

The Next Yankee World Series Team

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Mariano Rivera, who has announced that 2013 will be his last season, is one of the best and, from my subjective view, coolest ballplayers ever. This year, at age 43, he is seeking to comeback from an injury that cost him almost all of the 2012 season. If he saves 50 games, has an ERA under 2.00 and a strikeout to walk ratio of better than 4:1, most Yankee fans would be extremely happy to see their favorite pitcher come all the way back. They would also not be terribly surprised, because Rivera is unlike any other pitcher in the game.

Unfortunately, even another great season from a future first ballot Hall of Famer like Rivera, will not push the team much closer to a championship. The first reason for this is quotidian, Rivera's replacement last year, Rafael Soriano, put up strong numbers, saving 42 games with a 2.26 ERA, so there is not a lot of room for improvement from the closer. The second is more abstract, and more troubling for the Yankees. The team is no longer at a place where a modest improvement in the bullpen is going to have a big impact.

The Yankees are in sufficiently bad shape that even a great year by Rivera will not bring them back to the World Series. Moreover, Rivera is not the only aging Yankee seeking to recover from an injury. Derek Jeter, the greatest shortstop in Yankee history, and one of the greatest in the game's history, saw his 2012 season end with a broken ankle in the ALCS. Jeter, now 39, had a very solid year last year, so seeing him get back to that level of .316/.362/.429 would make Yankee fans very happy. Andy Pettitte, is also trying to comeback from an injury, but even a good year from all three of these players will not be enough.

The Yankees are a well run franchise with the resources to compete into the foreseeable future, so they will not take up long term residence in the AL east cellar, or anything like that. Nonetheless, for the first time in a generation it is clear that neither Pettitte, Jeter or Rivera will play a big part on the next Yankee championship team. The Yankees have other aging stars like Alex Rodriguez, Ichiro Suzuki and Mark Teixeira who will either be gone or relegated to minor roles the next time the team wins it all. This is a difficult thing for the team, and its fans, to accept, but recognizing this is critical to the Yankees' future.

Recognizing that the Jeter-Rivera era is over will be difficult. The two of them played together longer than Ruth and Gehrig, Mantle and Ford, Dickey and DiMaggio or any other celebrated pair of Yankee stars, but now must be seen as part of the great Yankee past, not the future. It will be even more difficult because it is not clear what the Yankees should do next. The organization's top prospects like Mason Williams and Gary Sanchez are not yet ready for the Bronx; the team is saddled with big contracts belonging to Mark Teixeira and Alex Rodriguez which will be very tough to move; and many of their other valuable player like Hiroki Kuroda and CC Sabathia are in the decline phase of their career. Other than Sabathia, possibly Brett Gardner, and Robinson Cano, if the Yankees resign him, it is hard to identify any players on the current roster who could be major contributors to the next strong Yankee team.

The most intriguing question facing the Yankees is not which of their veterans can come back or who they can acquire to help their chances this year, but what the next decade will look like for the Yankees. Only Cano, Gardner and perhaps Sabathia, are both young and good enough to be around and contributing in five years. The prospects who are expected to arrive in the next few years are solid but unspectacular. Accordingly, the Yankees need to build a team based on some good prospects, a contingent of aging and, due to contracts, largely unmovable veterans, and, of course, the ability to outspend everybody. This last point alone will not be enough to build a winner.

Changes in how free agency works, the willingness of both Southern California teams to spend as much as anybody, and the dispersion of top young talent around the big leagues will raise additional challenges for the Yankees as they seek to build towards the future. [In the early mid-1990s, the Yankees developed and kept, five players](#), Rivera, Jeter, Pettitte, Jorge Posada and Bernie Williams who ranged from borderline or near miss to first ballot Hall of Famers. With that nucleus, they had room for error in pursuing other strategies. The task in front of them now is much tougher because they are very unlikely to develop a comparable nucleus of talent.