No owner has changed the landscape of sports more than New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner. From the moment he bought the team in 1973 for $10 million, Steinbrenner's monomaniacal pursuit was to restore the most fabled franchise in baseball history to its former glory. Today the New York Yankees are worth more than $1 billion and are once again world champions.

Award-winning sportswriter Bill Madden traces Steinbrenner from his early days in Cleveland through his years as a shipping magnate, a Nixon fund-raiser, and a champion horse breeder to the fateful moment when he bought the Yankees, even though his father disparaged George's desire to own a professional sports team as a hobby. Over the next four decades, Steinbrenner's tumultuous reign included his epic battles with Billy Martin, Reggie Jackson, Dave Winfield, even beloved Yankee captain Derek Jeter. His ruthless and free-spending tactics made him a lightning rod for controversy but they also paid off: Steinbrenner's Yankees have won seven championships and remain the gold standard in all sports. In the last few years, with his health declining, the Boss ceded control of the team to his sons, but not before lording over the team's historic transition from the House That Ruth Built to the House That George Built.

Throughout his three decades of covering the Yankees, Bill Madden has cultivated hundreds of sources at every level in the organization, from the many managers and front-office personnel Steinbrenner has fired to the bat boys who are ever present in the locker room. All of them have colorful stories about the man with whom they have enjoyed a love-hate relationship, but it is the Boss himself whose voice rises above the rest. And when Steinbrenner decided to give his final print interview, he spoke to Madden to set the record straight on his extraordinary life and career.
My Personal Review:
Madden does an excellent job of investigative journalism in digging out Gabe Pauls secret audiotaped diary and in interviewing scores of people who worked with Steinbrenner. He provides a clear, unbiased narrative. This is not the official Steinbrenner biography, and Madden goes out of his way to be fair.

In some ways, Steinbrenner comes off better than expected. He was a very shrewd businessmen, as shown by his knack for making the exactly right strategic decisions in his shipping business, his acquisition of the Yankees (for only $160,000 of his own cash and for $10 million in all), his embrace of free agency, and his seizure of fantastic TV money via the creation of his own YES network. And he had a brutal upbringing, which will prompt some empathy on the part of the reader.

On the other hand, the tremendous power he gained by virtue of his excellent strategic decisionmaking freed him up to let loose all of his personal indiosyncracies and demons. Hes a sentimental man. Some of that is good -- the stories of his charity are legion. But there is a flip side to sentimentality -- the need to give to get; a guilty conscience. One example: he feels bad about cutting Stottlemyre before what was to be his comeback season. This saved the team some money. So Steinbrenner promises to pay Stottlemyre to do rehab, which eases Steinbrenners guilty conscience. But he never delivers on the promise despite Stottlemyres reliance, and Stottlemyre is too proud to ask him to deliver. Not until Torre hires Stottlemyre as pitching coach in 1996 does an irate Stottlemyre demand compensation as part of the deal. The tyrant in Stottlemyre demands constant fawning and acknowledgement and follow up from the charitable recipients -- hardly a Christian sentiment.

Steinbrenner frequently comes off as the insane babbling idiot so brilliantly parodied in Seinfeld. He actually blames two separate General Managers for cancelling games for rainouts -- insisting (while in Cleveland) that it was not raining in New York. His baseball moves are idiotic -- he was saved from dumping Rod Guidry for instance, and he throws away money on aging stars and those who suck up to him. He was the one responsible for picking Sheffield over Guerrero. Sheffield proved to be a tremendous clutch hitter, but Vlad was the superior player and much younger. He does things like overrule his own doctors advice not to sign a White Sox pitcher (Burns) because of a deteriorated hip. Steinbrenner signs him anyway and Burns never pitched a regular season game.

On the legal front, Steinbrenners election campaign fraud was gross (i.e., paying employees a fictitious bonus that was then used as to give a campaign contribution in the employees name) and Steinbrenner ignored edicts against him controlling the team during his suspensions. On the other hand, Madden does an excellent job of portraying Fay Vincents unfairness in his conduct of the investigation of the Spira scandal that led to Steinbrenners second suspension. The suspension should have never
happened, and Fay Vincent comes off as a bit of a petty tyrant, despite his generally good reputation in the press. In retrospect, MLB was right to get rid of him in favor of Selig.

Madden does not attempt to offer much analysis of Steinbrenners character and his significance, which is unfortunate. For instance, the thing that bothers me as I read this narrative is how much worse Steinbrenner gets as he ages. There is less and less constraint on his freedom of behavior, and he really lets loose with some very bizarre behavior. Where are his friends in all this? Doesnt someone owe it to him to sit him down and confront him? Hes so pathological that at times he resembles an out-of-control alcoholic whom everyone enables. Those close to Steinbrenner are rewarded and seem to be too fearful to attempt to correct him. Theyd just as soon have Steinbrenner be Steinbrenner. Well, this kind of thing ends badly -- as Howard Hughes found out when his hangers-on grew to like the idea of him being a recluse so much that they resisted any effort by him to break out of it.

In any event, by the later Torre years, Steinbrenner had a series of strokes that disabled him. At that point, hes no longer the out-of-control bully, but a tragic and weakened figure.

On the whole, very interesting and well done.

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