogi was also known a talking catcher mainly to try and disturb the concentration of the batter. Stats are great but don't tell the entire story of Berra's heart and abilities. As a fielder, Berra was truly outstanding. Quick, mobile, and a great handler of pitchers, Berra led all American League (AL) catchers eight times in games caught, six times in double plays (a major league record), eight times in putouts, three times in assists, and once in fielding percentage.

Berra left the game with the American League records for catcher putouts (8,723) and chances accepted (9,520). He was also one of only four catchers to ever field 1,000 for a season, playing 88 errorless games in 1958. Later in his career, he showed his range as he excelled as a defensive outfielder in Yankee Stadium's difficult left field. In June 1962, at the age of 37, Berra showed his superb physical endurance by catching an entire 22-inning, seven-hour game against the Tigers.

I could just say how many All Star games and other awards Yogi won, but to list the years does it more justice. Yogi was voted to the All Star Team 15 times, 1948, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61 and 1962. He was voted American League MVP three times, 1951, 54 and 55. Most impressively for himself and his teammates he was part of World Series Champion Teams 10 times, 1947, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 56, 58, 61 and 62. Berra was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1972.

With the World Series as the goal of every team and player in spring Yogi has had quite a bit of success in his 10 World Series Championships. His series records include most games by a catcher (63), hits (71), and times on a winning team (10), first in at bats, first in doubles, second in RBI's, third in home runs and Base on Balls (walks). Yogi also hit the first pinch hit home run in World Series history in 1947.

After playing Berra managed and coached for the Yankees, Mets and Astros from 1963 to 1989 while leading both the Yankees and Mets to World Series victories.

Away from baseball Yogi is renowned for his selflessness, giving generously of his time for countless youth organizations and charitable causes, including his own annual golf tournament in Montclair, NJ which has raised over \$1 million for scholarships, educational programming and special needs scouts. He has been awarded the Boy Scouts of America's highest adult honor The Silver Buffalo.

Family has always been paramount to Yogi Berra, who has been married over 50 years to Carmen and is the proud father of three athletic sons – Larry, a former minor-league catcher, Tim, a former NFL receiver, and Dale, a former major-league infielder.

A resident of Montclair, NJ for over 40 years, Yogi Berra remains an inspiration to all. In 1996, he received an honorary doctorate from Montclair State University and the baseball stadium was named after him on campus. In December 1998, the Yogi Berra Museum & Learning Center opened its doors to the public, paying tribute to an American legend and his lifelong commitment to the education of young people.

The museum, located at the university is currently the home of various artifacts, including the mitt with which Yogi caught the only perfect game in World Series history, several autographed and "game-used" items, three World Series Championship trophies, and nine of Yogi's championship rings. Berra only wears the 1953 ring, in commemoration of the Yankees' record 5th consecutive World Championship.

Berra is very involved and frequents the museum for signings, discussions, and other events. It is his intention to teach children important values such as sportsmanship and dedication, both on and off the baseball diamond. When asked "So, what is it you do

here?" Yogi, without missing a beat, replied convincingly, "It's my museum."

What is a Yogi-ism? Yogi is well known for his malapropisms (substituting an incorrect word for one of a similar sound) and misusing the English language in interesting ways all in the name of fun.

Some of them, "It's like déjà vu all over again", "You can observe a lot by just watching.", "It's tough making predictions, especially about the future", "Always go to other people's funerals, otherwise they won't come to yours.", are well known and truthfully while humorous statements.

As a golfer Berra had some well known comments about golf. He is credited with saying "90 percent of putts that fall short don't go in", and "I think they just got through marinating the greens" while commenting on his performance after playing a poor golf game. Of course as with everything quotes and sayings are exaggerated and changed over time leading Berra to say, "I didn't really say everything I said"

What does all this have to do with our jobs and the game of golf. Nothing really, but it is playoff time for baseball and a good reminder of the generation that lived through World War II, and their importance to our lives today. Take some time out of your busy day, get a book (of just surf the web) and familiarize yourself with a few of the leaders from "The Greatest Generation" as they are appropriately called.

You can even look around your course and thank those older members for their support to your club and take a few moments to learn a little bit about their lives. You will soon find out they all have an interesting story to tell. ♻



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