THE CRISIS MANAGER

Trying times for Joe Girardi and the Yankees.

BY GAY TALESE

Even as the Yankees suffer a late-season slide, Girardi is almost always unflappable.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARTIN SCHOELLER

One summer afternoon in 1974, a nine-year-old boy sat in Busch Stadium, in St. Louis, watching the Cardinals play the Montreal Expos. He sat next to his aunt, in the front row, near the left-field foul pole, and every half inning he rose and pleaded with the players as they exchanged warmup tosses in the outfield: "Throw me a ball!" For most of the game, he was ignored. But, just before the bottom of the seventh inning, the Expos' left fielder, a thirty-one-year-old slugger named Bob Bailey, flipped the boy a ball—and then watched as it bounced off his small, outstretched hands and fell back onto the playing field.

"Son," Bailey said, retrieving the ball and reaching up to hand it to the boy, "if you want a ball, you gotta learn to catch it." He spoke softly, sensing the embarrassment that the boy must be feeling. Bailey remembered the kindness shown him by a major-league player when he was a kid. His father had been a high-school teammate of the Cleveland Indians' pitcher Bob Lemon, and, once, Lemon took young Bailey on a tour of the clubhouse and introduced him to many of the Indians.

Bob Bailey never forgot that experience, and it reaffirmed his desire to play among such men—which he started doing in 1961, with the Pittsburgh Pirates organization. In a seventeen-year career in the majors, he had a hundred and eighty-nine homers in 1,931 games, while knocking in seven hundred and seventy-three runs and posting a career batting average of .257. He made his final plate appearance in 1978, with the Boston Red Sox, as a pinch-hitter in the playoff game in which the New York Yankees' shortstop Bucky Dent hit a three-run homer in the top of the seventh at Fenway Park, to lead the Yanks to a 5–4 victory that propelled them toward a World Series triumph. The Yankees' manager at that time was Bob Lemon, the old Bailey family friend. After the game, Bob Bailey walked over to congratulate Lemon. A couple of weeks later, shortly after marking his thirty-sixth birthday, on October 13th, Bailey retired as a player.

On October 14th, in East Peoria, Illinois, the boy who, four years earlier, had fumbled Bob Bailey's gift ball in St. Louis turned fourteen. The boy's name was Joe Girardi. He went on to be an outstanding defensive catcher in high school and college and later spent fifteen years in the major leagues—as a catcher with the Chicago Cubs (1989-92), the Colorado Rockies (1993-95), the New York Yankees (1996-99), the Cubs again (2000-2002), and, finally, as a backup catcher with the St. Louis Cardinals, playing his last game at Busch Stadium on September 20, 2003, at the age of thirty-eight.

Now, at forty-seven, Girardi is in his fifth year as the manager of the New York Yankees, and, except for his graying hair, which he wears trimmed close to his scalp, he appears to be as physically fit as most players on his team. Standing just under six feet, with broad shoulders, narrow hips, and a flat stomach hardened by daily CrossFit workouts, Girardi is five pounds lighter than his playing weight, of two hundred. The only obvious reminders of his burly strength as a plate-blocking catcher are his thickly muscled forearms, which he began developing as a child, assisting his bricklayer father on weekends.

His voice, however, is soft, reflective, and cautious. He is a straight arrow from the Midwest in the middle of the tabloid hurly-burly of New York City. Even now, as the Yankees are suffering an injury-plagued late-season slide, he is

nearly always unperturbed. This stalwart mildness of manner—added to the fact that the Yankees have won only one World Series under his guidance, in 2009—has disappointed many fans. Earlier this year, in the *Post*, the veteran sportswriter Mike Vaccaro wrote, "Yankee fans are still a little lukewarm about Joe Girardi," and he went on to compare Girardi unfavorably to the late Billy Martin, the colorful, volatile manager whom the Yankees' owner, George Steinbrenner, fired and rehired four times during the seventies and eighties. Girardi succeeded the avuncular and loquacious Joe Torre as manager, in 2008, and, ever since, many sportswriters have found Girardi stubbornly removed. Girardi's responses to questions after games are rarely quotable. In this sense, he remains the man behind the catcher's mask, communicating slyly from a crouched position with his fingers extended, or, when speaking to a batterymate on the mound, whispering along the edges of his upturned mitt.

Near the end of last season, as Girardi and the Yankees were about to conclude their fourth successive year with a winning record, Will Leitch, in *New York*, characterized the Girardi era as "boring, easy, calm, and dominant."

