MICKEY MANTLE
"Don't Be Like Me!"

By Dennis Pollock

It was as though God had decided to design the perfect baseball player. With broad powerful shoulders, an arm like a cannon, and speed that smaller men couldn't begin to touch, Mickey Mantle was a natural. Casey Stengel had tried to get him to shorten his swing in the early years but Mickey would have none of it. Having little technical knowledge of the game, he didn't dare mess up a batting stroke that produced such prodigious home runs. His blasts didn't just go into the stands; sometimes they left the park altogether.

When Mickey Mantle died of cancer at Baylor Medical Center the nation sat up and took notice. Every year numerous former pro athletes die of various causes, but this time it was different. For some reason Mickey Mantle had captured America's heart four decades ago and we had never been able to forget him.

He came into the big leagues as a poor country boy from Oklahoma. A Yankee coach named Henrich, who had been assigned to work with Mantle on his defensive play, felt that he had never seen the kind of strength that Mantle possessed in any other baseball player. He wasn't an especially big man, but the power and bat speed he generated when swinging at a baseball resulted in mammoth home runs. Bill Dickey, the former Yankee catcher, said that even the sound of his home runs was different. Ted Williams declared that the crack of the bat against the ball when Mantle connected was like an explosion. Had he played for a team with a smaller stadium, rather than in New York where their cavernous centerfield turned homeruns into easy putouts, and had he stayed injury free, he might easily hold the record for career homeruns today.

As it was, he still managed to finish his career with stats that were none too shabby. Nominated to the All-Star team 16 times, eighth on the all-time home run list, Mantle played in 12 World Series and holds the record for the most home runs in world series play (18). He was a legend in his own time. Mantle seemed to symbolize the All-American male. Kids pretended to be him as they played their sandlot games and dreamed of future glory. His teammates loved him. Clete Boyer, Yankee third baseman once said, "He is the only baseball player I know who is a bigger hero to his teammates than he is to the fans." Good looking, funny, and macho to the core, Mickey Mantle seemed bigger than life.

FEARS AND PRESSURES

Not all was as rosy as it seemed, however. Behind the line drives and the laughter Mickey was a troubled man. One of the sources of this was his certainty that his days were numbered. His dad had died of Hodgkin's disease at 39, and two uncles also died in their early 40's of other forms of cancer. When Mantle was a rookie his roommate, Jerry Coleman, was on the pension committee, and tried to talk to him about the importance of the pension plan. Mantle had no interest, announcing flatly, "I'll never get one. I'll never live that long." Joe Pepitone recalled that Mantle "used to stay up and talk about being afraid of dying young." Never more than nominally religious he had no answer to the reality of death, and it seemed to haunt him all his days.

A second pressure that he faced was the immense expectations that surrounded him nearly all his life. Even as a child his father would practice with him for hours after work, and tell him that he would become the best baseball player that ever was. In his first spring training with the Yankees nearly a half a million people came out to see the games—something unheard of at that time. They came out to see the
new phenomenon, the next Babe Ruth. Manager Casey Stengel even knicknamed him "the phenom." In his later years he would write, "When I was a rookie, Casey had said, 'This guy's going to be better than Joe DiMaggio and Babe Ruth.' It didn't happen." At times it seemed that the pressures put on him by his dad, the coaches, and the fans were a heavier burden than he cared to live with, and as a result he often withdrew into the tight-knit world of his own teammates, particularly the company of Whitey Ford and Billy Martin.

TIME IN A BOTTLE

Whether it was from the pressures of the fear of death, the expectations he had always lived with, or some other inexplicable reason, Mickey Mantle soon started what was to be a lifelong pattern of alcohol abuse when he first came to the Yankees. In his autobiography The Mick he writes:

If I tasted the high life in 1951, I got a bellyful starting in 1952—especially on the road. Parties, flashy people, hard liquor, staying out really late. Billy and I were often the life of the party. We wouldn't go upstairs to our old room until we were just about ready to drop.

While it seemed a glamorous life to a naive young ballplayer, it gradually evolved to something that got ugly, and at times dangerous. One evening, during the off-season, as he left his house his wife asked him how long he would be. He told her "just a couple of hours." At his favorite "watering hole" he chatted with some buddies as he graduated from beers to boilermakers to bourbon. Near five in the morning he was on his way home when he saw his neighbor with some friends getting ready for an early morning fishing trip. They asked him to go with them, and falling into a drunken sleep in the car, he found himself at a remote spot in Arkansas without a phone nearby. Two days later he showed up at home with a nice catch of fish to find his wife, Merlyn, frantic with worry. She cried, "How can you do this to me?" but he shrugged and went to bed without explanation. Another time he came within inches of killing Merlyn when he crashed into a telephone pole, after refusing to let her drive for him in his drunken condition.

