

General Topics :: Mariano Rivera- NY Yankee Ace Pitcher and Christian. (this is a good thing)

Mariano Rivera- NY Yankee Ace Pitcher and Christian. (this is a good thing), on: 2010/6/30 15:01

Saints, found this the NY Times, and it's a wonderful article, because this secular newspaper printed up a wonderful walk with Christ in the life of Mariano Rivera. I think, in the midst of so much junk, this humble man in public circumstance, is a wonderful testimony. (especially fans of baseball, like me)

June 28, 2010

Mariano Rivera, King of the Closers

By JAMES TRAUB

Before the seventh game of the 2003 American League Championship Series with the Boston Red Sox, Mariano Rivera, the New York Yankees star who is widely considered the greatest relief pitcher in the history of baseball, said a prayer. Rivera, a deeply religious man, prays with his family before every home game. But this was a special prayer, which he delivered within himself, because the two teams, so evenly matched, had fought their way down to this final contest. Rivera's prayers remained unanswered until the bottom of the eighth inning, when, in one of the great comebacks in playoff history, the Yankees scored three runs against Boston's ace, Pedro Martinez, to tie the game. Before heading for the mound, Rivera, the most stoical of athletes, had to leave the bullpen for a little shed nearby, where he proceeded, astonishingly, to weep.

"I feel a tremendous load on my shoulders," Rivera recalled this past March, sitting in front of his locker at the Yankees' spring-training camp in Tampa, Fla. Rivera was trying to convey something quite different from what that expression normally means. A closer, who generally comes into a game only in the highly pressurized ninth inning to finish off the opponent, must welcome the kind of burden most of us — and even some otherwise very effective pitchers — flee. "I know," Rivera went on, "I am going to have a good opportunity to pitch." Closers normally pitch one inning. That night, Rivera navigated his way through a supremely tense ninth inning. And then the 10th. And then, with the score still tied, the 11th. "It was always a battle," Rivera said. "It was a beautiful game." In the bottom of the 11th, Yankees third baseman Aaron Boone won the game, and the series, with a home run. And if he hadn't? "Tell you what," Rivera said, flashing a most unworshipful grin, "I would have gone out there again."

In his 16th year with the Yankees, Mariano Rivera, who is 40, has become a kind of living god of baseball. While his regular-season statistics are remarkable, in postseason play, where the pressure is at its highest, he is sui generis. He holds the lowest earned-run average in postseason history (0.74) among pitchers with at least 40 innings pitched. On 30 occasions he has gone more than one inning to record a save; over the same period, all other pitchers combined have done so only a few more times more than Rivera alone. In 2009, when he was thought to be slowing down and yielding his place to the Red Sox phenom Jonathan Papelbon, he pitched 16 innings in postseason play and gave up one run, while extending his career postseason saves record to 39 as the Yankees won the World Series. (Papelbon gave up a two-run lead in the ninth to end the Red Sox's season in the divisional round against the Angels.) Rivera, when pressed, attributes his gifts to providence; people of a more secular bent say that he combines one of the single greatest pitches baseball has ever seen — his cutter, or cut fastball — with an inner calm, and a focus, no less unusual and no less inimitable.

UNTIL 30 OR 40 YEARS AGO, starting pitchers typically finished games. When they were shelled, managers called on the stock of has-beens they kept in the bullpen. Some pitchers with goofy offerings, like the knuckleballer Hoyt Wilhelm, made a living coming out of the bullpen. A very few talented hurlers, like the Yankees fireballer Joe Page in the late '40s, came on in relief; but Page could be called upon at any point in the course of a game. In the '70s, managers began looking for pitchers who could be counted on to get a few crucial outs toward the end of the game. Fans began to pay attention to saves, which relievers earned by entering a game with a slim lead and preserving the victory, and by the '80s, relief pitchers like Dan Quisenberry of the Royals, Bruce Sutter with the Cubs and Cardinals and Dennis Eckersley with the Athletics became stars in their own right. The last two made it to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