When the Yankees failed to dominate the Detroit Tigers in the first round of the 2011 playoffs, losing the decisive fifth game by the score of 3–2, journalists were hoping that Girardi would comment candidly on the poor performances of his players—of, in particular, such stars as Alex Rodriguez, who batted only .111 during the series and was 0 for 4 in the finale, striking out three times—once with the bases loaded. But Girardi deflected every question in tones of such equanimity that his true feelings were never evident. He never criticizes his players.

During the season's final press conference, a reporter asked, "Joe, with the lineup that you have, is it surprising that the big hits should prove so elusive tonight?"

Girardi answered by complimenting the Detroit pitching staff: "They made big pitches when they had to."

Seated behind a microphone with camera lights deepening the shadows across his dour and ascetic countenance, he continued to deflect questions politely. I imagined him as a soulful figure in a Renaissance painting, a man resigned to the shortcomings of his calling. Like religion, the game of baseball is founded on aspirations rarely met. It generates far more failure than fulfillment. At the press conference, Girardi gave me the impression of a monk in pinstripes.

Girardi, though, is the father of three children—daughters of thirteen and six, and a ten-year-old son—and, as he has told the press on previous occasions, being a good father is more important to him than professional baseball. Without a trace of irony, he says that the Yankees on his watch will always be a family-friendly ball club, expecting its members to be as courteous to young fans as Bob Bailey was to him. Under Torre's management, the players could bring their sons into the locker room after a team victory, whereas Girardi allows youngsters in before and after every game, and he has also lifted the ban on daughters. He told Mark Feinsand, of the *News*, "Once or twice a month, we let the girls in the clubhouse and tell all the guys to make sure to get dressed in the back."

Before a spring-training game in Clearwater, Florida, Girardi noticed a middle-aged man behind the Yankees dugout holding up a poster that displayed several photographs of a young man, along with the words "Please remember Steven E. Smith." Girardi approached the man, and learned that Steven E. Smith had died in an auto accident, at the age of twenty-four, and had been a zealous Yankees fan who hoped to become a sports broadcaster. The man with the poster was his father. Girardi invited him onto the field to get a closer view of batting practice. He also signed the poster and said he would have it autographed by all his players.

Later in the spring, when he learned that Joba Chamberlain, a Yankees pitcher, had seriously damaged his right ankle while jumping on a trampoline with his five-year-old son, in Tampa, Girardi went to the hospital. Medical reports indicated that it might be a career-ending injury, and some fans questioned the wisdom of Chamberlain's bouncing on a trampoline when he was still recovering from elbow surgery. After a

meeting between manager and pitcher that the press described as "emotional," Girardi came out and told reporters a story about how he had once injured his back while tossing a child of his own in the air. "Fathers are fathers," he said.

Not long ago, I visited Girardi at home, in Purchase, New York, where he lives with his wife, Kim, and their children. The house is a gray-stone-and-cedar affair with six bedrooms, and it is situated on the property of a private golf club. Their six-year-old daughter, Lena, had stayed home from school with a sore throat that day, so she came along with us when it was time to head to work at Yankee Stadium. Girardi drives a 2009 Cadillac Escalade, and when he stops at a traffic light fans will often recognize him and wave. As we drove, Lena sat in the back seat and watched a DVD. We passed a gas station near White Plains, and Girardi told me that, back when he was the Yankees' catcher, that was where players' wives used to drop off their husbands to carpool into the Bronx.

When we arrived at Girardi's office, a two-room suite situated behind the dugout, he threw a football back and forth with Lena for several minutes. She is a good catch, and she seemed to relish doing what her father had taught her to do. The office is decorated with autographed football helmets. Girardi played both quarterback and running back in high school; he gave up the game to concentrate on baseball, at Northwestern University. His ten-year-old son, Dante (named after Dante Bichette, Girardi's former teammate on the Colorado Rockies), plays football and most other sports, and, in his father's dressing room in the clubhouse, Dante keeps a Yankees uniform that he puts on to swing at pitches thrown by his father on the infield. Dante wears his hair in a crewcut, like his father.

"Dante Bichette was from Jupiter, Florida, and I just knew he was from another planet!" Girardi said, sitting down at his desk. (Lena had started playing a computer game.) "He was the complete opposite of me, and we hit it off great. He stayed up late. He was not serious, always laughing, just kind of goofy." Girardi said that Bichette was serious about baseball, though: he played in the major leagues for fourteen years, with five teams; his career batting average was .299; and he hit two hundred and seventy-four homers and drove in 1,141 runs.

