

# Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?

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# Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?

*"Where have you gone Joe DiMaggio?  
Our nation turns its lonely eyes to  
you."*

Paul Simon, "Mrs. Robinson."

By Ronald Yates

Chicago Tribune Press Service

**SAN FRANCISCO**—He's a little heavier now and there is a hint of stiffness when he walks because of a nagging back injury. The once-raven hair has turned the color of expensive Italian marble and the face, tanned and sharply

defined, has been furrowed by time.

But there is no mistaking Joe DiMaggio, who at 65 still shakes hands like a man reaching for a baseball bat.

"Good to see ya," he says, his mouth curled in that distinctive, boyish DiMaggio smile. Then, sliding into a chair at one of the tables of DiMaggio's, the restaurant on San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf that he has owned since 1937, the Yankee Clipper contemplates Nov. 25, his 65th birthday.

"Gee, it never occurred to me that

some people consider my birthday some kind of milestone," he says with genuine modesty. "What's going on? Is there something about turning 65? I don't feel any different. Except for my back. And that's been bothering me for 25 years."

Joe DiMaggio is being modest, of course. It is not just that he is turning 65. An era is turning 65. The DiMaggio Era. An era when choices were simpler; when the good guys were separated from the bad guys by sturdy moral

fences; when following the Yankee Clipper's career was almost as patriotic as saluting the flag; when a kid had no trouble finding a legitimate hero to look up to.

**NO MATTER HOW** much you might have hated the damn Yankees, it just didn't seem American to hate Joe DiMaggio. "Mr. Nice Guy," after all, was what being American was all about then. Clean living, dedication, self-sacrifice, honor, teamwork. Accentuate the

positive. De-emphasize the negative.

When "Joltin' Joe" belted one out against the home team, somehow it was all right and a voice somewhere inside you said grudgingly, "Nice going, Joe."

Thus, when Joe DiMaggio left baseball in 1951 the nation figured one of its legitimate heroes was about to vanish. But incredibly, DiMaggio's impact on America has endured. Even though he hasn't swung a bat in 28 years the im-

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# DiMaggio: Kids still come up to me for autographs

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age, unlike that of old soldiers, hasn't faded away, it has grown. The quiet unassuming guy from Martinez, Cal., has never stopped being a legend in his own time.

Not even the Clipper's whirlwind marriage to another, infinitely more tempestuous legend named Marilyn Monroe in January, 1954, diminished the magic—though a nation of Little Leaguers may have kicked their Louisville Sluggers and Spaldings in mortification.

Ten months later, Joe and Marilyn—the union Hollywood press agents promoted as the All-American romance story—were divorced. The years that followed were quiet. The Clipper protected his privacy, avoided public appearances, and was "unavailable" for endorsements and commercials.

And still the mystique persisted—especially during the tumultuous 1960s when the nation, torn by the war in Viet Nam and still mourning the death of President John F. Kennedy on the streets of Dallas, searched desperately for its soul.

IT WAS DURING that agony that Joe DiMaggio re-emerged on the battlefields of Viet Nam, talking easily with the same young men who once modeled their Little League batting stances after his and who had tried so hard to emulate his graceful style in the outfield.

"I didn't know what to think about Viet Nam," Joe D. says, sipping a cup of decaffeinated coffee. "I hated to see all those kids all shot up for nothing. Now, I see it was all a waste, what we did over there."

DiMaggio leans back in his chair and unbuttons his black-and-white checked sports coat, revealing a white golf shirt. He is still thinking about the war.

"It was nothing political, I just wanted to help out, you know, to show the kids over there somebody supported them, and I think they really appreciated that." They not only appreciated Joe's visits, they mobbed him. The Yankee Clipper proved to be one of Washington's greatest morale-builders.

DiMaggio winces when reminded that millions of Americans still view him as one of this country's last legitimate heroes.

"Uhhhh, well," he stammers. "Geez, I never know what to say when people talk like that. I guess a lot of kids look up to sports figures because they are visible. But there have been a lot of heroes in this country in the past few years. Look at Elvis Presley. And John F. Kennedy."

Pause. Joe wraps his huge hands around the cup of coffee. The familiar smile begins to curl at the side of his mouth.

