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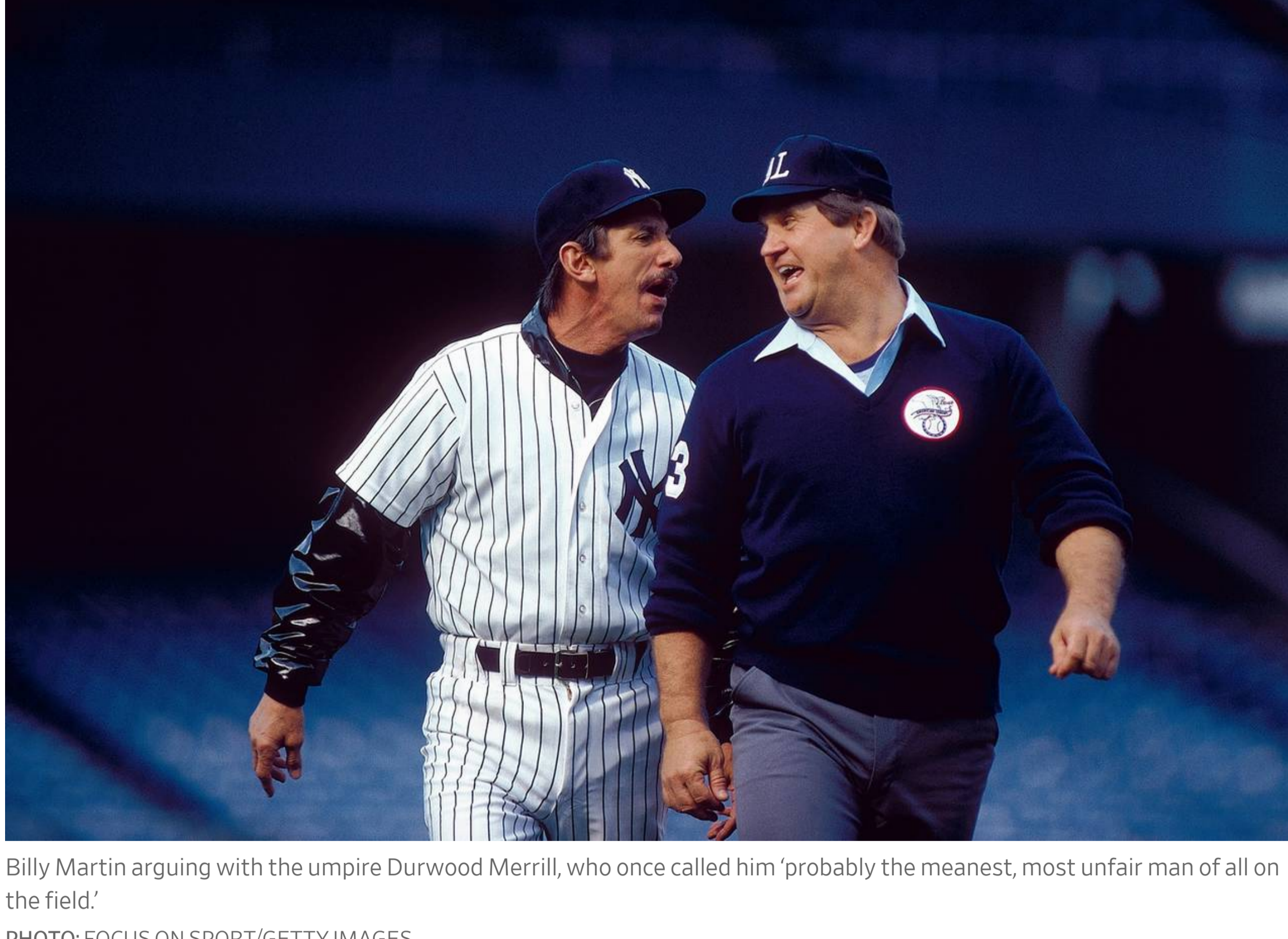
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## Billy the Id

Billy Martin got drunk, insulted the Yankees' owner, kicked dirt at umpires, flaunted his mistress at the ballpark, failed to pay his taxes and got into dugout and barroom brawls.



Billy Martin arguing with the umpire Durwood Merrill, who once called him 'probably the meanest, most unfair man of all on the field.'