The great Yankees teams of the '70s relied on one such fabled stopper, Rich Gossage, better known as Goose. A Hall of Famer himself, the Goose was a mountainous figure with a Wild West mustache and a 100-mile-an-hour fastball. The mustache has gone white, but Gossage remains a formidable, if genial and garrulous, presence in spring training, where

he serves as a pitching instructor and the Old Man of the Mound. The Goose and I talked one quiet morning as players began gathering. "I saw the total evolution of the bullpen where it used to be a junk pile where old starters went who couldn't start anymore," he said from somewhere above my head. Gossage came up a pure reliever with the Chicago White Sox. With the Yankees, he briefly had, in Ron Davis, his own setup man — a reliever who pitches an inning or two and preserves the lead for the closer in the ninth — but Gossage frequently entered games as early as the seventh inning, often with men on base. "When you come into the game with inherited runners, when you can't even allow the ball to be put in play — that's where I shined," said the Goose, a man in no way uncertain of his own place in baseball history. "I could get two strikeouts. The mental drain is incredible. I would be exhausted just because of the letdown of the pressure and the mental part of it." And then he had to go out and pitch the eighth and ninth.

Life evolves toward increasing specialization, and the age of the iron-man closer was itself short-lived. By the late '80s, closers were being asked to get only three outs. (Gossage says, with some justice, that he could have compiled all-universe numbers had he played in the current, namby-pamby era.) Mariano Rivera arrived at precisely this moment. Signed by the Yankees in 1990, Rivera was pegged as a starting pitcher. He moved steadily up the minor-league ladder without really turning any heads. He had a straight fastball with a top velocity of 91 or 92 m.p.h., a slider and a change-up — the normal starter's repertory. In 1995, Yankees General Manager Gene Michael brought him from the Class AAA Columbus Clippers to the parent club, and Rivera compiled average numbers. Michael sent him back down. The team was hoping to acquire pitcher David Wells from the Detroit Tigers, and Rivera was a modest part of the trade bait.

And then providence intervened — in Rivera's telling, though not Michael's. "He was down there two, three weeks," says Michael, a raconteur who calls to mind baseball's bygone bardic era. He has told this story before. (I first encountered it in "The Yankee Years," by former Yankees Manager Joe Torre and Tom Verducci.) "The numbers come across my desk, and I see the gun time — 94, 95." Michael, known around baseball as Stick, called Columbus to make sure the radar gun wasn't on the fritz. He called the Tigers scout who had expressed interest in Rivera:

"Yeah, I saw him, Stick."

"What did he throw?"

"About 94, 95."

The next report had Rivera at 95-96. What happened? "Nobody knows," Michael says. "All of a sudden he's just letting the ball go." Perhaps he had finally recovered from a 1992 operation on his arm. Michael immediately ordered Yankees Manager Buck Showalter to clear a date a few days later for a Rivera outing. "We had a date in Chicago, daytime. I figure, That's good, it's shiny, it's tough to see in Chicago. So we bring him up — eight innings, two hits. Then we knew we had something." Rivera's overall numbers that year were nothing special: five wins and three losses, while surrendering an average of five and a half runs per game. But in the course of the divisional series against the Seattle Mariners, he pitched a total of five and a third innings without yielding a run. Gossage took notice when Rivera came on in the decisive fifth game (which the Yankees went on to lose) and got out of a bases-loaded jam with a strikeout. "I just sat there," the not-easily-impressed Goose says. "Oh, my God — the coolness."

When I told Rivera what Gossage said about the emotional strain of coming into a game with men on base, he seemed a trifle perplexed — like Mr. Spock encountering the idea of fear. "It's a thing I can't control," he said. "They did it already. I don't think about it. If you think about it, you're going to get drained, and you might not do the job. So what is worth to think about? I've got to get the guy out that's at the plate. I can do something about it." You're a Yankee rookie, and the season is on the line, and the bases are loaded. Just don't think about it? Alex Rodriguez, a truly great hitter who has been known to think himself into knots at such moments, may be on to something when he says, "I don't think he knows what pressure means."

