

Yanks Weather Another Crisis: How Clouds Over Martin Lifted

The plaque, as yet unhung, lies on a table in Billy Martin's office at Yankee Stadium.

"Extraordinary achievement award to Billy Martin," it says. "For having reached the age of 50 without being murdered by someone ... to the amazement of all who know him."

Any day now, the plaque may have a companion. The inscription would say something like "for having survived another crisis with George Steinbrenner without being fired ... to the amazement of all who know them."

By now, Billy Martin and George Steinbrenner should know each other better than any two men should know each other because they have battled through more crises than Popeye and Bluto, and people do get to know themselves and others in a crisis.

The latest Martin-Steinbrenner crisis reached a climax last Monday in a 2½-hour meeting in which more air was cleared. The Yankees forever seem to be clearing the air. If the air covering the City of New York is polluted, surely there must be a pocket of air hovering over Yankee Stadium that is clear and pure.

Rosen Feels the Pressure

Only days before that meeting, however, the air surrounding the Yankees, particularly Steinbrenner and Al Rosen and Martin, was foul once again, just as it was every month or so last year. Only days before that meeting, Rosen, the harried club president who most likely would not have dismissed Martin if the choice had been left to him, had buckled under to Steinbrenner's stubborn view and decided Martin had to go.

What, then, happened to change the manager's status? How was his job saved this time and did he gain another savior? **How can Martin be certain** he won't encounter another crisis in the next few weeks or months, despite assurance that he will be the manager the rest of this season?

Unlike last year, when Gabe Paul, Reggie Jackson and Fran Healy were given credit for saving Martin at one time or another, no one came forward and interceded with Steinbrenner in Martin's behalf. **If anyone besides the two antagonists has played a significant role in the continued employment of Billy Martin, it is Doug Newton, the 33-year-old agent and business adviser who has become Martin's confidant and spokesman.**

Although no one involved will admit as much, it is known that Martin was hotter than a pot of boiling oil last Sunday evening over the Art Fowler incident and was ready to march into Steinbrenner's office and proclaim, "Give me Fowler or give me death." At that point, Steinbrenner gladly would have accepted Martin's plea and let him execute himself.

'Preaching Loyalty'

But a night of hard talking with Newton cooled Martin at least to the simmering level and a telephone conversation between Steinbrenner and Rosen

the same night established their course of action.

When Martin and Newton walked into Steinbrenner's office at noon Monday, the manager was told Fowler could stay; the pitching coach would not be exiled to the Yankees' minor league outposts. Thus, Martin did not have to state his case in no uncertain manner for loyalty.

"I preached loyalty," Martin explained the other day. "To me loyalty is very important. It's a two-way street. If I can't be loyal to my coaches or players, how can I expect them to be loyal to me? If loyalty is lost, my leadership is not on good ground."

Sports Analysis

Steinbrenner and Rosen already had decided Martin could keep Fowler, but Steinbrenner had not yet decided Martin could keep his job. The owner did not make that decision until late in the meeting, after the manager had convinced Steinbrenner he sincerely desired to work with Rosen and the organization.

If Martin hadn't sold Steinbrenner on the idea that he should continue as manager, it would have raised an interesting question as to whom the Yankees would have hired in Martin's place.

The most obvious answer was that they didn't have anyone to replace Martin any more than Steinbrenner and Gabe Paul could find someone last year to give the job to. The Yankees asked the Montreal Expos about Dick Williams, whose contract was expiring this year, but the Expos said Williams was unavailable, then rushed off to sign him for two more years so he wouldn't be available at the end of the season, either.

It's Not Just a Game

Those managers, past or future, who were available didn't appeal to Steinbrenner, who at times still manages to see through the fury that clouds his vision and maintain the proper perspective.

Earlier this season, before the latest crisis, the owner talked about his reasons for hiring Martin in 1975 when he became available.

"In New York," Steinbrenner said, "athletics is more than a game. The game is important, but so is the showmanship involved with the game important. I learned something from being in the theater business with Jim Neaderlander and watching how he works. You can take a show on Broadway like we did with 'Applause' and win a Tony Award because you have Lauren Bacall and you can take another show just as good, like 'See Saw,' but not have a hit because you don't have a Lauren Bacall. That always stuck in my bonnet. Billy Martin is something more than just a baseball manager."

If that is so, why has Steinbrenner wanted to discharge him so often in the past year and a half? Because the boss is more than a boss; he is a fan, the most impetuous kind of fan, who soars

with each home run and plunges with each strikeout.

He was miserably unhappy over the way the team was plunging behind Boston and something had to be done before the Red Sox disappeared over the horizon. When Steinbrenner exploded publicly in Boston, it was out of frustration and not of psychology, as he later suggested.

Dropping Martin, of course, would be unpopular with the fans and so, the players reasoned, that's why Steinbrenner ordered Rosen to banish Fowler. If Martin became sufficiently enraged, maybe he would quit and remove the onus from Steinbrenner.

If the players were correct in their suspicion of a palace plot, the plotters had to be embarrassed by the disclosure of the plot. Rosen discovered last Sunday that the Fowler furor had become public knowledge, then called Steinbrenner. Presumably, it was during that conversation that they decided to keep Fowler.

Thus, when the two sides sat down at noon Monday, they experienced perhaps the most constructive meeting they've had in the nearly three years of the Steinbrenner-Martin rule. No threats had to be made, no ultimatums given. Each side listened calmly as the other spoke, just as calmly. Each side came across to the other as sincere.

Because Martin feels Newton, his confidant, can express his views better than Martin can, Newton explained to Steinbrenner and Rosen the points he and Martin had discussed the night before.

Problems had arisen, the parties discovered, because of a communications gap: Rosen felt Martin didn't want to hear his suggestions; Martin felt he had no support from the front office.

The Problem of Injuries

Steinbrenner, who had been absent in body, if not in voice, much of the season, finally discovered that injuries, indeed, had affected the team's ability to stay even with the Red Sox. That point sank in deeply enough for the owner to say the other day, "Billy's doing the best he can with what he has going for him."

If Steinbrenner was impressed at the meeting with Martin's loyalty (Martin earnestly believes there is no more loyal Yankee than he), Martin was impressed with Steinbrenner's sincerity. That's why the manager feels he does not have to fear another crisis or three between now and the end of this season.

Steinbrenner's assurance that Martin would have the job for the remainder of the season was not put in writing; Martin already has a contract that can be terminated at any time, so what would another piece of paper mean?

The manager, right or wrong, simply believed what the boss told him and the way he told him.

At that meeting, Steinbrenner did not invite Martin to his birthday party, which was held last night. That, however, did not bother the manager. The boss's professional acceptance of him is more important than his social acceptance.

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