



Jon Heyman

Now showing in New York: The Posada Adventure

All through the spring, George Steinbrenner's rants revolved around the club's catching and left field situations. And Steinbrenner wasn't the only one worried about catching in Yankeeland.

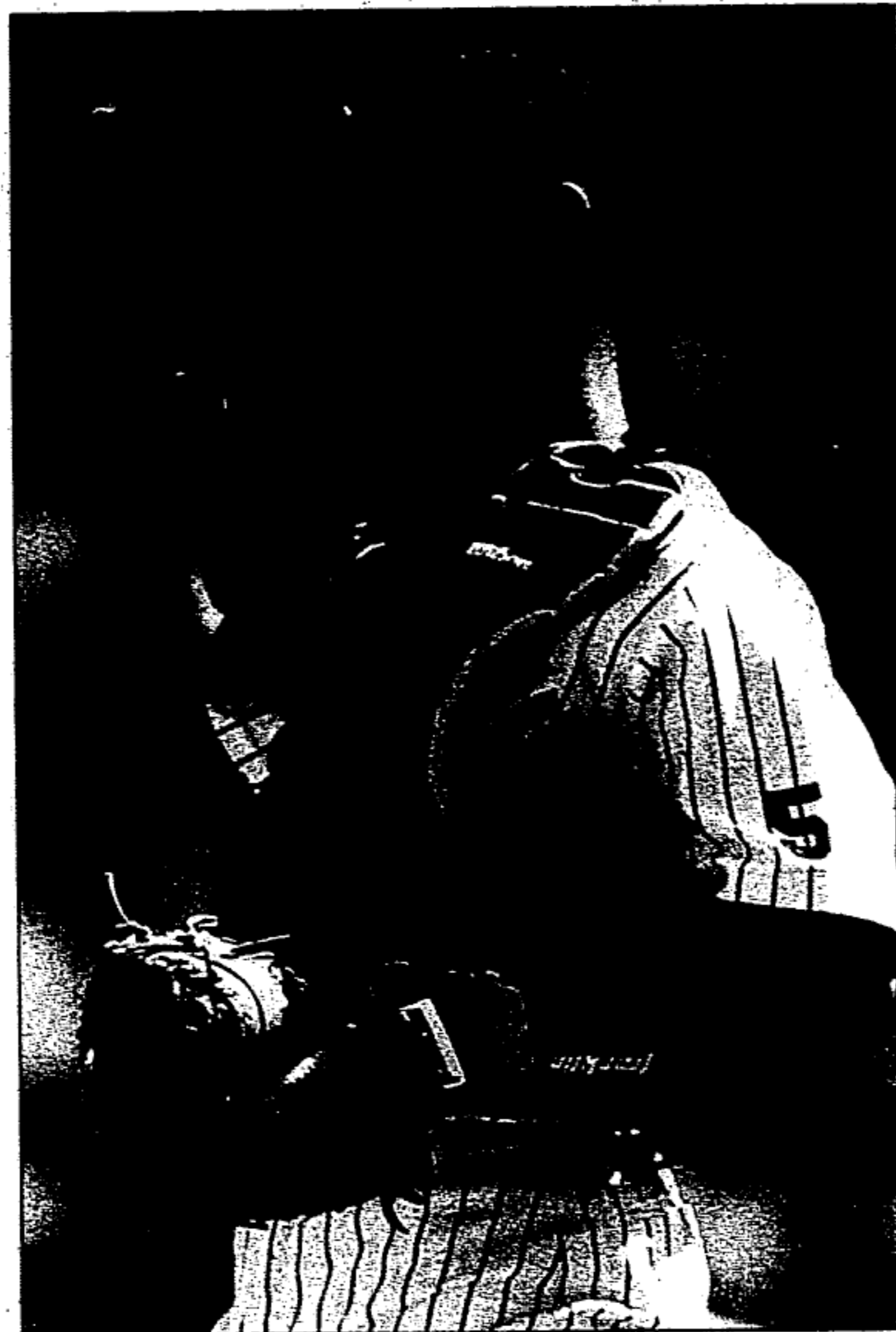
The Yankees aren't like other teams with real headaches. Besides their flirtation regarding Jim Edmonds and a few other left-handed hitters to replace the suspended Darryl Strawberry, the big story this spring was how their catcher, **Jorge Posada**, would react now that his human safety net, Joe Girardi, had gone back to Chicago to become a Cub again.

