



AP FILE PHOTO

Yogi Berra tags out Phillies baserunner Granny Hamner in the 1950 World Series, the third of 10 seasons in which Berra won a championship as a player.

# BERRA BECAME AMERICAN TREASURE

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Special for USA TODAY Sports

When Yogi Berra broke into the big leagues in 1946, teams in two eight-team leagues played 154-game schedules and sent pennant winners directly to the World Series.

One of the few things about the game and America that hadn't changed since then had been Berra, an unorthodox hitter and successful manager who morphed from war hero to folk hero long before he died at 90 last week.

Even when he was alive, Berra

From humble beginnings grew war hero, baseball star, dugout whiz and all-around quotable, affable fellow

was larger than life. Maybe it was the iconic nickname, applied by friends after watching a travelogue depicting a Hindu holy man. Maybe it was the string of memorable malapropisms that made him more quotable than Thomas Jefferson. Or maybe it was the short, squat physique (5-7, 185 pounds) that suggested anything but a ballplayer.

Early in his career, Berra wandered up to New York Yankees

coach Frankie Crosetti. "Remember the first time you saw me?" he asked.

"Sure," Crosetti said, "You were just coming out of the Navy and were wearing a sailor suit."

"I bet you didn't think I looked like a ballplayer," Berra said.

Crosetti had a ready response: "You didn't even look like a sailor."

Looks can be deceiving: the only major leaguer to participate

in the D-Day invasion June 6, 1944. Lawrence Peter Berra began his big-league career two years later and it lasted until 1965 (thanks to nine at-bats with the New York Mets that season).

Durability was his trademark; he caught both ends of double-headers 117 times and caught a seven-hour, 22-inning marathon at the ripe athletic age of 37 in 1962.

Even in the event of a rare

injury, fate smiled on him — a beaming in Detroit gave a headline writer the chance to say "X-rays of Berra's head showed nothing." When a 1957 foul tip shattered a steel bar on his catcher's mask and damaged his prominent nose, nagging sinus issues and migraines miraculously stopped.

The only serious injury of his life came at Normandy, where a Nazi bullet pierced his throwing hand. Berra collected two battle stars and a Purple Heart.

The ultimate contact hitter, he had more home runs than strikeouts in five different seasons — even though he was a notorious



SPORTS WEEKLY SEPTEMBER 30–OCTOBER 6, 2015

bad-ball hitter. He and Joe DiMaggio were the only players to hit at least 350 home runs without striking out 500 times.

"Yogi was tough," former big-league pitcher and Berra contemporary Ralph Branca told USA TODAY Sports. "He swung at the first pitch a lot. He knew pitchers tried to get ahead of hitters and would usually start with a fastball. He swung at a lot of high balls and at some low ones. And when he swung, he hit the ball."

Branca, who pitched Game 1 of the 1947 World Series for the Brooklyn Dodgers against Berra's Yankees, called him "a good guy, friendly to everybody." But he also said Berra was wrong in insisting that Jackie Robinson was out when he stole home during the 1955 World Series.

"Yogi missed that one," Branca said. "The pitcher (Whitey Ford) threw the ball outside. Jackie slid across the plate first and then into Yogi's glove."

Former umpire Al Clark agreed. "We spoke about that, and Yogi said he definitely got him," said Clark, who umpired in the majors from 1976 to 2001. "I said, 'Did you look at the scoreboard?' He looked at me quite clearly and didn't say anything. He thought he got him, but the umpire thought differently."

Current video technology would have decided the issue, Clark said. He added that Berra's outburst was unusual.

"He treated everybody fairly — umpires, players, coaches, and opponents," he said. "He cared about winning and his club doing well but had respect for everybody else in the game."

That respect was reciprocated. He homered 358 times and was such an American icon that news of his death almost knocked Pope Francis' visit to the USA off the front page. Berra would have liked that.

Berra, a Catholic, saw Pope John XXIII at the Vatican in 1959. In his typical, down-to-earth manner, he reached out his hand and said, "Hello, Pope."

