

Priceless

Because of Derek Jeter's regal skills and commoner's touch, it's hard to begrudge a crossing-the-threshold contract for the Yankees' shortstop. But the deal will carry the responsibility of taking charge—this is his team, his time.

By Adrian Wojnarowski

Derek Jeter could see the measure of a life passing one by one into the Queen of Peace Church in North Arlington, N.J., a year ago. The people poured into the pews for the funeral mass of his grandfather. They were elderly women clutching rosary beads, kids out of the parish schools, an endless line of people paying respects to Bill Connors.

The pastor, Monsignor Thomas Madden, considered his 21 years assigned to Queen of Peace and couldn't recall the church ever so packed for a service. Had to be 800 people easy.

The grandfather of the Yankees' shortstop was a genius of the hands, a prince of the heart. Every summer, Jeter used to visit his grandparents and watch Bill, the man they called "Sonny," rise with the first shards of light to make it to work by 6:30, where for 36 years he was the head of maintenance. He cared for the parish church, its high school and grade school. He did the plumbing, the electrical wiring, the woodworking. He was there on Saturdays for the weddings, at 3 a.m. to start shoveling out of the snowstorms.

He devoted his life to churches for 50 years, starting with St. Michael's of Jersey City in the 1940s. He was the heart and soul of Queen of Peace, a living historian, the pulse of the parish. It humbled Jeter to see the legacy of his grandfather, the people and lives he touched. Here was the measure of a life, he thought. Here was the value of a man.

"He enjoyed what he did," Jeter says. "He didn't make millions, but he affected as many lives as anyone in this room. He was the type who never missed work. Never. Even on a bad day, he always seemed to go. That's a lesson I learned from him."

The essence of his ethic was passed down to Jeter, turning him into one of the most admired and appreciated stars in sports. Before long, he'll be one of the richest. Soon, he's expected to sign his name to a seven-year, \$118.5 million contract and be a baseball matinee idol paid like a Hollywood movie star. Along with his brilliant talent, his stylish, sophisticated way, Jeter has gone beyond the sports page and been trans-

formed into the prince of New York. He has turned into a modern-day DiMaggio. Across New York and beyond, Jeter stands as baseball royalty with a commoner's touch.

"The coolest cat in town," Yankees manager Joe Torre says.

Though the sheer magnitude of Jeter's proposed salary sent shivers to executives across the sporting landscape (this was even before reports of a \$140 million Tigers offer to Juan Gonzalez), it marked the first time an athlete has crossed the \$100 million threshold and been spared national scorn. From the Dodgers' Kevin Brown to the Washington Wizards' Juwan Howard to the Minnesota Timberwolves' Kevin Garnett, no one escaped a public seething over their salaries. Before some athletes ever won a lousy playoff game—never mind a title—they were among the most rewarded that sports has ever seen.

Perhaps people are angry with the system, but it's hard to detect a disdain for Jeter. The consensus has been clear: If the price of pleasing an icon has to be \$118.5 million these days, then the checks ought to be written out to Derek Jeter.

He has won three World Series since becoming a Yankees fixture in

1996. His 795 hits in his first four full seasons are more than Pete Rose (723), Ty Cobb (728) and Stan Musial (792) had over the same time frame. Last season, he hit .349 with 24 home runs and 102 RBIs. He has shown Gold Glove promise at shortstop, using his long body and strong arm to turn the most improbable of plays into mundane outs.

Though Jeter craves the competition with his unparalleled generation of brilliant shortstops, he is most concerned with box scores and standings. Still, everyone is watching the contract situation. The Red Sox signed Nomar Garciaparra to a practical five-year, \$23.25 million contract in 1997, and own his option until 2004. George Steinbrenner could have had Jeter for a comparable price but waited too long. Now, the \$118.5 million contract is a bargain for Steinbrenner, compared with the \$150 million that Jeter could have commanded when Seattle's Alex Rodriguez sets the standard next winter. The rest of baseball doesn't want to hear it, not with Jeter's salary of nearly \$17 million per season topping the 1999 payrolls of the Twins, Royals, Marlins and Expos.

All along, Jeter had a hard time frightening Yankees officials into believing he'd ever leave New York. His four years with the Yankees have been an absolute affair of the heart. Back on Joe DiMaggio Day at Yankee Stadium last April, Hank Bauer gestured to the end of the clubhouse where DiMaggio used to sit for hours downing cups of coffee and chain-smoking Chesterfields. All the old Yankees on hand that Sunday morning had a DiMaggio story, Bauer to Yogi Berra to Whitey Ford to Phil Rizzuto.

