



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on July 22, 2010

‘Major’ Ralph Houk Was Smart When It Counted

When World War II veteran Ralph Houk, “the major,” was a Yankees coach under manager Casey Stengel, Stengel one day gave him a bag of baseballs to hold onto during batting practice, while the “Old Professor” went off to tend to some pregame business. Houk set the bag down a little too close to the box seats and a zealous fan reached over, grabbed it, and ran off with the baseballs.



When Casey found out, he was dumbfounded. “Man kills all them Germans,” he said, “and he can’t guard a bag of baseballs.”

Later Houk replaced Stengel as manager when the Yankees did the unthinkable and fired the manager who had finished the season with his tenth pennant to go with seven World Series wins in his 12 years at the helm. The Yankees decided the job called for a younger man. “I’ll never make the mistake of being 70 again,” Stengel promised.

Stengel went on to manage the “Amazin’” New York Mets, a brand new expansion team that in its first year won 40, lost 120, and showed the manager ways to lose that he swore he’d never seen before. Houk merely won three pennants and two World Series in three years as a manager before he was “kicked upstairs” to an administrative post to make room for new manager Yogi Berra. The Yankees won the pennant and lost the World Series to the Cardinals in seven games in Berra’s single season as manager. So he was fired and the Yankees hired Cardinals manager Johnny Keane. The Yankees had a strange way of rewarding success.

Houk went on to manage the Detroit Tigers and later the Boston Red Sox. He was also a consultant to the Minnesota Twins. He died at his home in Winter Haven, Florida, Wednesday at age 90.

I was privileged to meet him briefly when he managed the Boston nine. It was a summer day in 1984 and I had gotten a press pass for an article I was working on about Fenway Park for a New Hampshire magazine and was able to enter the clubhouse for pregame interviews. I found Houk in the manager’s office, reading the newspaper in what appeared to be a leisurely fashion. We talked a little about the park, the pluses and minuses of playing there and the hazards of pitching to strong right-handed batters in a park where the proximity of the left field fence made pitchers claustrophobic. Eddie Murray of the Orioles had hit a long homerun into the right field bleachers the night before and Houk assured me that was no Fenway Park home run, meaning it would have gone out of any park, with the possible exception of Yellowstone. We talked for a few minutes more and then, newspaper still in his hand, he subtly suggested the interview was over.

“Okay?” he said.

“Sure. Thanks,” I answered. I wasn’t going to argue with a man who had “killed all them Germans.”

I didn’t get to ask him about something I had pondered for years, a decision he made in the nail-biting



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seventh game of the 1962 World Series, that pitted Houk's Yankees against the San Francisco Giants, managed by Alvin Dark. Ralph Terry took a 1-0 shutout into the bottom of the ninth at Candlestick Park in San Francisco. With two outs, Matty Alou singled and Willie Mays ripped a double down the right field line. The Yankees' Roger Maris raced into the corner to retrieve the ball then whirled and threw a one-hop strike to home plate to keep Alou, representing the tying run, at third. With Mays, the winning run, on second and first base open, Houk let Terry pitch to Giants slugger Willie McCovey. McCovey hit a bullet right at Yankees second baseman Bobby Richardson for the final out that ended the inning, the ball game, and the World Series, making the Yankees baseball's champs once again.

I often wondered why Houk didn't order an intentional walk for McCovey, since the winning run was already in scoring position at second in the fleet-footed Mays. And McCovey was a left-handed batter, facing right-handed Terry. Orlando Cepeda, a right hand batter, was on deck. Even with the right-left percentages factored in, Cepeda was, at that stage of their respective careers, a more dangerous hitter than McCovey. And loading the bases would have put added pressure on Terry, since a walk would have tied the game. Houk did what he did and it worked, and I guess it was just as well that I didn't ask him about it. He was getting ready for that afternoon's game and probably would not have wanted to answer questions about the moves he made and didn't make 22 years earlier. But if McCovey had hit that line drive a foot or so in either direction away from Richardson, the ball would have gone into right field, Alou and Mays would have scored, the Giants would have won the World Series and half or more of the world would have been saying: "What the hell was he thinking of, pitching to McCovey in the first place? First base was open fer cryin' out loud!"

But as it happened Houk won that day and captured his second World Series championship ring in two years as Yankees skipper. The next year the Yankees won the pennant, but lost to Bob Gibson and the Cardinals in seven games in the Series. Houk got "promoted" upstairs and soon his days with the Yankees were over. As an old political hand once said, "When you win you're smart." But not, apparently, for very long.

Photo of Ralph Houk (left): AP Images



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