#### BRILLIANT BASEBALL MAN

A three-time MVP who made 18 All-Star teams, Berra was equally known for twisted syntax — he dropped out of school in eighth grade to help support his struggling family. But manager Casey Stengel, whose Yankees won 10 pennants in 12 years from 1949 to 1960 with Berra behind the plate, appreciated his skills on the diamond.

"Yogi is the smartest baseball man on my club," he once said.

"He can bat against a pitcher once and know more about him than the pitcher's mother."

Berra collected RBI the way kids collected his baseball cards. From 1949 to 1955, he led the Yankees in RBI every year — even with DiMaggio and then Mickey Mantle as teammates (Mantle and DiMaggio briefly overlapped with the Yankees.) He also had a seven-year streak of finishing in the top four in the voting for MVP.

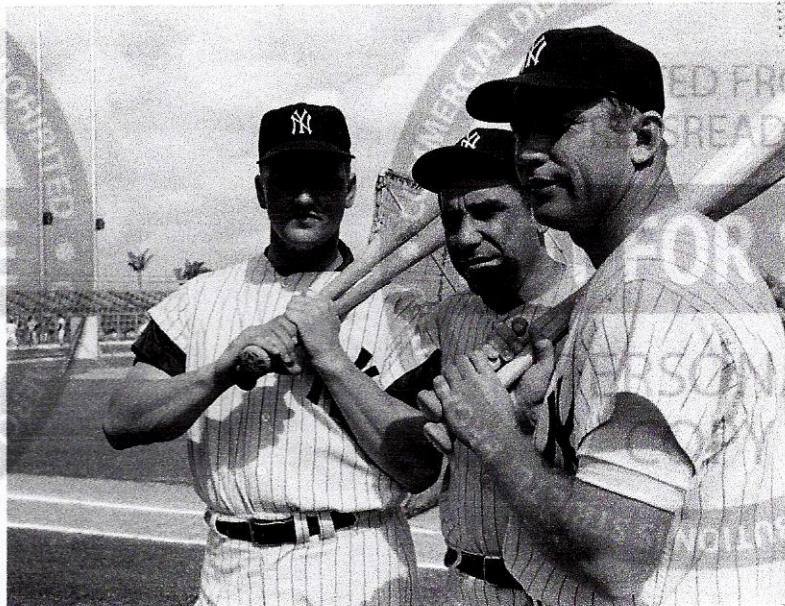
Berra's acumen extended to his defense; Don Larsen never shook off a single Berra suggestion while throwing his perfect game for the Yankees against the Dodgers in the 1956 World Series. Berra also capped that classic with two homers in Game 7 — the only time anyone has done that.

"When Yogi was managing the Yankees (in 1984 and early in 1985) and I was his bench coach," Jeff Torborg said, "I realized he had baseball instincts that were second to none. We had made Dave Righetti a relief pitcher and told him to cut down on the number of pitches he used. A good hitter was up with the game on the line and two outs. He kept fouling off the fastball and slider, just missing them. Yogi said, 'Have him throw a curveball.' I said, 'He hasn't thrown a curveball since he was a starter last year.' He insisted. So I signaled for a curveball, and the hitter didn't even swing at it. Strike three, game's over."

"Another time we had two men on, and he said, 'Do you think we ought to run here?' I said, 'You have the tying run at second. If we swing and miss, we could be in trouble.' Before I finished my thought, the hitter banded into a double play more quickly than you could blink. I said, 'Yogi, do not listen to me. Go by your gut. You're a Hall of Fame player, you have great experience and you have a greater feel for this game than just about anybody who ever lived.'"

The only manager to win pennants with both the Yankees and the Mets, and one of seven to win flags in both leagues, Berra did not always enjoy a smooth tenure.