POWER PITCHERS, who get much of their thrust from their hams, tend to be beefy across the middle. Not Rivera: at six feet two inches, 185 pounds, he is built like a cheetah, an impression reinforced by his smooth skin, his high, sharp cheekbones and his glittering teeth. One morning, when Rivera was preparing to pitch some batting practice, I watched him perform a stretching routine that culminated in a half split, his right leg fully butterflyed against the locker-room carpet — more like a dancer than a pitcher. Rivera is an extremely gifted athlete who never seems to lose his balance, even when he has to pounce off the mound to track down a bunt or a slow-rolling grounder. During a game in May, he fired a cutter that broke the hitter's bat, as often happens, and half the bat came spinning straight at him with the ball bouncing right behind. Rivera leapt straight up, like a kid on a skateboard, came down and speared the ball in the same motion and then threw the man out, a play that so stupefied the Yankees broadcaster Michael Kay that it was replayed again and again.

That morning I met with him at spring training, Rivera ambled out to one of the practice fields. Fans gathered along a fence in right field to gawk. Rivera threw to some of the young players with high uniform numbers who would soon be returning to the minors — an experience for them to write home about. Rivera's mechanics are smooth, simple and unhurried. As he drives forward, his hips rotate counterclockwise, bringing his left knee up just beyond his waistband; his arm comes straight up over his shoulder, and he ends with his hand down by his right foot. "He has real good finish," Gene Michael says, "a long finish, real good, easy wrist pop." Goose Gossage says that Rivera, like the ageless power pitcher Nolan Ryan, "throws with the big muscles in his body." This physiological efficiency explains Rivera's remarkable durability. And the impression of effortlessness baffles hitters; thanks to his long fingers and loose wrist, the ball seems to explode from Rivera's hand. After 30 or so pitches, Rivera walked over to the knot of fans and signed whatever they thrust at him.

Everything in Rivera seems to flow in the same direction. "I don't want to say this like he doesn't work hard," Manager Joe Girardi says, "but it's just who he is. I don't think he has to think about who he is." Rivera grew up in Puerto Caimito, Panama, a fishing village where his father worked as a ship's captain and Rivera, once he was old enough, as a mate. He played baseball, with a flattened milk carton for a glove and a stick for a bat, because he loved it. He just turned out to be much better at it than everyone else. Though we are inclined to think of the Latin American countryside as so grimly confining that young men latch onto baseball out of the desperate wish for salvation, Rivera himself recalls not so much the poverty as the raucous family gatherings orchestrated by his father. His parents were not churchgoers, and neither was he one. Rivera said that he had a born-again experience when he was 21 or 22. Nowadays, he says, his parents have become religious as well.

The Mariano Rivera whom the Yankees saw in 1995 had athleticism, flawless mechanics, velocity and, as baseball people say, makeup. Rivera's startling performance in the playoffs convinced management that he could be a more powerful weapon coming out of the bullpen than he could as a starter. The team already had a dominant closer, John Wetteland, and as Rivera quickly demonstrated his mastery, Manager Joe Torre made him Wetteland's setup man. Yankees fans remember 1996 as the year of the six-inning game: if the Yankees were ahead after the sixth, the game was effectively over, because Rivera would pitch the seventh and eighth and Wetteland would pitch the ninth. Like many closers, Wetteland lived on the edge, walking one guy and giving up a hit to another before tugging on his sweat-stained cap and blowing fastballs past the last few batters. Not Rivera: scarcely anything seemed to happen when he was out there. Rivera won eight games and lost three with a sparkling E.R.A. of 2.09. (Anything under 3.00 is considered effective for a reliever.) In 107½ innings he struck out 130 batters while giving up 73 hits. (The standard for excellence is striking out one batter and surrendering no more than one hit per inning.) There's a strong argument that Rivera should have been named the most valuable player in the American League that year, though the award has never gone to a setup man.