Across the room, Jeter dressed for the game. He was raised a Yankees fan while growing up in New Jersey and Michigan, priding himself as a student of pinstripes history, and he wished he had a story to tell, too. DiMaggio used to come to the Stadium to visit, wearing his regal blue blazer and an uninviting aura of royalty. He had little time for a new generation of Yankees, even the ones with hopes of joining him with a plaque in Monument Park. Looking back, the great DiMaggio could have learned a few lessons on manners from Jeter.

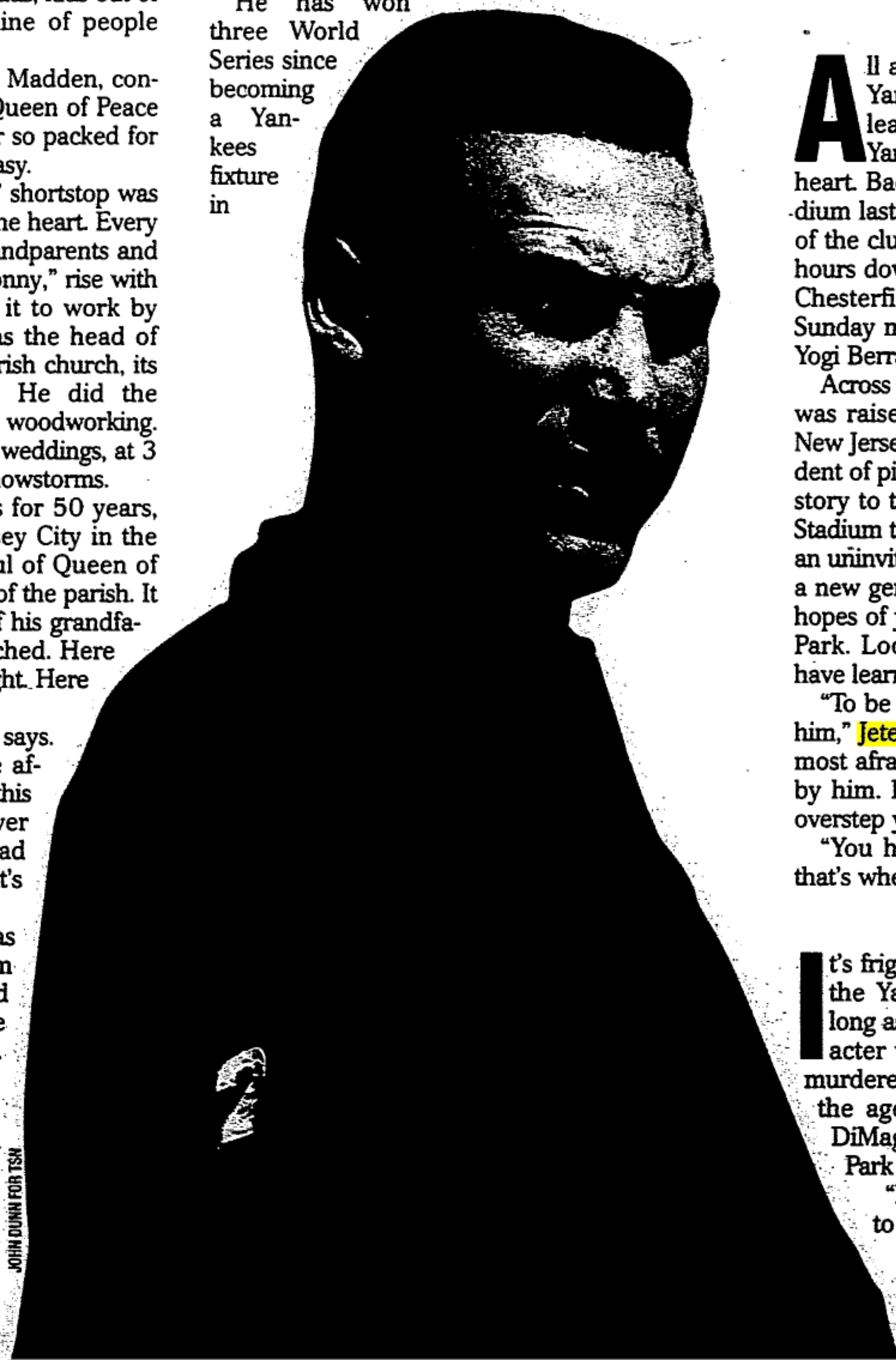
"To be honest, I never had a conversation with him," Jeter says. "He was a mystery. You were almost afraid to approach him, almost intimidated by him. I kept my distance. You don't want to overstep your boundaries."

"You had to put him on a pedestal because that's where he belonged."