In 1964, his temper boiled over on a bus after a tough loss. He asked infielder Phil Linz to stop playing his harmonica, but the infielder, seated far away, didn't hear him. Mantle told Linz that Berra wanted him to play louder. Incensed, the manager smacked the harmonica away. After the Yankees lost Game 7 of the World Series, general manager Ralph Houk fired Berra and replaced him with Johnny Keane, whose



Yogi Berra is flanked by Roger Maris, left, and Mickey Mantle at Yankees spring training in 1964. AP FILE PHOTO

## Memorable quotes live on

During his life, Yogi Berra was one of the most quotable people in America. His sayings (as well as contradictions and misuse of words) became part of the national vernacular.

Here is a sampling of some of Berra's best-known turns of phrase:

*Thank you for making this day necessary.*

— On Yogi Berra Day, 1947, when he was being honored in his hometown of St. Louis.

*It's déjà vu all over again.*

— After watching Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris hit back-to-back home runs.

*We made too many wrong mistakes.*

— After the Yankees lost the 1960 World Series to the Pittsburgh Pirates. Berra was playing left field and watched Bill Mazeroski's Game 7-winning home run fly over the outfield wall.

*It gets late early out there.*

— On playing left field at Yankee Stadium in the fall, when shadows covered the playing field.

*Ninety percent of the game is half mental.*

— Berra claimed to have said this on many occasions and used it as a coaching tip.

*When you come to a fork in the road, take it.*

— While giving friend and childhood neighbor Joe Garagiola directions from New York City to his house in Montclair, N.J.

*You can observe a lot by watching.*

— While managing the 1964 Yankees and players weren't paying attention.

*Congratulations. I knew the record would stand until it was broken.*

— Message in a telegram to Johnny Bench, who broke Berra's record for home runs by a catcher.

*Steve McQueen looks good in this movie. He must have made it before he died.*

— On post-dinner conversation with wife Carmen and son Dale while watching one of McQueen's movies, *Papillon*.

*We have a good time together, even when we're not together.*

— Responding to a question about Carmen.

*The future ain't what it used to be.*

— Taking about how times are different.

*It ain't over 'til it's over.*

— While managing the 1973 New York Mets when they were far out of first place. They eventually won the National League East and reached the World Series.

*Always go to other people's funerals; otherwise, they won't go to yours.*

— On a discussion he had with Mantle about how many funerals they had been to in one particular year.

*I really didn't say everything I said.*

— When someone asked him about some quotes he didn't think he ever said.

Source: *The Yogi Book*, by Yogi Berra. Workman Publishing, New York, 1998.



St. Louis Cardinals had just beaten the Yankees.

The next season, Berra rejoined Casey Stengel as a player-coach with the fourth edition of the expansion Mets. With 44-year-old Warren Spahn also on the roster, Berra was asked if they would form the oldest battery in baseball history. "I don't know if we'll be the oldest," Berra said, "but we'll certainly be the ugliest."

He retired as a player in May but stayed with the club long enough to succeed Gil Hodges as manager in 1972. A year later, he joined the short list of managers with pennants in both leagues.

Returning to his roots, Berra coached for the Yankees from 1976 to 1983, then took over as manager again in 1984. The next year, George Steinbrenner fired him after 16 games.

"We were in Chicago and heading out to O'Hare (International Airport)," Torborg said. "Before we got to the tarmac, we stopped so that Yogi could get off and fly home to New Jersey. Guys were in tears on that bus. They gave him a standing ovation."

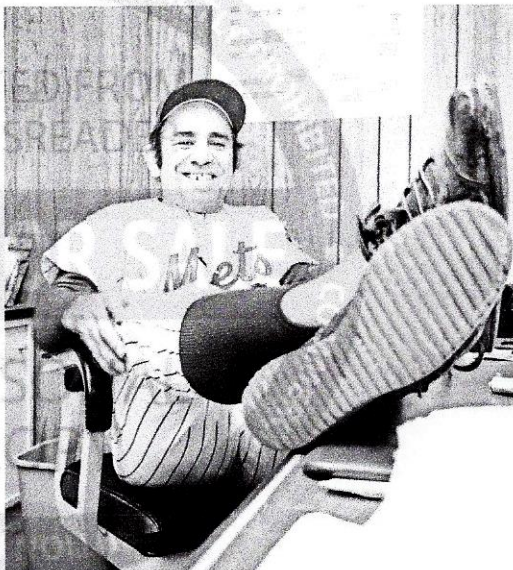
Deeply offended that the Yankees owner dispatched general manager Clyde King to relay the news, Berra refused to return to Yankee Stadium for 14 years. Peace was restored only after Steinbrenner came to the New Jersey-based Yogi Berra Museum & Learning Center to apologize.