Bichette and Girardi continue to be close friends, and now both men share an avid interest in Bichette's nineteen-year-old son, Dante, Jr., an infielder selected as the Yankees' top draft pick in June, 2011, who hit .342 with the minor-league Gulf Coast Yankees, based in Tampa. Girardi is enjoying watching his best friend's son, whom he remembers glimpsing for the first time as an infant in a car seat in Bichette's minivan, ascend the Yankees' list of future prospects.

Fathers and sons figure prominently in Girardi's baseball life. After he told me about muffing Bob Bailey's toss in Busch Stadium, back in 1974, I decided to track Bailey down. I reached him in Long Beach, California, where, at sixty-nine, he had recently retired from years spent working in the time-share industry in Las Vegas. I repeated the story of the nine-year-old boy at Busch Stadium, years before. "Oh, yes, I remember that kid, remember his excitement, yelling from near the left-field foul line," Bailey said. Until I told him, Bailey had no idea that the kid grew up to be Joe Girardi.

Bailey reminded me of a story from my own boyhood. In 1944 and 1945, the Yankees held spring training in Atlantic City, New Jersey, fifteen miles north of where I lived. An avid baseball fan, I received my first autograph and also a signed ball from the team's handsome wartime outfielder Johnny Lindell, who was substituting in center field for Joe DiMaggio, while DiMaggio was in the Army Air Forces. Johnny Lindell always posed graciously for snapshots and talked with fans before and after the games, every one of which I attended. Years later, when my love of the Yankees had faded somewhat, I retained my connection with Lindell. Embarked on a love affair in college with a young woman I had met in French class, I booked a room at a motel and, seized with panic, scribbled on the registration form the name of the man I viewed as my protector—Johnny Lindell.

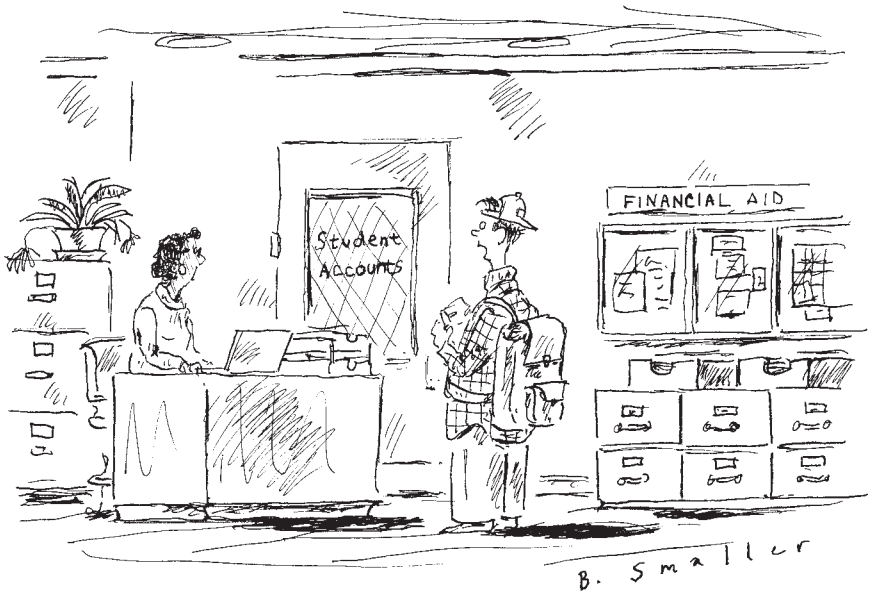
By the time Lindell retired, in 1954, I was out of college (and had signed Lindell's name at other hotel registration desks). I did what many insufficiently blessed aspiring athletes do after they no longer indulge fantasies of playing in the big leagues: I became a sportswriter. I kept the baseball Lindell gave me for about forty years, finally losing it when my house was robbed, in the mid-nineteen-eighties.

The baseball that Bob Bailey gave to Joe Girardi in 1974 was not saved and cherished but was used by its young owner and his pals in pickup games on a lopsided field in East Peoria. "That baseball was better than any we'd ever played with," Girardi said, seated at his U-shaped desk. On a shelf behind him was a baseball signed by the shortstop Derek Jeter, after he got his three-thousandth hit, last year. Next to it was a ball signed by the relief pitcher Mariano Rivera, after he became the major-league career leader in saves, and an older ball bearing the signature of Yogi Berra, one of three ex-Yankee catchers to precede Girardi in becoming the team's manager, the earlier ones being Bill Dickey and Ralph Houk.