And then, as if that weren't enough, came the second providential episode of Rivera's career — the Miracle of the Cut Fastball. Rivera has said that the cutter simply appeared one day in 1997, like a divine visitation. He threw the fastball, and it cut. Girardi, however, says that Rivera already had the cutter, if in embryonic form, in 1996, when Girardi joined the team as a catcher. It is a matter of purely historical significance. A cutter is a fastball that, rather than rising or sinking, as most fastballs do, stays on a level plane but breaks sharply away from the pitcher's throwing hand; when thrown by a right-hander like Rivera, for example, it jams a left-handed hitter and rides away from a righty. "Here's the deal," the Yankees' batting coach, Kevin Long, says. "The ball's coming in, and you're thinking it's going to be right here." He motions over the plate. "So you start to swing, and it ends up here — inside. You might know it's going to cut, but you can't really see it until the last minute, when it takes off." Long estimates that Rivera's cutter moves six to eight inches.

Plenty of other pitchers throw a cutter, including Phil Hughes, a Yankees starter. Hughes says, however, that though he grips the cutter the same way Rivera does, "it does a lot less." It's true: Hughes's cutter is a fastball with a little swirl at the end, while Rivera's cutter is, as the Yankees' puckish outfielder Nick Swisher puts it, "a heat-seeking missile, and the target is the handle of your bat." Rivera's cutter is faster and breaks more than just about anyone else's and almost always ends up exactly where Rivera wants it to be. Though Rivera throws a single pitch 80 percent of the time, the velocity, break and pinpoint control still make him almost unhittable.

By 1997, the Yankees had enough confidence in Rivera to let Wetteland go and make Rivera the closer. He had another great year. In the American League Division Series, though, he gave up a game-tying home run to Indians catcher Sandy Alomar Jr. in the eighth inning of Game 4. (The Indians went on to win that game and, eventually, the series.) As any Yankees fan can tell you, it was a high, outside cutter, and the right-handed Alomar leaned across the plate to poke it over

r the right-center-field fence. It was the first sign that Rivera was mortal. Rivera brought up the moment, unbidden, while talking about the need to learn from your mistakes. He had missed his spot; the pitch should have been lower. The lesson? “You do whatever you got to do to get it there.” But was it even a mistake? Alomar wasn’t a high-ball hitter. Rivera himself said: “I throw the pitch maybe 20 times, and he doesn’t hit. He maybe doesn’t swing at it.” The pitch was more a misfortune than a mistake.

The following year, Rivera developed a new pitch, or rather a new location — a cutter thrown to the opposite part of the plate, inside to right-handers, to keep them from leaning out over the plate as Alomar did. He also began to throw a classic fastball — held along rather than across the seams — which moved down and in to a right-handed hitter. Over the next three years, the Yankees rampaged through the league, winning the World Series each year. Rivera was unbeaten during the postseason. There were no major mistakes or misfortunes during this golden era, and so nothing is remembered. When a closer does his job properly, nothing happens, and his stint is over in moments. It is thus the peculiarity of his profession that only the failures stick in the collective memory.

In 2001, Rivera and the Yankees tasted the bitterness of the late-game collapse. The peerless closer entered the seventh game of the World Series against the Arizona Diamondbacks with a one-run lead. This was money in the bank: Rivera had not taken a loss in 51 consecutive postseason games. In the ninth inning, the first batter punched a single into short center field. The next batter bunted, and Rivera’s throw to second was just errant enough that shortstop Derek Jeter couldn’t make the play — an extremely rare miscue by the slick-fielding Rivera. Then, after an out, Rivera threw a cutter on the hands of the left-handed Tony Womack — who, to everyone’s surprise, hit it sharply for a run-scoring double, the only solidly hit ball of the inning. Rivera tried to crowd the next batter, and hit him. Finally, Luis Gonzalez, a power hitter, choked way up on the bat in the hope of making contact — and blooped a perfect Rivera cutter over the infield for the Series-ending hit.

