

The Yankees and Mets Are Facing Challenges Off the Field Too

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Despite the good first week enjoyed by the Mets, and the recent hot streak by the Yankees, this season may be a rough one for big league baseball in New York. It is possible that, for the first time since 1992, both the Yankees and Mets will finish below .500. Additionally, the Yankees are an old team without any top-level prospects ready to step into major roles in either 2013 or 2014. The Mets are younger, but like many recent Mets teams, seem to be without a plan or vision for improving for the next several years. This tough situation is compounded by the resurgence of California baseball and of Southern California as a big market. To put this in perspective, if they played in California the Yankees would probably be the third best AL team in the state, while the Mets might make it that high among NL teams, but could also fall behind the Padres and be the fourth best team in that state.

Good and bad teams come and go, but the problems facing baseball in New York go beyond what is happening on the field. The business of baseball is changing in a way that may begin to erode the built-in advantages of having a large market. For example, free agency is changing radically as teams are making a much greater effort to retain their young stars. Younger players are increasingly aware that exchanging some income for certainty will allow them to make a fortune while not having to worry about injuries or even downturns in performance before their free agent years. The Yankees, who have benefited from free agent signings more than any team in baseball since signing Catfish Hunter following the 1975 season will not be able to rely on that strategy nearly as much anymore.

Baseball is also consumed differently than it was a generation, or even a few years, ago. For not much money, fans can now get access to products from MLB which allow them to watch any game in the country on any given night, or to watch pieces of many games switching between innings or even between pitches. Meanwhile, broadcast television is in decline. Accordingly, having a huge market for YES is less valuable when people are dropping their cable plans every day. The Yankees and Mets will always have large fan bases, but over the next years that will erode somewhat as fewer people will grow up with access to only one or two teams on television.

The technological changes in the ways that baseball fans receive information about the game will also gradually reduce the structural advantages enjoyed by both the Yankees and Mets. Poring over the morning box scores in an actual newspaper that, due to issues of timing, does not include scores from the previous night's west coast games, is something which fewer fans, particularly those under 40, do. Instead, highlights can be watched, almost instantly, on hand-

held phones and tablets. A young New York baseball fan no longer has to read about the Yankee or Met game over breakfast. Instead, he or she can look at Mike Trout's latest exploits or Sergio Romo's save from the previous evening.

The new media environment also means that the cost of entry to write or comment about baseball is lower than ever. Thus, podcasts, websites, blogs and the like can begin to compete with the national and larger news outlets. The latter still may out of necessity have a bias towards the major media centers, but the former do not. For many New Yorkers, for example, buying a paper copy of the *Daily News* requires more effort and expenditure than listening to one of many excellent podcasts or visiting one of many similarly excellent independent baseball websites. These changes also make it much easier to follow one's hometown team after moving to New York. A native of Ohio who moves to New York as a young adult, for example, can continue to follow the Indians or Reds much more easily than was the case even a decade ago.

The timing of this might be worse for the Yankees than the Mets. The Mets are a mediocre team, but they are not dogged by controversy, unpopular stars and players in decline. The best Met player, David Wright is still a great player around which a team can build an identity. The Yankees, on the other hand, are closing one chapter of the extraordinary history, but with no clear idea of what is next. Two of the greatest Yankees ever, Mariano Rivera and Derek Jeter will be retiring in the next year or two. Andy Pettitte, who is probably one step down from those two in the team's pantheon, will also be retiring soon. These two all time greats have been at the heart of the Yankee identity for a generation, and have become part of the Yankee brand. The Yankees still have some great players, but none who are comparable to Jeter or Rivera on or off the field.

A world without Rivera, Jeter, and with an altered media landscape and new structures framing free agency will be very difficult for the Yankees. The media landscape will have an impact on the Met's fortunes as well. The next few years could be difficult for both teams both on and off the field. Both teams will have to adapt to a new game. The Yankees have successfully done this in the past, but based on the past few years, it seems that this time might be more of a challenge.