

The Fiscal Times
November 29, 2010

Poor Derek?
By LAWRENCE HAAS

Visiting family in New York for Thanksgiving, scanning the *New York Daily News* for a dish of local sports, I came upon the latest obsession of Big Apple scribes and fans – contract talks between the New York Yankees and their iconic shortstop, Derek Jeter, whose 10-year, \$189 million contract ends this year.

‘Tis often said that, to maintain a grasp on reality, one must travel outside the Beltway, read the papers, and chat up the locals. Actually, as I discovered in mulling the increasingly bitter Yankee-Jeter negotiations over a new contract, you need to combine an outside-the-Beltway viewpoint with a touch of inside-the-Beltway wonkiness.

Here’s what I mean:

As the late David Halberstam surely would have put it, “Derek Sanderson Jeter IS the Yankees.” The club’s captain since 2003, he has been the face of the recent Yankee dynasty, which has included five world championships since the Pequannock, New Jersey native arrived in the Bronx in 1995.

A career .314 hitter, he was the first baseball player to win the Most Valuable Player award in the All-Star Game and the World Series in the same year (2000), he will become the first Yankee to reach 3,000 hits next season and, presuming he stays with the Yanks, he will surpass Mickey Mantle for most game played with the Bronx Bombers.

Having said that, he’s 36 years old, he just finished up his worst statistical year at the plate by far (hitting .270 with 10 home runs and 67 runs batted in), and some critics howled when he won his fifth Gold Glove award in 2010, saying he made so few errors only because he now reaches so few ground balls.

Now, the Yanks have offered Jeter a three-year, \$45 million contract that would maintain him as baseball’s highest-paid shortstop and make him one of only three 37-year-old Major Leaguers to receive that much money. It also would also mean that, counting his earlier wages, he would have earned \$250 million just for playing baseball (not counting the tens of millions more he earns from endorsement deals).

Jeter wants more – much more – with his agent comparing him to Babe Ruth in his value to the club (in image, fans in the seats, etc.) that extends far beyond balls and strikes, home runs and runs scored. Jeter, who reportedly wants \$20 million a year for perhaps four, five, or six years, is keenly aware that the Yanks extended the mind-boggling, \$275 million contract of his rival, the far-less-beloved third baseman Alex Rodriguez, to cover him until age 42.

“Baseball will show its true colors; the Yankees will show their true colors by how they conduct these negotiations,” the filmmaker and baseball lover Ken Burns told the *New York Times* earlier this fall.

“If they focus entirely on his statistics and the subpar year that he’s had, they will have done a disservice to themselves and their organization and to baseball in general,” he went on. “At this stage Derek Jeter deserves a kind of contract for life.”

Poor Derek.

Lest we all start pitying this naturally gifted, Hollywood handsome, fabulously wealthy man who dons the legendary Yankee pinstripes to play a kid’s game, who is the biggest sports star on the world’s biggest stage, who need never work after he hangs up the cleats, and who has inspired accomplished men like Burns to make his final contract a test case for a sport that dates back to the 19th Century, let’s keep a few things in mind:

Today in America, unemployment stands at 9.6 percent, with 14.8 million people out of work – 6.2 million of whom have been looking for work for more than half a year.

The number of poor Americans rose by 3.7 million, to a total of 43.6 million (or 14.3 percent of all Americans), in 2009.

Some 14.7 percent of American households had trouble providing adequate food for themselves in 2009 and, in more than a third of those households, at least one member did not get enough to eat at some time during the year.

The number of Americans without health insurance rose by 4.3 million, to a total of 50.7 million (or 16.7 percent), in 2009.

Nearly 1.6 million people used an emergency shelter or a transitional housing program at some point between late 2008 and late 2009, a third of whom were homeless as members of families (as opposed to individuals).

So, yes, let Derek Jeter fight for every cent of guaranteed money, and for every year, to which he feels entitled.

As for the rest of us, let’s keep our heads on straight and not buy into a farcical morality play about Jeter, the Yankees, and Major League Baseball to which otherwise intelligent people subscribe.

Let’s worry about the jobless, the homeless, and the hungry – and not about a gifted man with a skewed view of what he’s worth for hitting a round ball with a carved piece of wood.

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