The ball from Bailey saw hard use every day until, Girardi recalled, "I ended up losing it in the woods." By that time, it was pretty well ravaged. A year later, he and his friends were invited to join a youth league, where the balls, bats, and uniforms were provided by local sponsors. Girardi was technically too young to be in the league, but the coach played him anyway, because he was more agile and versatile than anyone else on the team. The coach also liked that he was a well-mannered youngster who did as he was told.

Although Girardi preferred the infield to catching, he deferred to the coach's judgment that his strong and accurate throwing arm was best deployed behind the plate. He followed the coach's directives at home, too, including the warning against sleeping in a cold room, to avoid developing a sore arm; and to sleep with a tube sock pulled up over his throwing arm. Even later, during his years as a college player and a professional, he continued to go to bed with his arm in a sock. A rare occasion when he broke this habit occurred in 1989, at the insistence of his bride on their wedding night.

Before Girardi's marriage, the most persuasive woman in his life was his mother, Angela, a petite, carefully coiffed woman with a kindly but uncompro-



"How much would it cost if I don't take classes but just live in a dorm with a meal plan?"

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mising disposition. She condoned Joe's devotion to sports only if he earned good grades in school. While Girardi's father, Gerald, held three jobs (bricklaying on weekends, bartending at a Howard Johnson's at night, and on weekdays hawking gypsum products as a travelling salesman), his mother stayed up late working toward a master's degree in clinical psychology. The first two Girardi sons, John and George, became physicians; the daughter, Maria, became a professor of mathematics; Joe, the fourth-born, graduated from Northwestern in 1986, with an industrial-engineering degree; and the youngest brother, Gerald, is an accountant.

Joe Girardi is the most religious and contemplative of his siblings, but he is competitive, too, and his competitiveness derives from his boyhood relationship with his father, Gerald, and his two older brothers. Joe often accompanied Gerald in the gypsum-manufacturing-company car on road trips to Iowa, listening to Cubs games on the radio while Gerald stopped to take orders for wallboard.

"I loved the physical part of what he did," Girardi said. He served as Gerald's apprentice on weekend bricklaying jobs. "I carried the brick, I carried the blocks, I mixed the mortar, I did the smoothing."

Gerald Girardi's father was also a bricklayer, a stern and exacting worker who was known to sometimes fling mortar down from his ladder upon the heads of incompetent helpers. His family had emigrated from the vicinity of Turin, in northern Italy.

"I had a temper," Girardi told me. "My father had a temper." Once, when Girardi was about eight, he was playing pool at home and missed a shot. "I threw the stick right through the wall," he said. He managed to cover up the hole by hanging a framed picture over it, and his father never found out. Another time, after Joe and his brother George had broken their bed while wrestling on it, and then tried (unsuccessfully) to conceal their misdeed by propping up the bed with one of Maria's calculus books, their father announced, "All right, you guys wanna fight? I'm gonna cool you off." He then shoved the boys out into the snow in their underwear.

Shortly after Joe turned thirteen, in 1977, his mother was given a diagnosis of cervical cancer. Although she continued for a few years in her job as a school psychologist—and studies toward her doctorate—the family dynamic changed. "We were always trying to please my mom," Girardi said. "It became a conscious effort not to upset her." He vowed to control his temper. On the playing field, he imagined his mother on the sidelines, and dedicated himself to the highest standards in sportsmanship.

In June of 1984, when Girardi, having completed his sophomore year at Northwestern, was playing baseball in the Cape Cod summer league, his father called to say that his mother's condition had worsened. He immediately headed back to East Peoria, driving the first car he had ever bought. It was a new red Ford Tempo coupe that cost eight thousand dollars and represented his savings from all the jobs and chores he had done over the years. He raced west to join the family at his mother's bedside, and he was there when she opened her eyes, looked around, and whispered, "Don't forget me."

"I carried that with me my whole life," he said.

After her death, Girardi said, "I just didn't know that I could play baseball the rest of the summer."

He returned to Cape Cod and he did finish the season, and, after graduating from Northwestern, he began his minor-league career, earning seven hundred dollars a month, with the Peoria Chiefs, an A-level team affiliated with the Chicago Cubs. In August, he was hit by a pitch and fractured a thumb; the injury ended his season. That winter, he supported himself by selling baseball shoes.

In the spring of 1987, fully recovered, he was sent to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to another Cubs A-level farm team, the Spirits. Here he performed very well offensively, but he was despondent much of the time, asking himself, "Why am I playing baseball?" He realized that keeping his mother alive had been a huge incentive, and he went to his manager and said that he was quitting the team.

"Joe, what are you doing?" the manager asked. "You're hitting over .300. You're going to have a chance maybe to make a million dollars in the game of baseball."