"I HAVE TO admit, it's kinda gratifying that kids still come up to me for autographs," he says, smiling shyly. "You have to thank their grandfathers for that, though. They see me on TV and they tell the kids: 'See that guy, he was a ballplayer once.' And of course the kids read baseball statistics, too."

And when they do, they find mountains of baseball trivia about a man they never saw swing a bat. There was the incredible 56-game hitting streak in 1941, for example, a feat still unmatched in major league history.

There was also his lifetime .325 batting average during a career that began in 1936 and ended 15 years later, with 1943-45 out for a tour with the U.S. Army Air Force during World War II. There was 1937—the year DiMaggio considers his best in baseball—when he batted .351 with 216 hits, 167 RBI, and a league-leading 46 home runs. And there was his selection as major league baseball's most valuable player three times.

Does Joe D. ever get the urge to return to baseball? Maybe as a manager? "Naw, that's all past me now," he says. "I still haven't given up on baseball, mind you. I'm always talking to coaches and scouts, but managing... naw, I have all I can do to manage myself."

"BUT I still like to watch baseball on TV, you know, and I like going to the Yankees' old-timer games and seeing the guys again," he says. "I don't swing the bat anymore. I haven't since I was 60. It's my back. It's just too painful. I couldn't get around on the ball and I figured if I still couldn't punch the ball into the outfield, then I should stop. I didn't want people to remember me for hitting dribblers at home plate."

"Baseball should be fun," he adds, and that is one reason he likes to watch a television show called "The Bad News Bears," a situation comedy about a collection of adolescent misfits playing Little League baseball: "I think it's as funny as hell," he says.

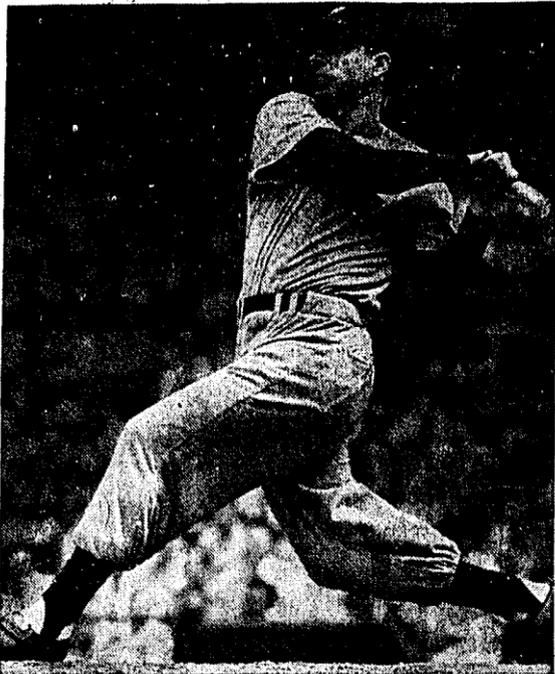
"Joe," one of the waitresses yells, "you've got a phone call." DiMaggio stands up and walks over to a wall phone. "My office," he says with a grin. Indeed, DiMaggio's Restaurant, with its banquet-sized dining rooms, is the Yankee Clipper's office. On an average morning, Joe will come in at around 10 and stay until after lunch. Then he hits the golf course for 18 holes with old friends such as Joe Petrano, a former San Francisco 49er lineman who, like DiMaggio, retired in 1951.

"That was Dell Publishing Co., down in Los Angeles," DiMaggio says of the call, strolling back to the table and lowering his 6-1 frame into his chair. [The Clipper used to be 6-2, but he says his back trouble has caused him to lose an inch.]

"They wanted to know if it was true or not that I was making \$400,000 for doing my commercials. I told 'em it was none of their business. I don't discuss salaries."

THE COMMERCIALS to which DiMaggio refers are the only two he has ever done—Mr. Coffee and New York City's Bowery Bank.

"I began doing the Bowery commercial about seven years ago," he says. Why, after years of being "unavailable"



1937: The Yankee Clipper

Joe DiMaggio riddled American League pitching in 1937 for 46 home runs, 167 RBIs, and a .351 average. Four years later, he hit in 56 consecutive games, a record which still stands.



