How Yankees Became Italian

The Players in Pinstripes Who Changed Perception

BY MILES RYAN FISHER

Immigrants flooded the pre-Depression New York City streets with extra change rattling their pockets. They bought goods. They sold goods. They consumed American products. And New York baseball took notice.

Both the New York Yankees and New York Giants organizations saw two large ethnic populations swell. Between the 1880s and 1920s, more than four million Italians and two million Jews arrived in America, many of them settling in New York City. They started working their way into American society. To New York's baseball front offices, however, this population wasn't just a labor force. With the standard of living on the rise during the booming '20s, these groups represented an untapped consumer base.

While the Giants signed Andy Cohen, a Jewish-American player from El Paso, Texas, the New York Yankees set off in search of an Italian-American ballplayer, a hero who would bring them the Italian immigrant audience. They scoured ball fields across the country, their search taking them to Salt Lake City where they targeted an immigrant's son who was posting unparalleled numbers in the Pacific Coast League (PCL), the unrivaled league of the west coast. Tony Lazzeri, a San-Francisco area boy, was in the midst of hammering 60 home runs in their 1925 season.

Impressed by these numbers and what they saw from Lazzeri, the Yankees paid the PCL's Salt Lake City Bees a hefty $50,000 and sent them five players for the rights to payroll him. When the gates unlocked on opening day of the 1926 season, the 22-year-old second baseman suddenly found himself penciled atop the same lineup card as Babe Ruth and a young Lou Gehrig. But un-

Yogi Berra is currently being considered for the Presidental Medal of Freedom. See page 34.

(National Baseball Hall of Fame Library)

like his Yankee teammates, Lazzeri carried a particular burden the moment he stepped to the plate.

With newspapers portraying Italian Americans as criminals, with sentiment riding the restrictive Immigration Act of 1924, an unfavorable perception of Italian Americans etched itself into the public mindset. With one swing of the bat after another, Tony Lazzeri began changing that. He played every game of his rookie year, clubbing the third-most home runs in the league and leading the Yankees from seventh place the previous season to the 1926 World Series—feats that accurately projected his Hall of Fame career.

Just as the Yankees had hoped, Italian Americans flocked to the ballpark to see Lazzeri play. These droves of new fans didn't emerge just from New York City, either. According to historian Frank Graham, Lazzeri "was almost as big a drawing card as Babe Ruth. Italian societies in New York, Boston, Detroit, and almost everywhere the Yankees played, held banquets in his honor and showered him with gifts."

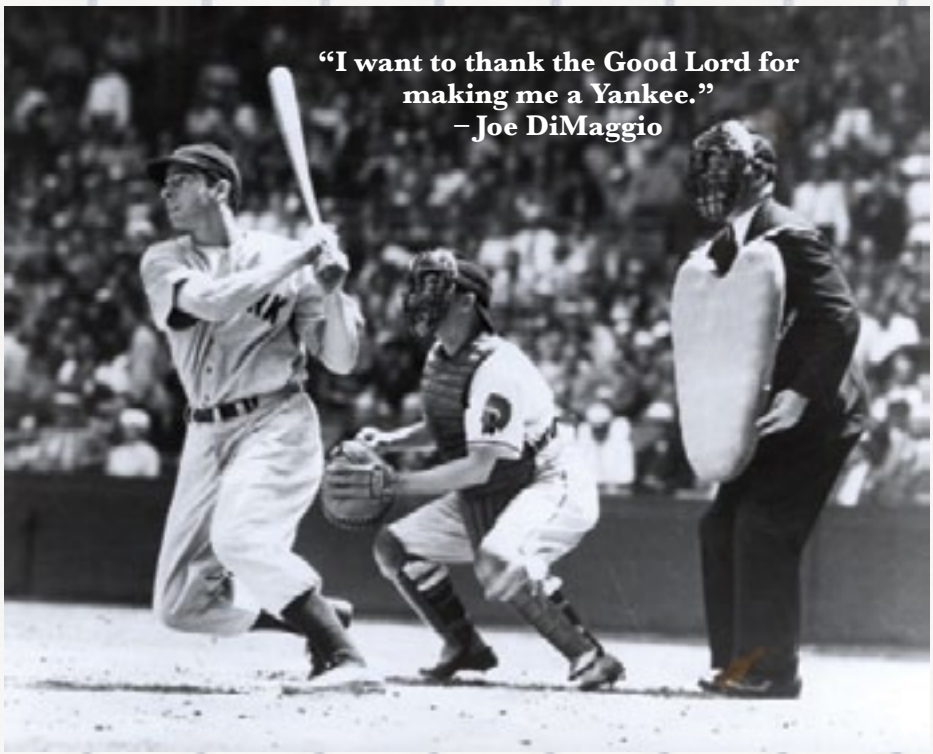
Known as Murderer's Row, (L-R) Lou Gehrig, Babe Ruth, Earle Combs, and Tony Lazzeri were the most feared lineup in baseball.
(Boston Public Library, Leslie Jones Collection)

Lazzeri wasn't just a ballplayer; he was an *Italian-American* ballplayer. He was the ethnic hero the Yankees searched for, intertwining him with this immigrant identity over his entire career.

With their new fan base at hand, the Yankees signed another Italian-American player from the San Francisco area who, beginning in 1932, ended up wearing pinstripes for the next 37 years. Shortstop Frankie Crosetti served as Lazzeri's new double play partner before eventually moving on to coach third base. As Crosetti remarked, "In those days, (the Yankees) were looking for Italian ballplayers." With Lazzeri and Crosetti anchoring the middle of the diamond, the Yankees gained their foothold in Italian America, and Italians gained their foothold in Yankee America. Yet it was another son of Italy, a third San Francisco area player, who drove it all home. He was the Yankee Clipper: Joe DiMaggio.