PHOTO: FOCUS ON SPORT/GETTY IMAGES

By Edward Kosner

April 3, 2015 3:23 pm ET

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Some baseball figures are so colorful, brilliant, charming, perverse or infuriating that they embed themselves in fans' imaginations far out of scale to their talent on the field or in the dugout. Casey Stengel, the craggy old manager of the championship Yankees and later the woebegone Mets, was one of these. And so, in his way, is the reviled Alex Rodriguez. But the premier example of outsize diamond legend is Billy Martin, the runty, pugnacious second baseman and later serial manager of the Yankees. Martin wore No. 1 on his pinstriped back and was always first in his own mind.

He was at once the swaggering hero and pathetic martyr of George Steinbrenner's '70s and '80s Yankees—those "Bronx Zoo" teams that were more menagerie than baseball club. A bumptious bully crazed for publicity, Steinbrenner hired Martin five times to manage his team between 1975 and 1988—and fired him every time. Martin never failed to play his part in the sick drama: He got drunk, insulted the owner, kicked dirt on umpires, flaunted his blond mistress at the ballpark, failed to pay his taxes, and got into dugout and barroom brawls with his players and, most notoriously, with a marshmallow salesman in Minneapolis.

Martin wasn't born with that interlocking NY logo over his heart—it only seemed that way. In fact, he played barely half of his 1,021 major-league games as a Yankee and managed only 941 games over parts of eight seasons for New York. Most of his dugout time—1,325 games—was spent in exile as the skipper of the Minnesota Twins, Detroit Tigers, Texas Rangers and Oakland A's.

### BILLY MARTIN

By Bill Pennington

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 530 pages, \$30



But Martin made the most of those Yankee years. He memorably saved the Yankees in the 1952 World Series, dashing in to snare Jackie Robinson's infield pop-up when the rest of the team froze. The next season, he was the Series' Most Valuable Player, leading the team to its fifth consecutive championship with 12 hits, including two home runs, and eight runs batted in. Decades later, he managed the 1976 Yankees to their first World Series after a dozen futile years, and the next season his team won its first Series since 1962. His 1978 Yankees were champs, too, but Martin had been fired as manager long before the champagne flowed.

The legend of Billy the Id has endured since his death at 61 in 1989 in a truck accident on Christmas after a day of drinking. Now it will be burnished anew by "Billy Martin: Baseball's Flawed Genius," a biography by Bill Pennington, a New York Times sportswriter. Energetically reported and skillfully written, the book is enormously entertaining. Without pretension, it explores the question whether a baseball lifer can actually be a tragic figure in the classic sense—a man destroyed by the very qualities that made him great. Mr. Pennington makes a persuasive case for Martin's genius in the dugout and, while plainly sympathetic, chronicles his manifold flaws in clear-eyed detail. Billy's mother, who may have been a prostitute, counseled him early, "Don't take s--- from anyone," and her loving son never failed to heed her advice.

Most fans are familiar with Martin's career-long boozing and brawling, but Mr. Pennington's delineation of Billy's mastery of the inner game of baseball—achieving tiny edges by recognizing patterns and clues invisible to the unenlightened—is fascinating stuff.

A scruffy street kid from a tough East Bay neighborhood, Billy, whose father left home when he was an infant, learned from the best. Wiry, and naturally athletic, he started playing sandlot baseball near his home in West Berkeley, Calif., where each fall and winter major-league players like Augie Galan, Bill Rigney and Ernie Lombardi, all locals, used to work out. As a minor leaguer for the Oakland Oaks, Martin literally learned at the knee of his manager, "the Old Perfessor," Casey Stengel, and Casey's successor, the wily Charlie Dressen, who later managed the Brooklyn Dodgers.

From them and his own instinctive grasp of baseball, Martin developed "Billy Ball," a hyper-aggressive approach to the game using sign stealing, hit-and-run plays, the hidden-ball trick, double and sometimes triple steals, balls surreptitiously slicked with soap, and other tactics all designed to demoralize the opposing team.

Buck Showalter, later the successful manager of the Yankees and three other teams, was a Martin protégé as a young coach in 1988. "I felt like I had never seen a baseball game before," he told the author. "He taught me to have my eyes darting everywhere, looking for something to use later in a game. Take a ball that one of your guys hits into the right-center-field gap. Billy said don't watch the ball; you know it's going to be a double or a triple. Watch to see if the pitcher is backing up third. Is the left fielder moving? Are the relay guys in the proper order? You have a checklist of things to look for that might tell you something that you can use later."

"Billy was the most brilliant manager I knew," said Tony La Russa, himself a Hall of Fame manager. "No one worked a game better. . . . Billy's way was like no one else. It was a magnificent combination of learned baseball knowledge and intuitive logic mixed with incredible guts."