It's frightening to think that Jeter, at 25, is still the Yankees' youngest everyday player. As long as he stays healthy, honors his good character with clean living, No. 2 will lead off a murderers' row of retired Yankees numbers for the ages—No. 3 Ruth, No. 4 Gehrig, No. 5 DiMaggio. Some days, Jeter visits Monument Park just to have private time there.

"I'd be lying to you if I said I didn't want to be a part of (the history)," Jeter says.

On that April day in 1999, Jeter crushed one ball off the top of the right



JOHN DUNN FOR TSN



ALL-AMERICAN YANKEE: Jeter's long body and strong arm are a force in the field. And his offensive production makes him an anomaly among shortstops. But it's character that sets Jeter apart and makes him deserving of a huge paycheck.

field wall, a second to the tip of the 390-foot mark in left-center. Had the second drive cleared the wall for a home run, the ball appeared destined to fall at the feet of DiMaggio's monument. It was almost like a ghost reached down and kept it in the park for a double. Almost as if Joe D himself, a ferocious protector of his legacy, made sure no one else shared the stage with him.

Even so, there's no stopping Jeter. Somehow, people refuse to believe the contract will change him. This is the magic of Jeter, his essence. He still calls his manager "Mr. Torre," still stays the longest to sign autographs at Legends Field, the Yankees' spring-training base in Tampa. Forever fighting to stay clear of controversy, he recently weighed in on Braves reliever John Rocker. This was a step for him, a good one, where he was talking straight from the heart. With his contract will come different obligations in the clubhouse. This is his team, his time.

Based on how Jeter reacted to winning a \$5 million salary in arbitration last year, it's doubtful he will be much different after his wind-fall. How he will be perceived is another story—and the next chapter in Jeter's career.

A contract of this magnitude is a recognition not only of Jeter's playing ability but his leadership qualities. He always has deferred to veterans such as David Cone, Paul O'Neill, Bernie Williams and Tino Martinez as the team leaders. There is no doubt anymore, however, who is center stage among the Yankees—and Jeter will have to show even greater leadership.

He will face the same pressure as other players with huge paychecks who think they have to prove themselves worthy of such an investment. Jeter's attitude always has been that he needs to continue to improve, so he may not feel that burden.

The athletic director at the Queen of Peace High School, Ed Abromaitis, still can see the skinny grandson of the late maintenance man wiping away the sweat under a hot August sun. As a teenager visiting his grandparents on summer vacation, Jeter was commissioned a small push mower and assigned to cut the grass on the football field. He was lucky to get minimum wage and a bag lunch under a shady tree.

"By the time he got done cutting the field, the grass would've grown enough at the other end for him to start all over again," Abromaitis says.

This story flashed back to Abromaitis on the morning the stories hit the newspapers about Jeter's

pending contract. After Jeter's grandfather died a year ago January, his sons, Billy and Bernie Connors, took over the church grounds. Along with Abromaitis and millions in New York and beyond, Jeter's uncles sat and studied the staggering statistic.

"They just shook their heads, saying, 'One hundred (eighteen and a half) million, huh? Well, God bless him,'" Abromaitis says.

If it had to be anyone, it might as well be Derek Jeter, the Yankee with the grace of the great DiMaggio, with the honor of a working man at the old Queen of Peace Church.

TSN

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Shortstops, long green

The Yankees' attempt to work out a long-term contract with Derek Jeter, 25, is part of an industrywide trend. Though the Red Sox's Nomar Garciaparra, 26, is entering the third season of a five-year, \$23.25 million deal and the Mariners' Alex Rodriguez, 24, is in the final season of a four-year, \$10.6 million contract, some shortstops have signed or have been offered long-term deals this winter. The big-dollar deals along with the players' statistical averages over the past three seasons:

Major League	3-year Averages							The deal	
Player, Team	Age	Experience (years)	Avg.	HR	RBI	R	SB	Years	Money
Derek Jeter, Yankees*	25	5	.321	18	85	126	24	7	\$118.5 million
Rey Ordonez, Mets	27	4	.243	1	45	43	7	4	\$19 million
Mark Grudzielanek, Dodgers**	29	5	.287	7	53	70	16	4	\$18 million
Tony Womack, Diamondbacks	30	6	.279	4	45	94	63	4	\$17 million
Tony Batista, Blue Jays	26	4	.262	18	53	48	2	4	\$14 million
Neifi Perez, Rockies*	25	4	.279	9	53	78	7	4	\$12.5 million
Mark Loretta, Brewers	28	5	.297	5	56	68	6	3	\$11 million

*Player has been offered the contract terms.

**Grudzielanek is expected to be shifted to second base.