(L-R) Frankie Crosetti, Joe DiMaggio, and Tony Lazzeri.
(Boston Public Library, Leslie Jones Collection)

Though reticent in nature, DiMaggio entered Major League Baseball in 1936 with a forceful presence. *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* dubbed him "the next logical candidate for the hero role"—the hero being the next Ty Cobb or Babe Ruth. And with a three-hit debut, DiMaggio never looked back, hitting .323 with 125 RBI in his first season. His numbers



Prior to his final season, DiMaggio had more home runs than strikeouts. *(National Baseball Hall of Fame Library)*

only *improved* in the following years, and in 1939, DiMaggio won his first of three Most Valuable Player (MVP) awards. Yet it was during an uneventful day game on May 15, 1941 that DiMaggio began his rise to almost mythical heights.

On that day, the struggling fourth-place Yankees faced the Chicago White Sox. DiMaggio dug into the batter's box with two outs in the bottom of the first inning. He looked past White Sox pitcher Eddie Smith to Phil Rizzuto, his rookie teammate who'd led the inning off with a double. From the stretch, the southpaw Smith delivered the pitch, and DiMaggio drove it into left field. Rizzuto crossed the plate for the Yankees only run of the day in what turned out to be a lopsided 13-1 loss. It was that single, however, that relatively harmless hit, that laid the foundation of what would be known as—simply—"The Streak."

With each game, with each day, DiMaggio tallied one hit after another, and the hitting streak continued to build. It started to bond a whole nation, taking over the headlines of newspapers and interrupting radio programs with updates. Non-Yankees fans joined Yankees fans. Non-baseball fans joined baseball fans. DiMaggio's streak became daily conversation. *Did he get one today? Did he get one today?* Even after the hitting streak surpassed Willie Keeler's record of 45 straight games with a hit, the excitement did not wane. The Streak eventually ended at 56 games, a record that still stands and is regarded as unbreakable.

Like Lazzeri, DiMaggio was a man who didn't seek the attention and certainly didn't seek the larger-than-life burden that he carried. Yet the shadow he cast enveloped more than just baseball; it enveloped all of American culture. It *became* American culture. Even after his retirement, DiMaggio's name appeared in renowned works of art, from Ernest Hemingway's Nobel Prize-winning novel *The Old Man and the Sea* to Simon & Garfunkel's Grammy Award-winning song "Mrs. Robinson." DiMaggio, the son of an Italian immigrant fisherman, was the largest Yankee of them all.

During the same year of DiMaggio's streak, an Italian American standing at just five-foot-five and 160 pounds put on the pinstripes. Criticized for being small, Phil Rizzuto

After his 13-year playing career, Phil Rizzuto became a beloved broadcaster of Yankee games, doing so for 40 years.
(National Baseball Hall of Fame Library)

took over shortstop for fellow paesan Crosetti, and much of baseball had its doubts. "Everyone wonders about my size," Rizzuto once said. "I've had a great deal of trouble convincing people I am a ballplayer—even some managers." One of those managers, a Brooklyn Dodgers' coach, told him to "go out and get a shoeshine box—that's the only way you're going to make a living." Rizzuto, one of the finest fielding shortstops the league had ever seen, proved him wrong by winning the MVP award in 1950 and eventually getting voted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

Five years after Rizzuto's 1941 rookie season, he became quick friends with yet another new Italian-American Yankee. His awkward appearance and clumsy-looking style of play made him one of the most beloved baseball players in Major League history. Yogi Berra, a roly-poly catcher with a squished face and ears that jutted out, was described by one magazine writer as looking like someone "who carried luggage."

Like Rizzuto, Berra battled this image. Standing at just 5'7," he gravitated to Rizzuto. "I liked him right away," Berra reflected. "He was the first big league ballplayer I saw that I could eat soup off his head." In spite of their size, Berra and Rizzuto made the Yankees such a formidable force that it made Red Sox-legend Ted Williams lament, "A lot of people said that Rizzuto was too small, but damn, those two guys knew how to beat you. Makes me sick to think about it." Berra ended his Hall of Fame career a three-time MVP with 15 All-Star appearances and 358 career home runs—185 more than any catcher at that point in baseball history.

With their arrival, Rizzuto and Berra started encountering other barriers. Rizzuto was too small. Berra was too portly. Suddenly, it was their height and their stature that received more attention. The focus began to slowly shift away from their ethnicity, a sign that after several decades—after Lazzeri became the leadoff hitter for the most feared lineup in baseball, after Crosetti became the longest-standing member in pinstripes, after DiMaggio became the icon of American culture—Italian Americans were finally assimilating.

Spanning the Lazzeri through Berra years, the Italian-American Yankees won 19 World Series titles in 37 years. What they accomplished, however, was something greater—something more lasting. They didn't just help bring championships to a city. They didn't just help bring a mass of fans to a sport. They helped bring a change *in perception* to a society. They helped change the way Italian Americans were perceived in America, enabling their ethnicity to gain its acceptance in a new culture. And like their hard-working ancestors, like their very own immigrant fathers, they did so by using their bare hands, hands that bore the calluses to prove it. The only difference was the tool they used.

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A special thanks to University of Wisconsin Professor Lawrence Baldassarro and his thoroughly researched book *Beyond DiMaggio: Italian Americans in Baseball.* It is available on Amazon.com.