When I asked Rivera about that fateful sequence, he just shrugged. “You can’t second-guess baseball,” he said, ever the stoic philosopher. “You can’t second-guess yourself.” Jorge Posada, Rivera’s catcher then and now, told me, “Even though he threw the ball away, even though he gave up the double, even though he hit a batter, he was still competing, knowing that he had a chance to get guys out.” Failure on so supreme a stage can be psychologically devastating to a closer. During that Series, the Yankees hit two game-tying home runs and a game-winning home run over the course of back-to-back games against the Diamondbacks’ closer, Byung-Hyun Kim, who was never quite the same pitcher afterward. Rivera, by all accounts, was crushed by losing the Series. But he did not show it in the locker room. Rivera says that he does not let anyone see the full measure of his suffering save his wife, Clara — “my anchor,” he says. The two grew up together; they were, Rivera says, elementary-school sweethearts. I don’t think he was joking.

OVER THE COURSE of Rivera’s career, the great baseball rivalry has continued to be that of the Yankees and the Red Sox. Both organizations are well run and so richly financed that they can pursue almost any prized player. The teams play each other 18 times in the regular season and, almost inevitably, again in the playoffs. They have furnished some of the most memorable games in recent years, including the deciding game of the 2003 A.L.C.S. and the fourth game of the 2004 A.L.C.S., when Rivera suffered his other dramatic reversal, surrendering a run in the ninth inning of a game the Yankees went on to lose. The Red Sox have hit Rivera well and have defeated him more often than any other team. For a time, in 2004 and 2005, they even seemed to have a bit of a hex on him, though that has since come to an end.

During the spring, I paid a visit to the Red Sox at their facility in Fort Myers, Fla., to talk to some of the team’s veterans. You can feel the difference between the two teams’ cultures long before you reach the locker room. The Yankees play in George M. Steinbrenner Field, located on Steinbrenner Drive. Formerly known as Legends Field, the complex features a grassy Valhalla with plaques of the many players whose uniform numbers have been retired. Across from White Ford, the great pitcher of the ’50s and ’60s, is a smaller grassy patch containing a replica of the World Trade Center — an expression of Steinbrenner’s blustering patriotism as well as the Yankees’ iconic sense of themselves. The Sox, by contrast, play in a low, whitewashed facility called City of Palms Park; you could drive by it if you hadn’t turned on your GPS. There was less security outside the locker room than in Tampa, and more facial hair inside.

Half the team, along with most of the press, had traveled to an away game, leaving the remaining players in a thickly carpeted hush. At the very back of the locker room, I found Mike Lowell, the glowering, bearded third baseman. When I mentioned the Rivera cutter, Lowell warmed to the subject. “It’s just high velocity and high movement, and you don’t see that,” he said. “Guys who throw a good split-finger” — another variety of fastball — “if they throw 95, their split isn’t at 95; it’s at 88 or 89. When your eyes pick up a cutter, you almost figure that it’s coming in at a slow pace, and you don’t think it’s going to cut as much as it does.” As a right-handed batter, Lowell said, he has been particularly flummoxed by Rivera’s back-door cutter: “Righties give up on that pitch, because it’s literally at your right hip. By the

time you freeze or pull back, it cuts so much that he gets a lot of strike calls, because where the catcher ends up catching it, it looks like a strike.Â”

Kevin Youkilis, BostonÂ’s batting genius and merrymaker, pointed out RiveraÂ’s few vulnerabilities, which the team has exploited over the years. Rivera canÂ’t control the sinking fastball the way he can the cutter, and it often rides inside to righties. Youkilis said heÂ’d been hit with the pitch a few times. The only time Rivera ever gets in bad jams, Youkilis added, Â”is when he doesnÂ’t have command of the cutter. Sometimes he gets the ball up, and it kind of floats. Sometimes if you just battle him,Â” youÂ’ll get a pitch you can hit.

Across the locker room sat Jason Varitek, the durable and dignified catcher who has been the teamÂ’s heart and soul across the long era of Yankee-Sox agon. Shrugging off his 10 career hits against the Yankees closer Â— Â”You have to have a little favor sometimesÂ” Â— Varitek described RiveraÂ’s success with a catcherÂ’s dispassionate appreciation. Â”You see guys with sometimes even better stuff unable to make quality pitches when the game is on the line,Â” he said. Rivera, with his easy delivery and simplicity of moving parts, had the gift of execution. Â”The ability to repeat,Â” Varitek said, Â”is both mental and mechanical.Â”