Girardi nevertheless left the team and returned to Peoria to spend time with his father and with his girlfriend, Kim Innocenzi, whom he had met at Northwestern. Kim was a sorority girl and an evangelical Christian, and she was the one who persuaded him to return to baseball.

"She made me realize that I was playing because God gave me a gift, and I would be able to share God's good news through my gift and talent," he said.

Although Girardi was brought up Catholic, he told me, "The Catholic Church, it seemed to me, growing up, was a lot of rules. You sit, you stand, you kneel; you sit, you stand, you kneel." He said, "Kim introduced me to Jesus." He once described the moment to a reporter: "We were sitting in the basement of the Tri Delta sorority house. Kim explained salvation to me, and I silently prayed to receive Jesus as my Savior."

Kim Girardi, a tall, dark-eyed woman who played doubles on her high-school tennis team, was working toward a master's degree in education. She was reared in Lake Forest, north of Chicago. As a little girl, Kim was involved in the Good News Club, an affiliate of the international Child Evangelism Fellowship. The Fellowship is a ministry dedicated to the belief that, as a spokesman put it, "if properly instructed, any child can come to knowledge that God is our Creator, created us for a reason, sent Jesus to die for our sins, was buried, and rose again the third day, was seen by hundreds of witnesses, and is alive now in heaven."

In 1989, Girardi married Innocenzi, who had by then become a third-grade teacher. All her pupils came to the wedding. As soon as her husband joined the major leagues, she started a Chicago Cubs Bible-study group with some other players' wives.

At home in Purchase, Kim gets up each morning at five to spend an hour alone reading the Bible. At six-thirty, she wakes up her older daughter and drives her to the school bus, then wakes up Joe and the other children, and, after making breakfast (with Joe sometimes preparing the eggs, as his father liked to do), she drives the younger children to school. She drives to the gym while listening to Christian music on a satellite radio station. She told me, "Living for God is the theme of our home."

After a season playing winter ball in Venezuela, in 1989, Girardi was promoted from the minors to start on Opening Day at Wrigley Field. He was ecstatic. But, despite his enthusiasm and his defensive skills, he was soon demoted to the minor-league Iowa Cubs, in Des Moines.

"I was crushed," he recalled. "It might have been the only time that I ever cried on my mother-in-law's shoulder, because I felt like my life was done."

"Kim would visit me in Des Moines on weekends," he said. "And she would tape up a sock and she'd throw it, and then duck behind a couch and I would swing." After several weeks with the Iowa Cubs, Girardi was called back to Chicago. "I told myself, 'I'm *never* going back to the minors'—and I didn't." He added, "I got sent down for forty days, which was interesting, because I had come to know that the Lord Jesus was in the desert for forty days."

After finishing his rookie season, Girardi became the Cubs' starting catcher, appearing in a hundred and thirty-three games and hitting .270. But, the following year, while he was sprinting in the outfield one day during spring training, his heel got entangled with a sprinkler head and he strained his back, a mishap that kept him inactive from April into September. He stayed in Chicago and helped Kim grade math papers.

In 1992, when he was making three hundred thousand dollars a year with the Cubs and was a favorite with the local press, the Girardis finished building a house in Lake Forest, after three years of renting. Shortly after the closing, he learned that the Cubs had left his name unprotected, and the Colorado Rockies, an expansion team, had selected him.

He was stunned and dejected. "They say buying a house in the place you play is the kiss of death," Girardi told me. "I grew up a Cubs fan, and I thought I was always going to be a Cub." Kim helped reconcile him to the move, however, telling him again and again, "This is God's plan." She resigned from her teaching job and headed to Denver, where she bought a pair of cowboy boots and rented an apartment.

"Those three years in Colorado were magnificent," Girardi said. "We played at Mile High Stadium, and you'd have seventy thousand people there. It was loud, it was exciting, people loved baseball."

In 1995, Joe and Kim went on a package tour to Italy, their first vacation since their honeymoon, in 1989. Right after returning home, Girardi received a call from a man in Suffern, New York, whom he and Kim had met on the trip. He said, "Joe, you're all over the papers and the radio here. You're going to be traded to the Yankees!"

Within a week, the outgoing message on the Girardis' answering machine was a snippet of Frank Sinatra singing "New York, New York." They quickly rented a town house in White Plains, owned by Charles Oakley, the onetime Knicks star, and joined the Yankees for spring training, in Tampa.

