



The Colonel and Hug

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Miller Huggins Put The Yankees On Their Dynastic Path

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Miller Huggins grew up in Cincinnati, where he played infield for the Reds before becoming skipper of the Yankees in time for their Roaring '20s. [View Enlarged Image](#)

For Miller Huggins, the choice of a baseball career was a matter of listening to his heart. Oh, and future President William Howard Taft.

Huggins was the first legendary manager of the New York Yankees, who'd had seven skippers in 10 years before his 1918 arrival.

Owner Jacob Ruppert credited Huggins with building the first Yankees dynasty and laying the foundation for the others.

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At the University of Cincinnati, Huggins captained the baseball team and attended their law school, where Taft was one of his professors. Huggins graduated in 1902, passed the bar, clerked and was at a crossroads.

"You can become a pleader or a player — not both," Taft told Huggins. "Try baseball; you seem to like it better."

Taft read Huggins correctly.

Huggins' Keys

- Builder of the New York Yankees' first dynasty, winning three world titles. Inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1964.
- Overcame: Pressure to reach the top and stay there.
- Lesson: Don't wilt vs. challenges, embrace them.
- "Leadership means keeping the morale and spirit of the team at the right level. Sometimes overconfidence has to be toned down (or) the team must be lifted from a mental slump."

"No suitor ever laid out as careful a plan to obtain his love as I. ... I loved baseball, I went to it. I had to, for in it I was happy," Huggins said, as quoted in "The Colonel and Hug: The Partnership That Transformed the New York Yankees," by Steven Steinberg and Lyle Spatz.

Small In The Bigs

Huggins (1878-1929), at 5 foot 6 inches and 140 pounds, was a scrappy player who carved out a respectable 13-year career playing in the big leagues. He stayed in the majors in part by becoming a student of the game while grooming himself to become a manager.

The Sporting [News](#)' John Sheridan wrote of Huggins in 1920: "Smart little chap. Stayed in baseball with nothing but a clever head . . . nothing at all but ambition and pluck and brains."

Huggins' record skippering the Yankees from 1918 to 1929 was 1,067-719, good for a .597 winning percentage. In addition to winning the World Series of 1923, '27 and '28, he led the Bronx Bombers to six American League pennants.

Waite Hoyt, the Yankee pitcher who also reached the Hall of Fame, said of the manager: "Huggins was almost like a schoolmaster in the dugout. There was no goofing off. You watched the game, and you kept track not only of the score and the number of outs, but of the count on the batter. At any moment, Hug might ask you what the situation was."

So Said Huggins

■ "You've got to be patient when plans go wrong, when a young player gets into a slump. When fans and the newspapers are riding you hard — that's when patience becomes the most necessary of managerial virtues."

■ "A team of stars will never succeed if all the players do not harmonize."

■ "Winning a pennant is much like climbing a mountain. You brave all kinds of obstacles to get to the top, but when you have reached the top, all you can do is stay there for a while and then come down again."

■ "Ballplayers and ballclubs are like any businesspeople or business places. They do not just spring up and become something. They grow into it."

Huggins was in his 12th year managing New York when he died at age 51. His funeral was held at Yankee Stadium, with American League games canceled that day.

A plaque dedicated to Huggins was placed at the stadium in 1932. It was the beginning of the tradition of Monument Park.

Born in Cincinnati, Huggins grew up loving baseball. His idol was Bid McPhee, a small second baseman for the hometown Reds.

By 1904, Huggins was the Reds' second baseman, earning him comparisons to McPhee.

"(Huggins) is a little firecracker," the Cincinnati Enquirer wrote.

Ned Hanlon, who took over as manager of the Reds in 1906, lauded his second baseman's determination: "Huggins is in the game up to his ears, from the time the first ball is pitched until the last man is out."

Huggins played six seasons for the Reds before being traded to St. Louis, becoming the Cardinals' player-manager in 1913.

He didn't win with the Redbirds in his five seasons as skipper, but AL President Ban Johnson heard solid reports and recommended Huggins to Yankees co-owner Ruppert.

Interviewing Huggins for the job, "Ruppert was impressed by the depth of baseball knowledge and grasp of the intricacies of the game the little fellow sitting across from him possessed," Steinberg and Spatz wrote.

Huggins knew of the challenge before him upon taking the job for the 1918 season. The Yankees weren't the Yankees then, but he said: "New York is like no other city. ... The psychology of New York is entirely different. ... You've got to make good!"

In order to do that, Huggins had two prerequisites that Ruppert agreed to:

The manager would have the power to make trades.

The skipper could bring along his chief scout, Bob Connery.

Here Came The Babe

The owner was convinced that with the proper financial resources, Huggins could build a winner.

Huggins immediately put his personal stamp on the Yankees, shuffling the roster and improving the team's wins from 60 to 80 to 95.

Boston Red Sox star Ruth became available after the 1919 season, due to team owner Harry Frazee not wanting to meet the Babe's salary demands and put up with his excesses. Huggins leapt, urging Ruppert to meet the \$125,000 (worth \$1.7 million now) asking price.

Ruppert called Huggins crazy, saying no baseball player was worth that amount.

"Take my advice," Huggins told the owner. "Buy Ruth. Frazee is crazy. ... He's crazy to let you have the Babe for so little."

With Ruth blasting a record 59 home runs in 1921, the Yankees won 98 games and the franchise's first AL pennant before losing in the World Series. The next two seasons saw two more pennants and that first world title.

"We owe a lot of the accomplishment to the guiding hand of Mr. Huggins," Ruth told the team amid the 1923 World Series celebration.

That guiding hand was bringing along Lou Gehrig in time for a huge impact for the rest of the 1920s.

Cheers

"(Huggins) is the best teacher I ever had the privilege of being with," Gehrig said. "He was more like a father to me than anything else. ... I call him the squarest shooter I ever knew in baseball."

The fun-loving Ruth and the serious Huggins had an up-and-down relationship that boiled over in the 1925 season. The manager suspended the slugger for late-night carousing and not being on time.

Ruth, the game's megastar, said he would never play for Huggins again. Ruppert backed his skipper, and the Sultan of Swat got with the program, eventually saying his manager "was the only man who knew how to keep me in line."

Huggins' philosophy on managing people was built on flexibility.

"One system will not rule," he said. "It is impossible, because you will find temperamental players, you will find players who do not need any rules, and you will find players who insist that they know more (than) the manager."

With Ruth specifically, Huggins gave him plenty of rope, saying, "To be at his best, (he) must be a happy, carefree boy."

Ruth rebounded from a subpar 1925 season to hit 47 home runs and bat .372 as Huggins took the team to another AL pennant but lost a close World Series.

That set the stage for the 1927 Yankees, considered by many the greatest baseball team in history.

With Ruth belting 60 homers and Gehrig driving in 173 runs, New York posted a 110-44 record and swept the Pittsburgh Pirates in the World Series.

Huggins maintained the Yanks' hot path with a second straight world title in 1928.

Still, he wasn't complacent. "Huggins," wrote Steinberg and Spatz, "always had a fierce determination to succeed and improve."

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