Finally, I talked with Jonathan Papelbon, the closer who has become RiveraÂ’s great rival. Â”I always watch closers,Â” Papelbon said, Â”what it takes for them to be successful. I try to pick up little nuances that you think might help you.Â” And with Rivera? Â”His focus. He may not stare in at the plate, but you can see that heÂ’s in control, and IÂ’ve tried to emulate that.Â” Papelbon acknowledged that he and Rivera occupy the opposite ends of the characterological spectrum of closers. Â”IÂ’m the type of pitcher that uses energy and adrenaline to help me succeed,Â” he said. Â”HeÂ’s the type of pitcher that tries to control that.Â” Youkilis said of his teammate, Â”We just say PapÂ’s nuts.Â” No one on the Yankees would describe Rivera that way. It would be as difficult to imagine the serene and pious Rivera with the Red Sox as it would the amped-up Papelbon with the Yankees.

LIKE MANY OF THE YANKEES, Rivera lives in New YorkÂ’s suburbs. He and Clara have three sons, ages 16, 13 and 7. I asked Rivera if they were athletic, and he seemed uninterested in the question. He would support them in whatever interested them. When I asked if he had any hobbies, Rivera said no Â— being with Clara and the boys was his hobby. Rivera seems almost not to have any personal attributes at all; virtue and duty and dignity take up the space that in others is occupied by appetite or vanity or cleverness or even ulterior motive. When I asked what achievements stood out in his own mind Â— not a tough question for most star athletes Â— he balked. Â”I donÂ’t think like that,Â” he said. Â”IÂ’m a different breed, I guess. Team wins; IÂ’m proud for that.Â” Rivera threw a scare into Yankees fans some years back by saying that he felt called to the pulpit rather than to the mound. But God had other plans for him, and he returned to baseball. RiveraÂ’s contract, which pays him \$15 million a year, expires at the end of this year, but he seems likely to continue playing.

Rivera channels his philanthropic activities through a personal foundation, as many prominent ballplayers do. The Mariano Rivera Foundation, which distributes at least half a million dollars a year, helps underprivileged children through church-based institutions in both Panama and the U.S. Rivera is quite possibly the worldÂ’s most famous Panamanian, but he said that he makes a point of staying Â”under the radarÂ” when he is there Â— which isnÂ’t often, because during the off-season the boys are in school and he is loath to leave. When he does put away the mitt, Rivera says, he will devote himself to his philanthropic work.

Rivera takes his role as mentor very seriously, and seems to enjoy teaching as much as he enjoys playing. People who do what they do effortlessly are usually not very effective, or very patient, teachers. Rivera has patience to spare. The problem is following his instructions. Rivera will show absolutely anyone, including rivals, exactly how he throws the cutter. When I asked him why he was so unguarded, Rivera said, Â”ItÂ’s a blessing from the Lord: when he gives you something, itÂ’s yours.Â” It took me a moment to realize that he wasnÂ’t saying that he had an obligation to share the blessing, but rather that no one without the blessing was going to throw his cutter. God had doled out his favors parsimoniously.

RiveraÂ’s chief students, of course, are his own teammates. He talks to them constantly about how to behave in various situations. Joba Chamberlain, RiveraÂ’s bulldogish young setup man, and possibly his successor, told me that Rivera directed him to pay more attention to at-bats when they sat together in the bullpen. Jonathan Albaladejo, another relief pitcher, told me that he and Rivera talked often about mental toughness, about holding your emotions in check. Albaladejo spoke wistfully of his mentorÂ’s inner calm. Â”I wish some day I could do that,Â” he said. The superpressurized atmosphere of Yankee Stadium had gotten to him, he admitted. Now, he said hopefully, Â”IÂ’m a little more used to it.Â”

To talk to players of more middling achievement is to understand how extraordinary is RiveraÂ’s consistency, his grace

under pressure. Chad Gaudin, whom the Yankees acquired last year for the bottom part of the starting rotation, said that he had virtually apprenticed himself to the team's closer-sage. He described a typical exchange:

"What do you do to throw that one pitch where you want it all the time when the situation is heavy — say, 3-1 count, bases loaded, big hitter up?"