Don Zimmer, the one person on the Yankees whom Girardi knew, was now the bench coach under Joe Torre, the manager. Zimmer told the press that Girardi was known for his leadership qualities, and that he was well liked by the front office. As Girardi told me, "I always had close working relationships with the coaches, whether it be the manager, the pitching coach, the catching coach, or the bench coach. If I wasn't playing, a lot of times I would sit next to the bench coach just to hear the conversations."

Girardi had a tough start in New York. He told me, "The first time I came out was for the Fan Fest, and I got booed." Fans missed the popular catcher Mike Stanley, whom Girardi had replaced, and who was a better hitter. The radio station WFAN needled Girardi by playing a mocking, retooled version of the 1941 hit "Joltin' Joe DiMaggio," in which the hosts would shout out "Girardio!" in place of "DiMaggio."

The cool welcome just made Girardi work harder, approaching the challenges methodically, like a bricklayer. "A fear of failure is what really drove me," he said, "and the only way I could not fail was to intellectually and physically prepare. So then whatever happened happened. I didn't want to ever face the unexpected." He added, "I never wanted to let my dad down."

Girardi told me that Yankees fans stopped booing him after he caught Dwight Gooden's no-hitter at the Stadium, on May 14, 1996. Ron Hassey, who had been the Colorado Rockies' third-base coach, said at the time, "Joe understands that the most important job for a catcher is to get the most out of your pitcher. That includes pitch selection, blocking balls, throwing runners out, holding runners on, knowing the strengths and weak-

nesses of hitters. Joe's as good as there is at those things."

There was little disappointment in Girardi's 1996-99 career with the Yankees, as the team won the World Series each year except 1997. He gave his first World Series ring to his father. As the team's No. 1 catcher, he was now earning more than two million dollars a year. The second catcher was Jim Leyritz, a seven-year veteran. A promising young catcher, Jorge Posada, was rising through the ranks, though, and Girardi remembers telling Leyritz, "This isn't going to go well for one of us, because Posada is faster, stronger, younger, and he's got a better arm and more power." After the 1996 season, Leyritz was traded, and Girardi was two years away from becoming Posada's backup. He remained with the Yankees as their second catcher and Posada's mentor through 1999, catching David Cone's perfect game at the Stadium, on Yogi Berra Day, July 18, 1999.

At the end of that year, as Girardi turned thirty-five and became a free agent, he went back to the Cubs as their primary catcher, and by 2001 he was a team captain. The most memorable event of his time in Chicago was the emotional announcement that Girardi made in front of a capacity crowd at Wrigley Field, on June 22, 2002, before a scheduled Cubs-Cardinals game.

"I thank you for your patience," Girardi began, standing near the Cubs dugout with a microphone. "We regret to inform you, because of a tragedy in the Cardinal family, that the commissioner has cancelled the game today." As the crowd reacted with a few boos, he continued, "Please be respectful. You will find out eventually what has happened." And then, with tears in his eyes, he concluded, "I ask you to say a prayer for the Cardinals family."

The reason for the cancellation was that Darryl Kile, a thirty-three-year-old pitcher for the Cardinals, had suffered a heart attack and was discovered dead in his hotel room while the teams were warming up. Girardi's appearance that day as a spokesman for Major League Baseball demonstrated to a large audience what a few in the dugout had long known: Girardi possessed a dignified and refined manner that, combined with his knowledge and love of the game, presented him with appealing possibilities once his playing days were over.

CANS

My mother kept cans till they exploded.
Better to let beans curdle to oil
poison swelling the tins like blisters
than have nothing to show.

—Allison Glock

Girardi found that he was much in demand. In 2004, a year after joining the Cardinals and expending most of the little that was left of his catching ability at Busch Stadium, he became a television commentator for the Yankees' YES network. In 2005, he joined the team as the bench coach under Torre. A year later, at forty-one, he was hired to manage a National League franchise, the Florida Marlins.

Although the Marlins' annual payroll, of about fifteen million dollars, was the lowest in major-league baseball, Girardi led the team into wild-card contention until, at the end of the season, it fell to fourth place. Still, the baseball writers' association honored Girardi with the National League Manager of the Year award.

This success, however, did not help him keep his job. Jeffrey Loria, the Marlins' owner, fired Girardi in October. Their relationship had been contentious. During a game against the Dodgers, Loria, from the sidelines, loudly berated the umpires' calls. According to reports, Loria believed that he had heard a voice in the Marlins' dugout yelling, "Shut the fuck up!" and assumed that it was Girardi's. Girardi denied that the words were his.

After the 2007 season, George Steinbrenner, unhappy at Joe Torre's failure to bring home a World Series trophy since 2000, made Torre a contract offer he could only refuse. He presented Torre, who had been the Yankees' manager for twelve years, with a one-year, take-it-or-leave-it contract with a base salary of five million dollars, which was two and a half million dollars less than he had earned the previous year. Torre resigned, and he signed a contract to manage the Los Angeles Dodgers.