Martin was fired nine times as manager of four teams, but he had a winning percentage of .553, including .591 with the Yankees, as good as or better than the record of a number of his competitors who are now in the Hall of Fame. Typically, Martin would take over a bad or underperforming club. The team would almost immediately start winning and do even better in Martin's second season in the dugout. But the next season the team would falter—and Billy would be fired.

A savvy sportswriter once told me about one of Martin's managerial traits that Mr. Pennington doesn't touch on but that helps explain his record. Martin, he said, would motivate players by telling them that teammates were gunning for their jobs or were talking against them. During Martin's first season, the players didn't share what the manager told them. But as time went on, they loosened up with each other and realized that Billy was playing them off against each other—and he would lose the clubhouse.

The rich core of the Martin legend is the sadomasochistic soap opera he played out with Steinbrenner for over a decade. But his first Yankee eruption took place back in 1957. Although no star, Martin had always been part of the Yankees in-crowd. At his first spring training, he was inexplicably taken up by the aloof Joe DiMaggio, the epitome of Yankee grandeur, who also came from the Bay Area. "Big Dago" and "Little Dago," as they called each other, became dinner regulars. By the mid-1950s, Martin was palling around with Mickey Mantle, Whitey Ford, Yogi Berra and Hank Bauer at the Copacabana and other hot spots. When Bauer slugged a Copa patron one night, Billy took the rap. The Yankees banished him to Kansas City, and it was 16 years before Steinbrenner, who had just bought the team, summoned him back to manage it.

Martin delivered, but there was always drama with Steinbrenner, particularly after Reggie Jackson joined the team and began competing with Martin for the paternal favor of the proprietor. The rivalry exploded in a televised dugout scuffle between Reggie and Billy during the 1977 season—one of the marquee moments of Yankee ignominy.

The Yankees won the World Series, but Steinbrenner fired Martin in the middle of the next season after the manager said of Reggie and George, "The two of them deserve each other. One's a born liar; the other one's convicted"—a reference to the owner's guilty plea to charges of making illegal campaign contributions to Richard Nixon and obstruction of justice. Later that same season, Steinbrenner smuggled Martin into Yankee Stadium on Old-Timers' Day and announced to the capacity ground that Billy would be back managing the team the next year.

And so it went. Steinbrenner enabled Martin's pathological behavior by giving him raises and forgiving loans each time he fired him. After the '79 season, Billy wound up in a fight in a Minneapolis bar with one Joseph W. Cooper, a marshmallow salesman. Then, in 1985, during Martin's fourth stint as manager, he squared off at a Baltimore bar with Eddie Lee Whitson, a pitcher he thought choked under pressure. Back in New York two days later, Martin strolled down to the Copa for a nostalgic beer.

Martin was replaced as Yankee manager the next season by Lou Piniella. Steinbrenner staged Billy Martin Day in the middle of the season, and the crowd roared when Martin told them: "I may not have been the best Yankee to put on pinstripes, but I am the proudest." Less than two years later, he was back for Billy V, which ended predictably enough soon after he was sucker-punched in a urinal at a Dallas strip club called Lace and suspended and fined for kicking dirt on an umpire in Oakland. Yet, in the weeks before he died in 1989, he was calling his old coaches to be ready to return with him to Yankee Stadium, because Steinbrenner had told him that he would be managing again sometime in the 1990 season.

Martin may not have been a tragic hero, but he was certainly a champion of self-destruction. Yet for all his brooding, Mr. Pennington writes, he had an infectious charm that drew people to him and led them to forgive his transgressions. He loved celebrities, and the feeling was mutual. He had dinner with DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe during their marriage, hung around with Frank Sinatra and Jackie Gleason, and was serenaded at one of his weddings by Bobby Darin. When he had money, he spread it around and never stopped, even when the money ran out. He was married four times, and each of the women had good things to say about him, even though he cheated on all of them.

Mr. Pennington ends his book with a meditation on Martin's alcoholism, which was barely acknowledged in his lifetime and certainly never treated. He speculates on how Martin's life might have gone had he been born decades later into an age when addiction has become just another treatable disorder. Yet Billy and his demons were likely inseparable. They were an incomparable double-play combination.

—Mr. Kosner, the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News, went to his first Yankee game in 1947.

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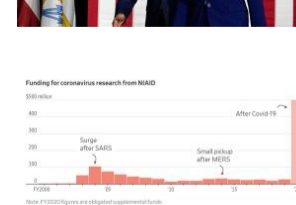
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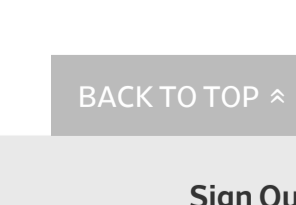
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