"I don't ever second-guess myself. I don't say, 'I can' or 'I should' or 'I must.' I will throw the ball where I want to."

Here was the distilled gnostic wisdom of the mound. Gaudin understood that he needed absolute commitment — to that pitch at that moment. Nothing else in his head. But of course when he got out on the mound, he found that there were all sorts of other things in his head — doubts, for example. "There have been numerous times that I've been out there and I think about the conversation we had when I'm pitching," Gaudin said. "I think about it as a key for myself: What did we talk about? Now I'm going to do it. I tell myself, Just throw this pitch." Gaudin tries to do through conscious effort what Rivera does naturally. Gaudin says that it has helped him. But not enough, apparently — he was released at the end of spring training. Though he was re-signed by the Yankees at the end of May, he has often not been able to throw the ball where he wants to. Albaladejo likewise has yet to translate Rivera's lessons into a major-league career, but he has been an effective closer this season at Class AAA Scranton/Wilkes-Barre.

Watching Rivera during the first three months this season, I was struck by the fact that while he doesn't always hit his spots, the number of consequential mistakes he makes — mistakes in those "heavy" situations — is vanishingly small. Rivera didn't allow a run over the first 11 innings he pitched, running his string to 51 straight converted save opportunities at home. He was, as always, boringly effective. Then on May 16, he came into a game against the Minnesota Twins in the eighth inning with the bases loaded and the Yankees leading 3-1. He walked Jim Thome, the aging slugger, to force in a run. And the next batter, Jason Kubel, turned on an inside cutter and hit a grand slam. I had never seen either of these things happen to Rivera. (It was, in fact, the fourth time in each case.) The pitch to Kubel was the same one with which Rivera has struck out left-handed sluggers like Boston's David Ortiz time after time; it was the walk that was shocking. Afterward, Rivera berated himself for the walk, not the homer. That was his last serious mistake. At press time, the 40-year-old closer had converted every other save opportunity, posting an E.R.A. of 1.03 while surrendering a ridiculously low 11 hits and striking out 23 in 26 innings.

Rivera's one breakthrough achievement of 2010 is his new role as glamor puss: the men's fashion designer Canali has featured him in an ad campaign. You can tell that the trim man in the blue pinstriped blazer (a coincidence, Canali says, not a reference to the Yankees' fabled uniform) is a ballplayer, because he's holding a baseball and has a mitt perched on his forearm. But with his Alfred E. Neuman ears and his shy grin, our model is plainly a very approachable superstar. It comes as no surprise to learn that Rivera actually patronized Canali before being asked to serve as model.

In an enterprise where arrested development is the norm, Rivera really does seem selfless. Brian Cashman, the Yankees' general manager, who has known Rivera since the pitcher joined the franchise, says: "Success changes most players. It hasn't changed him one bit." During spring training, Cashman said, Rivera will sometimes change into street clothes, wander over to one of the outer fields, sit on the bench and talk to the minor leaguers. "It's not asked, it's not expected; stars don't do that." A good deal of the advice Rivera offers, especially to other Hispanic players, has nothing to do with throwing a baseball. Francisco Cervelli, who has been sharing the catching duties with Posada this season, said that Rivera talked to him about dealing with the press: "Don't worry about what the people say; be yourself, say what you want to say with respect. They'll respect you, and then they're going to trust you." Excellent advice — if you happen to be in possession of a soul at peace, rather than one divided against itself.

Nobody would say that the Yankees are Rivera's team. After all, he appears in less than 5 percent of the team's innings. Derek Jeter is the Yankees' captain and the team's iconic figure. He's the franchise. But the Yankees' identity is forged not by any one player but by the veterans who came up together in the mid-'90s — Rivera, Jeter, Posada and the pitcher Andy Pettitte. No other team in baseball has held on to its core of players as the Yankees have. Few have two such players, much less four. Commitment through thick and thin is not, in fact, graven on the Steinbrenner tablets: the Yankees made little attempt to re-sign Pettitte after the 2003 season, allowing him to leave for the Houston Astros before bringing him back in 2007. The Yankees have held on to their stars because they can afford to do so. Nevertheless, the four men have given the team a powerful collective identity: professional, undemonstrative, dignified and arguably a bit colorless. When I met with Cashman, he had just come from a team meeting with a "Delta Force special-ops guy" who discussed "how they go about their business." That would be the Yankees: do the job right, and don't leave a mess.