The Yankees replaced Torre with Girardi, signing him to a three-year contract, for $7.8 million. His decision to select 27 as his uniform number was significant. The Yankees franchise had so far won twenty-six World Series titles, and it was Girardi's mission to capture another.

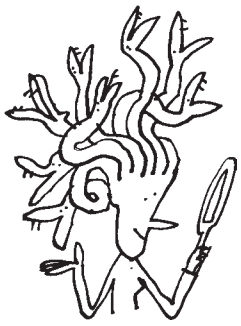
Just as Girardi had a tough time following Mike Stanley when he joined the Yankees as a player, he now found himself replacing a beloved manager. The press began by portraying Girardi as controlling and demanding, a robotic technocrat. His first spring training as the Yankees' manager was likened to boot camp. One day, both the *Post* and the *News* ran photographs of Girardi, with his signature crewcut, under the words "G.I. Joe." Posada said to one reporter, "If you'd have told me he was in the Navy or Army, I wouldn't have been surprised."

But hard work prevailed, and two years later, following the team's 2009 World Series triumph over the Phillies, Girardi changed his number to 28. The next year, his team was defeated by Texas in the second round of the playoffs, but the Yankees' management signed Girardi to another three-year contract, this time for nine million dollars plus incentives, based on how well the team did in the playoffs.

Girardi takes a somewhat minimalist approach to managing. Rick Sutcliffe, who pitched for the Cubs when Girardi was the team's catcher, observed that "he only manages when he has to." Russell Martin, the Yankees' current catcher, told me, "He's not going to tell me something negative, to criticize me. It's always positive feedback. And he knows how to pick his time, too." Girardi proved to be especially good at dealing with the Yankees' outsized personalities. Curtis Granderson, the team's All-Star center fielder, said, "A manager has to be an individual that can handle multiple personalities. You have a majority of your sub-

ordinates that make more money than you, and yet you have to tell them what to do, where to be, and they also have to respect you."

Last year's team did not get past the first round of the playoffs, winning only two of five games against Detroit; and although George Steinbrenner was no longer a factor—he died, at eighty, during the summer of 2010—the club's president, Randy Levine, reminded the organization and its followers of "what the Boss taught us," which is "If we don't win the World Series, then the season is a failure. . . . That's the way it's always been, and that's the way it will always be."



This season, neither Randy Levine nor other front-office executives have expressed concerns about the capabilities of the team, because, despite continuing injuries to key players and the underperformance of others, the Yankees had the best record in baseball at mid-season (52 wins, 33 losses). The team remained at the top of the American League East during the second half of the season, until a late-season surge by the Baltimore Orioles created a tie for the division leadership. On July 18th, the Yankees enjoyed a ten-game lead, but between late August and the first week of September they lost ten of fourteen games. Suddenly, the usually even-tempered Girardi was showing signs of frustration and anxiety.

On September 4th in St. Petersburg, during a 5–2 loss to the Tampa Bay Rays, Girardi became so enraged by the umpire Tony Randazzo's called third strike against the Yankees' outfielder Chris Dickerson that, according to the *Times*, he "shot out of the dugout and engaged in his most heated argument of the season, screaming at Randazzo as his face turned red and the veins bulged in his neck."

In the clubhouse after the game, Girardi told reporters, "I'm not going to comment on Randazzo," but the hitting coach, Kevin Long, acknowledged, "There's some pressure, obviously. We had a ten-game lead and it's down to zero. There's some added pressure, and the guys are probably trying to do too much. We've got to come out of it and start playing some better baseball, not just offensively but altogether."

Girardi approaches his job like the engineer he studied to be. "You figure out how to make systems run better and be more efficient, and really that's what you're trying to do as a manager," he told the Northwestern alumni magazine in 2008.

Unlike Torre, Girardi consults a lot of statistics. John Flaherty, a catcher for the Yankees from 2003 to 2005, told me, "I view Girardi as *the* New Age manager in major-league baseball. I believe that the 'old school' managers would watch the game in front of them and manage accordingly. There was not a whole lot of information available to them to prepare for a game. They had to rely on what they 'saw' on a daily basis and make their decisions based on that information."

Girardi's data used to be contained in a large blue three-ring binder that he carried with him almost all the time, but has since been transferred to an iPad. "I'm a big believer that numbers tell the story, and I also want to know why they tell the story," he told me. The data "is going to tell me a hitter's hot spots, where he doesn't hit the ball, what pitches he hits. I want to know what his strengths are, where he likes the fastball, that he doesn't hit the slider well." He creates matchups, figuring out how particular hitters will do against particular pitchers.