1954: A marriage to Marilyn

DiMaggio married Marilyn Monroe in January, 1954, in what press agents termed an All-American romance. Ten months later, the romance ended in divorce.



1973: Mr. Coffee salesman

For years, DiMaggio valued his privacy and refused to promote products. "I won one of those things in a golf tournament," used it, liked it, and agreed to be the spokesman for Mr. Coffee.

for commercials, did he decide to start? "Well, I thought about it for a long time and I figured there wasn't any harm in telling people to save their money."

And what about Mr. Coffee—the automatic drip coffee maker?

"Well, about six years ago I won one of those things in a golf tournament," he says. "I took it home and used it and it surprised me because it made damned good coffee. So when the manufacturer called me a couple of months later and asked if I'd be interested, I agreed to talk to them."

DiMaggio has been pitching for Mr. Coffee ever since—a fact which delights North American Systems, the Ohio company which manufactures the coffee maker.

"The thing about Joe is his honesty—and that comes across with the commercials," says a company spokesman. "People respond to that. They send letters saying they bought the Mr. Coffee machine because Joe DiMaggio says it's OK. People believe him. They trust him."

Joe D. shifts in his chair, leans forward, and pours some more Sanka into his coffee cup. ["The doc says I gotta cut down on the coffee," he confides sheepishly.]

"Well, I guess I do have some credibility," he concedes. "Maybe it's because I never did any endorsements before. Maybe that's why people respond."

Maybe, but the reason may be more deeply rooted in the national psyche than that. Like Charles Lindbergh, Abraham Lincoln, FDR, and Walt Disney, Joe DiMaggio is an institution. Just as you would never expect to see Lincoln or Lindbergh up there on the screen splashing after shave all over themselves or hawking beer, the idea of DiMaggio doing those things seems just as ludicrous.

"I GET CALLS and offers all the time," Joe sighs. "People want me to do commercials for everything from toothpaste to beer. I just don't want to do any more."

A woman in her 50s has been inching her way toward Joe's table, debating whether she should disturb the Clipper for an autograph. Joe motions her over.

"What can I do for you?" he asks. "Please, could you sign this?" she says, thrusting a piece of paper at him while turning five shades of red.

"Sure thing. What's your name and where do you come from?"

"It's Marianne Rhodes and I'm from Washington," she says, feeling more at ease. Then, holding the autographed piece of paper in her hands, she looks at Joe DiMaggio and says: "Thank you. Thank you for being such a wonderful person. Thank you for being Joe DiMaggio."

The Clipper, a little embarrassed, watches her stroll away. "Geez that was a nice thing to say, wasn't it?"

"JOE," THE waitress calls again. "You got another phone call." DiMaggio slides his 207 pounds out of the chair and walks over to the wall phone. It's his sister. He lives with her in a house on San Francisco's Beach Street a few minutes' drive from his restaurant. A son, Joe Jr., 39, is a truck driver in San Francisco. DiMaggio was divorced in 1944 from his first wife, actress Dorothy Arnold. There are two grandchildren, 13 and 16.

Joe returns to the table. "My attorney called me at home," he says. "He's renegotiating my Mr. Coffee and Bowery Bank contracts for me. Do you realize that's the first time I've ever had anybody negotiate a contract for me?"

"When I was playing with the Yankees, players didn't have agents and lawyers like they do today," he says. "I remember one time around 1940 I walked into Edward G. Barrow's office. He was the Yankees' general manager. And I told him I wanted more money. I think I was making about \$40,000 a year at the time and I wanted \$75,000."

"How could you ask for that?" Barrow said. He was hopping mad. "Lou Gehrig is only getting \$45,000 after 13 years with the club." I looked at him and I said: "Well, Mr. Barrow, in my opinion Lou Gehrig is underpaid, too." Boy, did Barrow blow his top. "Don't you tell that to anybody else," he said. "Don't you open your mouth."

DiMaggio grins and takes a sip of his Sanka.

"BOY," HE SAYS. "I've learned a lot since I stopped playing baseball. For

one thing, I'm getting so I can speak much freer than I used to. The fear of the public was put into me during formative years with the Yankees. Now I've finally started to come out of my shell."

The Yankee Clipper swirls the Sanka around in his cup and looks at it as if it were a window to the past.