"He came there almost every day," said museum director David Kaplan, co-author of four Berra books. "We went to Yankee Stadium together. We had conversations. I would ask him about certain players, certain years and certain situations. I learned so much."

The museum was open less than a year when the Yankees held Yogi Berra Day on July 18, 1999. "Don Larsen threw out the ceremonial first pitch to Yogi, who then handed the glove to Joe Girardi," Kaplan recalled. "I've always said that glove was touched since Girardi proceeded to call David Cone's perfect game that day."

A suggestion from Kaplan to writer Harvey Araton, a close friend, led to the book *Driving Mr. Yogi*, a recounting of stories by pitcher-turned-chauffeur Ron Guidry. When Berra became too infirm to drive himself during spring training, the lanky Louisiana lefty — a fellow celebrity instructor and the Yankees' 1978 AL Cy Young Award winner — became his driver, golfing buddy and dinner companion.

According to Kaplan, a mu-



**Yogi Berra managed the Mets to the 1973 World Series but lost to the Athletics. He managed the Yankees to a pennant in 1964.**

seum photo shows Berra's concern for others. "One of my favorite pictures was taken right after Gil Hodges fouled a ball off his face during the World Series," Kaplan said. "Yogi has his hand on Gil looking to see if he's OK."

The pair formed such a friendship that Hodges asked Berra to remain on the coaching staff after he became manager of the Mets in 1968. When Hodges died of a sudden heart attack during spring training in 1972, Berra succeeded him.

Mets radio voice Howie Rose told his listeners last week that choice was like "comfort food for the organization."

Because Berra blended a keen baseball mind, a kind heart and a quick wit that was often self-deprecating, Berra was universally regarded as a comfortable fit. John McMullen, a New Jersey neighbor who owned the Houston Astros, called him his greatest good-luck charm after the 1986 Astros advanced to the playoffs with Berra on their coaching staff.

#### LIVING AMONG LEGENDS

Originally signed for a paltry \$500 bonus, he wore a major league uniform from 1946 through 1989 and donned it again as a Yankees spring training instructor and Old-Timers' Day participant. He wore No. 35 as a rookie, then switched to No. 8 after Bill Dickey

left the Yankees coaching staff.

Dickey, who reached the Hall of Fame first, was Berra's mentor. "Bill Dickey is learning me all of his experiences," said Berra, himself a mentor for All-Star catchers Craig Biggio of the Astros and Jorge Posada of the Yankees. Had Berra not suggested Biggio move to second base, the fleet Seton Hall product likely would not have collected 3,000 hits or a plaque in Cooperstown.

Berra entered the Hall in 1972. The Yankees retired his number that same year and added a Berra plaque to Monument Park in 1988. When fans selected the All-Century Team 11 years later, he was on it. Where Berra walked, history lived. He met Babe Ruth, teamed with DiMaggio, charmed Joe Torre and befriended Derek Jeter — teasing the Yankees captain that he wouldn't match Berra's record of 10 World Series rings. (Jeter won five in a 20-year career.)

In the Sportsman's Park stands for Enos Slaughter's mad dash in the 1946 World Series, the St. Louis native was on the field for the first televised Series game (1947). Larsen's perfect game (1956), Bill Mazeroski's Series-ending homer (1960), Reggie Jackson's three-homer game (1977) and the one-game playoff featuring Bucky Dent's memorable home run (1978).

