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BACKTALK

A wish for Father's Day: Bouton and Berra with the old-timers

SportsSunday

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Son's Wish on Father's Day is to See Dad and Yogi Stand With Old-Timers

BY MICHAEL BOUTON

Today is Father's Day, but the date I have circled on my calendar is July 25. That is Old-Timers' Day at Yankee Stadium. Traditionally, it is the day when past Yankee stars take their annual curtain call. It is the day when my father, Jim Bouton, No. 56, the Bulldog, is snubbed, and not invited back. Although I know an invitation to attend Old-Timers' Day is an honor he can live without, it is what I wish for him this year.

You see, this past August my sister Laurie died in automobile crash at the age of 31. She was beautiful and sweet. And as tough as it is to lose a sibling, I cannot even fathom the loss my parents must feel.

Philosophers say it is because of tragedy that we give such importance to our games. Baseball, seemingly, has always been here for us. The key to baseball's future as America's favorite pastime lies in its continuity between generations.

I realize the big loss for Yankee fans and baseball continues to be the absence of Yogi Berra on Old-Timers' Day. Yogi has let it be known that he refuses to be part of the celebration at Yankee Stadium as long as George Steinbrenner is the owner. I have applauded Yogi's decision on this matter of principle, but recently I have had a change of heart and mind.

It is just as petty for Yogi to spite George as it is for George to spite my father. It does not serve the greater good for families, the fans or the sport we supposedly love so much. It does not factor in the human equation.



Jim Bouton, a popular Yankee from 1962 to '68 who went on to become a controversial baseball author, with Mickey Mantle after the rookie pitcher's successful major league debut. Below, a family photo of Bouton and his daughter, Laurie, who was killed last year.



I know that not having Old-Timers' Day on our calendar like a holiday gave us fewer days with Laurie. I wonder if Yogi knows how important it is for his grand-children to witness him out there under the classic façade of the stadium. There is no substitute for smelling the grass and hearing the cheers. It will be time for dusting off the scrapbook soon enough.

For the fans, their children and grand-children, the great difference between a regular game and Old-Timers' Day cannot be gauged. How many stories from their own lives are triggered by the sight of a player from the past?

The type of story that places them in time, describing what they were doing, say, on that afternoon when Yogi won his first of three most valuable player awards.

Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio, when you are more remembered as a line in

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a pop song than for an acrobatic catch or batting streak? Old-Timers' Day is a chance for fans to give back. To forget this aspect will ultimately doom baseball's primacy among sports in America.

It has been nearly 30 years since my father wrote "Ball Four." And for all the hullabaloo about his book, the major detractors have all written their own tell-all books, affirming the validity of what they once called lies. Last year, on the occasion of its 100th anniversary, the New York Public Library listed "Ball Four" as one of the 100 most important books of the century. The question is this: Why do the Yankees still feel as if they have to punish him?

For years, the rumor was that Mickey Mantle had threatened not to attend Old-Timers' Day if my father was present. I am thankful that the Mick was big enough to make what amounted to a deathbed call to my father to put that rumor to rest as being untrue. He understood the significance of the snub and wanted no part of it.

So that leaves only George, who was not even the team's owner when "Ball Four" came out in 1970. If George blames "Ball Four" for contributing toward free agency, one would expect a different reaction, because everyone knows it is only through the acquisition of such free agents as Reggie, Catfish, Cone, et al., that Steinbrenner's reign has seen any championships at all.

I'm hoping that a compromise on positions can take place without necessarily a compromise of principles. I mean, if George really hates my father that much, is it good for him to still hold it inside? Wouldn't it be more healthful to have my father there, if only to boo him?

George has said that this year he will be turning over more of the day-to-day operations to his sons Hal, Hank and Harold. Might that be enough for Yogi to return to Yankee Stadium and still save face?

I am hoping to reach George's sons. Despite our different upbringings, I think we have a lot in common. It is never easy

growing up the child of a public figure. I know they have heard mean things said about their father, much the same way I have. I think there have been days when they have been publicly embarrassed by him and there have been times when they have been as proud as any child has ever been about a parent – exactly like me. I'm sure they love their father as much as I love mine. That is what Father's Day is about – celebrating that love.

I see this as an opportunity to get my father some extra hugs at a time in his life when he could use all the hugs he can get. It is something he would never seek for himself – he is going to kill me when he reads this – and maybe the kind of thing only a son or daughter can do for their father.

I am not asking for any favors, just reconsideration. That is all. Life is short. Time is at hand.