"You know, I had to scratch for every nickel I made with the Yankees," he says. "To ask for a raise, well, they looked at you like you were crazy, like you should consider yourself lucky that you could even run out onto the field in a Yankee uniform. And if you didn't sign for what they wanted, well, you were just out of baseball. I once wrote a letter to the owner asking to be traded if they didn't want to pay me what I thought I was worth. They said to forget it: sign or you're out. Needless to say, I signed."

What about baseball today, with its free-agent drafts, seven-figure salaries, and superstars who often exhibit about as much team loyalty as piranha fish?

"I don't blame the athletes today for getting as much as they can," he says. "The only problem is, many have become so business-oriented that they are less dedicated to the game. Not all are out there giving 100 per cent—and that's what makes the fans mad. It's not so much the big money."

"YOU KNOW WHAT'S ironic?" he

asks rhetorically. "When I was playing, we were held down so much by the owners that today's owners are paying the price. That's why there are the huge salaries today. If they had been fair with us years ago, then there might never have been a free agent draft today. Look, Ted Williams and I were the first ballplayers to get \$100,000—and that was in 1949. Sure, that was a lot of money—especially in those days—but guys today are making \$1 million a year."

Two men in their late 20s walk up to the table. They are electrical engineers for the Bechtel Corp. attending a convention in San Francisco.

"Ummmm, excuse me, Mr. DiMaggio," says the engineer named Jim Clayton, "but could we have our pictures taken with you?"

"Sure, go ahead," DiMaggio says, pulling a chair next to his. "How's this?"

"Just great, Mr. DiMaggio," says George Stemper, seating himself next to the Yankee Clipper. "God, my dad's not going to believe this."

"Joe," the waitress calls. "Telephone."

"Excuse me fellas, gotta go to my office again," DiMaggio gets up and walks to the wall phone.

"WOW, WHAT a great guy," Clayton says. "Just a real nice guy."

"Yeah," says Stemper. "My dad's go-

ing to go bananas when I show him this picture. He ranks Joe DiMaggio only a notch below God."

DiMaggio is mumbling into the telephone as the two beaming engineers walk out of the restaurant. After a few minutes he hangs up.

"Where were we?" he asks, falling back into his chair. "Oh, yeah, we were talking about the Yankees and money. Boy, times have changed, that's all I can say. Old Steinbrenner [Yankee owner George Steinbrenner] wants to win so bad he'll spend anything to do it."

And what does he think of Billy Martin's latest tracas?

"Well, Billy and I are good friends," DiMaggio says. "But Billy just has to learn to curb his temper, to walk away once in a while. Strategically, though, he's one of the best baseball guys around. He's a genius as a manager."

If you have never seen a movie about Joe DiMaggio it is because one has never been made. Not that Hollywood wouldn't give its last piece of tinsel to make one. But Joe refuses to cooperate.

"THEY USED to call about every month, asking to do my life story," he says. "I've refused so often that they've pulled up a bit. I don't know. I'd just as soon they'd make a movie about someone else, I guess."

What about politics? "Not interested in getting into that at all," he says. "Besides, I haven't got

much to say anyway." The Yankee Clipper orders lunch: A single broiled piece of ground steak, a slice of bread, and some more Sanka.

"I registered as a Republican years ago," he says, sawing his steak. "And I like Ronald Reagan. He called me the other day. Personally, he said he'd like to have me in his corner. Wanted me to make a commercial supporting him. I told him I'd think about it. Well, I called him back a few days later and told him I didn't think I could right now. He's a super guy, though. When I told him I'd call his secretary if I changed my mind he said, 'No, Joe, if you change your mind you call me directly.' Then he gave me his private number."

Two more tourists wander over to the table seeking autographs. DiMaggio politely obliges and engages the two middle-aged women from South Carolina in some small talk.

"You ever get tired of that?" he is asked.

"Naw, heck, I'm flattered as hell," he says. "It's just that sometimes you can sign 999 autographs and just as the 1,000th is pushed at you, you have to break away to get on the plane. That's always the one who is insulted and calls you a jerk. But mostly I'm grateful that people still remember me."

Joe DiMaggio remembers too.

Ever since Marilyn Monroe's death in 1962, he has had fresh red roses delivered three times a week to her grave.