Even the most disciplined collective will have its outliers; and for the Yankees, that means Alex Rodriguez, superstar and perennial source of agita. A-Rod, unlike the old stalwarts, generates ink for all the right reasons and the wrong reasons — monstrous home runs, celebrity girlfriends, salary disputes, steroids. At times — like when he doesn't deliver in the playoffs — A-Rod has seemed to be more trouble than he's worth. This spring, with almost comic inevitability, the buff third baseman was ensnared in yet another scandal when he confirmed that he had seen a doctor suspected of blood doping.

Rodriguez said that he would be glad to talk about Rivera, whom he described as one of his closest friends on the team. He fiddled with his BlackBerry as we spoke, only looking up halfway through the conversation, when I asked if he had learned anything from Rivera. "You probably don't have enough time for me to tell you how much I've learned," he said.

"Try me," I said. A-Rod gathered his thoughts. Rivera, he said, was "the greatest closer of all time" and "even a better human being and a great leader." Rivera was a force in the locker room. "There's been a number of times that he's stood up and said something that was profound and important." Could he recall any specific instances? No, A-Rod said; that would be private. Here, perhaps, was further proof that Rivera's example was difficult to follow for people not constituted like himself.

THE YANKEES HELD their home opener this year on April 13. Fans exiting the subway to the team's year-old limestone palace could see that over the winter its predecessor, the House That Ruth Built, had been unbuilt; great heaps of shattered masonry and twisted metal lay in the shadow of the right-field stands, which had not yet submitted to the wrecking ball. Before the game, the players were called out one by one to receive their 2009 World Series rings. When Rivera's name was announced, the fans began to cheer, then rose to their feet and then let out a mighty roar of thanks. The only players to enjoy a comparable reception were the beloved Derek Jeter and Hideki Matsui, last year's World Series MVP, who had since been acquired by the Angels, the Yankees' opponents that day.

The Yankees' old guard shined that afternoon. Pettitte allowed no runs in six innings. Jeter homered. Posada hit two doubles. Only Rivera himself was left out, for the Yankees were leading 7-1 going into the top of the ninth. Girardi allowed Dave Robertson, a hard-throwing reliever, to mop up. But Robertson quickly got himself into trouble, falling behind hitters and then having to throw strikes. Perhaps he was having commitment issues. With the bases loaded, Bobby Abreu hit a grand slam. Suddenly it was 7-5, and Robertson was yanked. As the bullpen door swung open and the sound system cued up "Enter Sandman" and Rivera began jogging toward the mound, the fans went wild. It felt as if Robertson had accepted his role in the drama by pitching badly enough to give Rivera a chance to write his own inimitable conclusion to the afternoon.

Torii Hunter, one of the Angels' best hitters, was up with one out. Rivera bent over deeply from the waist, in the almost prayerful gesture with which he begins his windup, and fired a cutter. And then another. And another. He fell behind Hunter, 3-1, and then threw two more cutters past him for a strikeout. Then fate provided the perfect coda for the day in the form of Matsui, the Japanese superstar who had played his entire American career with the Yankees and had come to seem the very incarnation of Yankee professionalism and class — a clutch performer of unshakable sang-froid. If Mariano Rivera were a position player, he would be Hideki Matsui. The fans roared again as Matsui came to the plate. Rivera fired his seventh cutter of the day, jamming the left-handed hitter. Matsui popped out weakly to second to end the game and provide Rivera the 529th save of his career.

After the game, reporters crowded Rivera's locker, and he patiently answered questions in English and Spanish — standing up, not sitting in his folding chair, as many players do. Matsui, he said, was a great player, a great guy. The team was looking good. The whole day had been deeply moving. "It was," he said, "special for me."