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IN2PIRE

Chuck Levine

It was a meaningless game of 162. The Oakland Athletics were hosting the New York Yankees in the middle of September in 2004. The A's were on their way to a second-place finish behind the Los Angeles Angels, while the Yankees were looking to finish their third straight season with over 100 wins. It was just another game. The important part was one of the fans watching the game that night. All the way up in the nosebleeds sat a four-year-old at his first baseball game. Using his dad's binoculars, the little boy looked down to the field and focused on one jersey, one number, and the player wearing it. The jersey was the grey and navy of the Yankees' away uniform. The number he found was the number two worn by the Yankee shortstop. The player was a man who the young boy would soon learn was named Derek Jeter; a man who would impact this boy's life in many more ways than he would have thought.

The first thing the young boy would learn about Derek Jeter was who he was as a player. A Yankee through and through, Jeter had never played anywhere else and had no plan of ever doing so. He wasn't much of a homerun hitter, never hitting 20 or more in back to back seasons, but for whatever reason, the young boy gravitated toward him. The boy struggled to communicate why The Captain was his favorite because, statistically, he wasn't the best. Jeter always had a pretty high average, but it wasn't the best. He was definitely never the best homerun hitter, but he was one of the best defensive players in the league. There was one play that always stood out to the kid, so much so, that he still calls it the "Derek Jeter" play. A ball grounded to the far left, so the shortstop would have to field the ball backhand and across his body as he was running toward shallow left field. He picks up the ball and transfers it to his throwing hand, then he jumps and throws across his body, nailing the runner at first base by a hair. Jeter first pulled off the move in the 1998 ALCS, before the little boy was born, but he had since pulled it off a number of times. Of course, this was only one of many famous plays that Jeter had pulled off during his career, but since the young boy didn't have any stands to dive head-first into or Jeremy Giambi to throw out at home plate, this was a play that the kid could practice over and over again at any field whenever his dad was free.

It wasn't until the boy was older and learned what made Derek Jeter stand out from his competition. Jeter, who made his major league debut in

1994, played through one of the most notable eras of baseball: The Steroid Era. The MLB in the 1990s and early 2000s was defined by home run hitters like Barry Bonds, Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa and almost every other player who took Performance Enhancing Drugs (PEDs). For the few who didn't and still had notable careers, became all the more respected. Some notable names on that list include Chipper Jones, Ken Griffey Jr., and of course Derek Jeter. The other two are already members of the Baseball Hall of Fame, Griffey with the highest voting percentage of all time at 99.3%, so it would be of no surprise that Jeter would be the leading member of the 2019 induction class.

For someone to have played twenty seasons where he only played under 130 games twice, and once because of a lockout, to never have taken any banned substances to improve his numbers especially when everyone else was doing just that showed the little boy, who at this point was more of a teenager, that it took more to be a great player than just the stats a player puts up every season. The teen had started picking up on the values that Jeter had shown throughout his legendary career. Most notably to him was Jeter's loyalty. In a world of sub-tweeting and trash talking in sports, Jeter has never once gone behind a teammate's back to put himself into the spotlight or left his team in search of more money. Now obviously, the argument can be made that because he was on the Yankees, nobody had more money to offer, but there is definitely something to be said for a player staying on one team for as long as Jeter did. Loyalty to teammates, the team, and, most importantly, the fanbase is something that not many players can attest to. Another characteristic that the teen found in Jeter was respect. This principle might be the largest part of Jeter's pedigree, as it is the reason that many sight for the way he played his game. By never doing anything that would jeopardize his ability to play, whether that be by taking a banned substance or doing something risky outside of the season Jeter showed his respect for the game itself. By never talking bad about teammates, coaches, or opposing players, he showed his respect for those who play the game he loves so much. By staying humble in his success, he showed respect for those who supported him throughout his career. Respect is such a large part of who Derek Jeter is, that it became the slogan of his Jordan Brand campaign.

In the same year as Derek Jeter's retirement, the teenager joined an organization that would revamp his commitment to those principles. It was an international Jewish youth group whose driving morals ran along the same line as Jeter's and expanded on them with brotherhood. Throughout his time in the organization, the teen learned a tremendous amount of skills like leadership, philanthropy, and how to teach people rather than do things for them. First, he led the most active term of social action and community service that his chapter of the organization had ever seen. Later, as vice president, he created a program that paired unexperienced event planners

with people who had done it multiple times so that it wasn't just the same people doing everything and making the first-time experience less intimidating. Due to the lessons and experiences he had in this organization, the teen became a man. No matter what he did, the young man's core morals and principles always tied back to one person. Not his dad, not his mom, not his rabbi; Derek Jeter.

Derek Jeter is my favorite player. I am that little boy in the nosebleeds with oversized binoculars focusing on one person. I am the navy pinstripe in the sea of green and gold. I am the kid practicing Jeter's throw from the 1998 ALCS on any available infield my dad and I could get to. The number 2 is my lucky number, and the jersey number I request at every given opportunity. I stopped playing baseball in the 5th grade, but that hasn't stopped my love for the game or for my favorite player. If anything, it has only made me dig deeper into baseball and Derek Jeter. Being removed from the game has made me look at baseball and its players in a much more analytical sense, which has only reaffirmed my love for Derek Jeter.

Posting a career WAR (Wins Above Replacement) of 72.4, Derek Jeter is rated as the 57th best player of all time. This might not seem like the biggest accomplishment, but one must consider that, in a league with approximately 17,000 players since its creation, that being in the top 100 of all-time is remarkable. What more to consider is that, while being undoubtedly incredible, Jeter never broke any league records or was ever in the conversation for "best in the league" as often as players like Alex Rodriguez, Barry Bonds, Bryce Harper, or Mike Trout. One thing that separates Jeter from at least two of those names, however, is his aforementioned lack of steroid usage which certainly would have boosted his career hit and home run numbers. Even without all of that, anyone who knows baseball has to acknowledge that Derek Jeter is one of the best to lace up a pair of cleats.

There is one quote that sums up Derek and my admiration for him. He once said, "There may be people who have more talent than you, but there's no excuse for anyone to work harder than you do." Jeter is undeniable. He will never be the best player, probably not even the best shortstop with players like Jose Lindor, Carlos Correa, Corey Seager, and Didi Gregorius who are all very talented fielders and who can all hit for power with numbers higher than Jeter could have ever reached. Through all of that, nobody can deny that Derek Jeter is one of the best players of all time. That is what makes him relatable to me. I've never been the best at most of the things that I do, but that does not mean that I shouldn't put in the most effort possible to succeed. That is what Derek Jeter means to me; more than a player, more than a person, Derek Jeter is the idea of resilience and perseverance that has helped me often in life to get through hard classes and tough times. Derek Jeter inspires me to be the best me that I can be.