After retirement from baseball the drinking seemed to get worse. In an article he did for Sports Illustrated he wrote, "It was when I had no commitments, nothing to do or nowhere to be that I lapsed into those long drinking sessions. It was the loneliness and emptiness. I found 'friends' at bars, and I filled my emptiness with alcohol." He told of going through three or four bottles of wine in the course of an afternoon and needing six to eight vodka martinis before he could feel comfortable at a party. He often began his days with a drink he called "the breakfast of champions"—a big glass filled with a shot or more of brandy, some Kahlua and cream. Though he had little time for his sons while they were young, when they grew up he made them his drinking buddies. Two of them checked themselves into the Betty Ford Center.

SOWING AND REAPING

As Mantle grew older, and the glory years receded further and further into the past, he began to reap a bitter harvest from the hedonistic seeds he had so diligently sowed. He began having memory lapses, to the point where he wondered if he had Alzheimer's disease. The doctors said his liver had been so damaged it was like one glob of scar tissue. He began having anxiety attacks. His normally pleasant personality became surly and obnoxious at times. People told him of things he had done and said of which he had absolutely no memory. Finally he checked himself into the Betty Ford Center and gave up drinking altogether.

But it was too late. The cancer that he had always feared first struck his liver. In his prime Mantle and Billy Martin had teased each other about whose liver would give out first. With Martin killed in a car ac-
cident, Mantle attained the dubious distinction. As he neared the end of his life, Mantle became keenly aware of the way he had wasted his life and failed his family, saying, "My kids have never blamed me. They don't have to. I blame myself."

Mickey Mantle especially identified with the song *Yesterday When I Was Young*, made popular by Roy Clark, and asked that it be sung at his funeral. This is not your typical funeral fare, but the words fit Mantle's life to a tee:

> So many wild pleasures lay in store for me, and so much pain my dazzled eyes refused to see. I ran so fast that time and youth at last ran out. I never stopped to think what life was all about ... There are so many songs in me that won't be sung. I feel the bitter taste of tears upon my tongue. The time has come for me to pay for yesterday, when I was young.

At a press conference following his surgery for liver replacement Mantle spoke to the kids: "Don't be like me. God gave me a body and the ability to play baseball. I had everything and I just..." At that point he threw up his hands, and bowed his head. Then looking straight ahead he said, "I'm going to spend the rest of my life trying to make up." It was a nice gesture but he had no way of knowing that his time was too quickly running out.

**REGRETS AND EMPTINESS**

Those who knew Mantle well saw behind the facade of laughter to a man who was never really at peace with himself. The sportscaster Bob Costas, who got close to Mantle in his latter years, made mention of this when he interviewed Mickey just after he was treated for alcoholism:

Costas: I've always had the sense that there was a sadness about you ... Was that true?
Mantle: Yeah. I think that when I did drink a little too much or something, it kind of relieved the tension that I felt within myself maybe because I hadn't been what I should have been.

Costas: Because you hadn't been the ballplayer you thought you should have been?
Mantle: Or the daddy.

Costas: Did you ever say to yourself, "Wait a minute. I'm one of the best ballplayers of all time. I've made a significant amount of change doing this. I'm financially secure. People seem to love me. Why don't I feel better?"

Mantle: Maybe I do, in the back of my mind, feel like I've let everybody down some way or other. I know there is something in there that's not fulfilled or something. I don't know what it is ... I can't explain it.

**NINTH INNING**

As Mickey came face to face with the end of his life, and his body filled with a rapidly spreading cancer, he called on his old friend and teammate, Bobby Richardson, asking for his prayers. Like Mickey, Bobby had been an outstanding athlete and a tough ballplayer for the Yankees in their glory years. But there the similarities ended. Throughout his baseball career Bobby had been a committed Christian who had placed faith and family above baseball. Now, in Mickey's declining days he called a man he knew was close to God. Bobby encouraged Mickey to commit himself unto the Lord.
Not long after that, when it became evident that Mickey would die in the next few days, Bobby went to see Mickey in his hospital room. The familiar grin he had seen during all those locker room pranks was back on Mickey's face, this time for a wholly different reason. Mickey's first words were, "Bobby, I received Christ as my Savior." Taking nothing for granted, Bobby went over God's plan of salvation with Mickey, sharing with him how that Jesus had taken our sins upon himself on the cross, had paid the debt we could never pay by dying in our place, and had risen from the dead, according to the Scriptures. He told him how that we must receive Christ by faith, trusting in Him alone for justification in the sight of God. Mickey assured him that he had done this. And when Bobby's wife came into the room later on, she, too, wanted confirmation that Mickey really understood the gospel. She asked him, "And if God should ask you, 'Why should I allow you into heaven,' what would you answer?" Mickey knew that he would never make it by his own good deeds—something that is true for everyone of us, for the Scripture says, "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16). His reply gave evidence that he had indeed understood the gospel: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."