Girardi surely consulted the numbers before he decided to bench Jorge Posada in August of 2011. Posada had already been replaced as the team's everyday catcher by Russell Martin, and he was now stripped of his last regular role, the designated hitter. Earlier in the season, before a game against the Red Sox, Girardi had dropped Posada, who was deep in a slump, to ninth place in the batting order. Posada was so offended that he asked to be removed from the lineup entirely, because he needed a little time to "clear his head."

Girardi obliged him, but the next day the newspapers speculated that Brian Cashman, the general manager, was furious at Posada's peevishness, and, along with Hal Steinbrenner, the

co-chairman, had considered firing Posada for insubordination.

"Posada has to know the Torre era is indeed over," the baseball columnist Bob Klapisch wrote, in *The Record*. "The Yankees are no longer a baseball team, they're a corporation, as vast and powerful as Microsoft." In the *News*, unnamed sources were reminding readers that Girardi, who had lost his Yankees catching job to Posada during the late nineteen-nineties, had reappeared, in 2005, to haunt Posada as Torre's bench coach.

In response to these reports, Girardi exhibited his flair for deflating headlines with clichés. All that he would say about his meeting with Posada over the designated-hitter issue was "It's not a conversation that's easy to get through. But for Jorgie, he's very professional and I know he'll keep himself ready and try to do whatever he needs to do."

When Girardi is not preoccupied with the health and performance of his team, his mind is often on his father, Gerald, who is now eighty-one and suffers from Alzheimer's, and lives in a nursing home near Peoria. Girardi phones his father once a week to have a one-way conversation; for the past three years, Gerald has been unable to communicate.

When the Yankees are playing in Chicago, Girardi will rent a car and drive the hundred and seventy miles to spend an hour with his father, taking the same road that he did when he went home to Peoria during his student days at Northwestern. I once accompanied him to the nursing home, a two-and-a-half-hour ride past cornfields and grazing cattle.

"My dad was always there for me," Girardi told the Northwestern alumni magazine in 1998. "He's the one who played catch with me, he was the one who took me to Cubs games where I could see my favorite players, like Ron Santo and José Cardenal, in action."

Driving through the town of Roanoke, his father's birthplace, he pointed out a single-story brick house built decades ago by his bricklaying grandfather, George. He didn't stop, but he mentioned that George always had dark-stained fingers, the result of cracking open walnuts with his bare hands to give pieces of nutmeat to his grandchildren.

In the town of Washington, we drove past a restaurant building that Girardi's father had owned. When Angela became ill, Gerald quit being a road salesman and opened Girardi's, a twenty-five-table restaurant, doing nearly all the cooking himself. Joe worked as a waiter after school and on weekends, as did his siblings.

Driving into East Peoria, we passed the Girardis' old house, and continued through the neighborhood where Joe had once had a paper route. He said he hoped that he would hold on to his position as the Yankees' manager long enough so that Dante could get a part-time job in the clubhouse at Yankee Stadium, where, among other tasks, he would wash towels.

We pulled up to the nursing home, and as Girardi walked in he was greeted by staff members—as usual, some had baseballs for him to sign, which he did without hesitation. He continued to his father's room, and he was welcomed at the door by Judy Shea, a family friend who has been his father's companion since some years after Angela's death. She had been feeding Gerald a piece of carrot cake she had baked.

Girardi walked over to the wheelchair where his father sat. He leaned over the older man, who, wearing beige warmup clothes, was leaning back with his eyes closed. He did not respond as his son greeted him in a loud and cheerful voice: "Hi, Dad. I love you, Dad." Girardi repeated this a few times, but his father remained motionless. The physical resemblance between father and son was striking. If you looked at their matching buzz cuts and high cheekbones, it was easy to imagine what Joe Girardi might look like in thirty years.

For the next half hour, he and Shea sat across from each other at a table and talked about family matters, and Girardi ate a slice of carrot cake. When his father moved to the nursing home, Girardi had to take back the World Series ring he'd given him, for safekeeping. He glanced every once in a while in his father's direction.

After a while, Girardi stood up, embraced Shea, and said goodbye. Before leaving the room, he looked again at his father, leaned forward, and kissed him on the forehead. "I love you, Dad," he said.

He turned and walked toward the exit, waving at the attendants at the front desk, and finally, before leaving the building, he said, this time to himself, "I love you, Dad." ♦