He and teammate Phil Rizzuto, his best friend on the Yankees, went to the Bobby Thomson game on Oct. 3, 1951 — but missed "The Shot heard 'Round the World" because they left early to beat the traffic back to New Jersey. Brooklyn had a 4-1 lead in the eighth inning but would eventually lose the game and the pennant.

Never one to flaunt his superstar status, Berra always tried to keep things simple. "When I got traded from the Reds to the Mets and Yogi was the first-base coach, he didn't know my name," Art Shamsky said. "I got a hit in our first exhibition game and was excited because I thought Yogi and I were going to have a conversation. But all he said was, 'Hey, you're on first base. Pay attention.' He was right: I was on first base and needed to pay attention."

"We didn't have a hitting coach then, but whenever I asked Yogi about hitting, he always said, 'See the ball and hit it.' He was such an unorthodox hitter anyway."

"One day we were out in Dodger Stadium, one of the first stadiums with a big electric scoreboard. They started putting up Yogi's records — as a catcher, a hitter and a World Series participant. It took a whole inning to put up all of his records."

Shamsky noted that Berra was the ninth member of the 1969 Miracle Mets to pass on. "People remember him as a great Yankee, but I remember him as a coach on that World Series team."

Like Berra and Shamsky, Ron Blomberg was a left-handed hitter with New York ties.

"Yogi was supposed to be our hitting coach, but we never talked about hitting," said Blomberg, baseball's first designated hitter in 1973 and a Yankee in 1969 and from 1971 to 1976. "He talked about the game of baseball and what it was like when he played. He was probably the closest thing to a perfect man — not just as a baseball player but as a person. He was a perfect gentleman for the game of life and the game of baseball."

John Thorn, the official historian for Major League Baseball, agrees. "Yogi is in the category of Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, Paul Bunyan, Babe Ruth and Satchel Paige," he said. "So many stories are told about him, and they are wonderful. But you don't want to poke too hard at the veracity of the tale."

One true tale emerged from the 2009 opening of the new Yankee Stadium. According to blind sports writer Ed Lucas, "Yogi

came up to me, shook my hand and said, 'Happy opening day, Ed.' I said, 'How do you like the new clubhouse and how big it is?' He said, 'I don't.' I said, 'What do you mean?' So Yogi said, 'I used to be able to sit in my chair and yell over to Scooter (Rizzuto) or Mickey (Mantle) from one end of the clubhouse to the other. This place is so damn big, you need a GPS to get around.'"

Berra's wife, Carmen, who died last year after they had been married for 65 years, also revealed Berra's reaction when he saw a Murphy bed that folded into the wall in their first apartment. According to Carmen, Yogi said, "What do you have to do? Sleep standing up?"

The Berras were regulars in Cooperstown for Hall of Fame weekend until health issues intervened.

"Yogi and Carmen came every year," Hall of Fame President Jeff Idelson said. "Coming here was one of their favorite things. He cared about Cooperstown because he cared about the game. He and Carmen were big fans of the Hall of Fame. When they were here, they were here to be honored by other fans, but they considered themselves fans, too."

"People develop labels. When you think of Cal Ripken, you think of the streak but forget he was a 3,000-hit guy. When you think of Lou Gehrig, you think of ALS and don't realize his impact as a player."

"With Yogi being such a folk hero for his malaprops, baseball philosophy and life philosophy, the younger generation doesn't realize he was three-time MVP who won 10 World Series, was a helluva manager and a very smart baseball guy."

Also a shrewd businessman, he hawked shaving cream, cat food, cigarettes and Yoo-hoo chocolate drink. He also had an agent — Frank Scott — at a time when club owners refused to talk to them.

His top baseball salary was \$65,000 — not bad for a kid who once worked in a coal yard to support immigrant parents and four siblings but a mere pittance by current standards. The wind-falls modern players enjoyed never changed him.

To author Marty Appel, Berra personified The Greatest Generation. "The Depression, the war, he lived it all," the former Yankees publicist and noted team historian said. "He was a man of enormous character, dignity, integrity, honesty and sportsmanship."

"It was an honor to be in his company."