To most teams, this would seem like a triviality. To the Yankees, who have not only Steinbrenner at the top, but also an abundance of baseball minds spouting opinions right and left (Al Rosen and Clyde King were constant presences this spring, as if the highly successful triumvirate of Mark Newman, Brian Cashman and Stick Michael isn't enough for Steinbrenner), this was perceived as a crisis in the making. And in their minds, perhaps it was.

Posada is a gem in many respects, a switch-hitting catcher with power in his bat and arm. Except with the Yankees, everything revolves around their rotation, and folks wondered whether the inexperienced **Posada** could handle the star-filled cast with definite ideas about how things should be done. Last year, a few of them believed Girardi could do no wrong—which was how Girardi came to unseat **Posada** come playoff time last October, validating Steinbrenner's surprise decision to bring back Girardi last season for \$3.4 million.

Today there is no one to catch **Posada** if Yankees starters begin craving someone else to catch them. Posada's only backup is Jim Leyritz, a great clutch hitter abandoned as a realistic catching option by the Yankees four years earlier. Leyritz should be commended for working himself into tremendous shape and the catching picture, but no one believes he resembles an everyday catcher at this stage of his most unusual career.

That leaves it to **Posada**, and that worries folks, including the picky pitchers who favored Girardi last year. There were no statistics to support the pitchers' worries; the team's ERA was 4.20 with **Posada** catching last year, compared with 4.13 with Girardi. There was only anecdotal evidence. The questions and complaints about **Posada** may seem trivial to those who have never held a base-



HE'S CATCHING ON: *Posada understands he has some work to do to gain the confidence of the Yankees' stellar rotation.*

ball on a big-league mound. But they are very real to the pitchers.

In particular, pitchers worried about Posada's signal-calling abilities and emotions. They saw some good signs this spring but are not yet ready to commit. "I think he's gotten better this spring," David Cone said on season's eve. "He's less sensitive when he gets shaken off. The rhythm and signal calling is much quicker and more decisive."

Posada's problems generally have occurred when there were men on base, when more and different signs are needed to obscure the pitchers' intent from baserunners. In the past, **Posada** wasn't quick enough to "roll over" signs. "That was Girardi's strength," Cone says.

Catching always seems to be a big issue for the Yankees. That was the case four years ago, when the media created a firestorm over the club's decision to excise Mike Stanley, a strong clutch hitter, for Girardi, whose baseball card showed

little offensive punch. Four years later, after the media were proved wrong in their snap judgment of Girardi, the focus again is on the catcher. But this time, with some irony, the consternation is over the loss of Girardi, not his acquisition. With four years to show how important defense was to a catcher, Girardi did just that about a thousand times over. Manager Joe Torre was right in his National League thinking, it turns out. The question now is whether **Posada** is too much of an American League catcher—all offense.

One thing that concerns the Yankees is the loss of Girardi's diplomacy skills. Girardi pleaded pitchers' cases with umpires without seeming to. **Posada** is more direct in his approach, and that worries club officials. Torre made **Posada** apologize to umpire Greg Kosc after **Posada** implied last season that the overweight Kosc might have a hard time doing his job properly on hot days. This is something for **Posada** to work on; in Cone's second start, his second straight shaky one, **Posada** took off his mask to argue with home-plate umpire Tim Timmons.

The pitchers want to make this work. When Roger Clemens pitched in and out of trouble in an up-and-down 2000 debut in Anaheim, Clemens volunteered that he and **Posada** "worked well together." After Cone couldn't find the strike zone in his first start, he told us it wasn't Posada's fault. But there was no getting around the fact that Andy Pettitte and **Posada** were having problems in Pettitte's debut. Pettitte shook off **Posada** on seemingly every sign in the first three innings, prompting several impromptu meetings between the two men. Afterward, Pettitte said they formed a fine team in spring training but that "I wanted to do things different tonight, and (**Posada**) was still in a spring-training mode."

Pitchers can be quirky geniuses. But the Yankees can do nothing but try to make them happy. They are the collective key to the club's success. As G.M. Brian Cashman pointed out, Pettitte wanted only Leyritz to catch him in '96, then Pettitte wanted only Girardi to catch him. "It's overblown," Cashman says, adding about **Posada**. "He's the best catcher for us on an everyday basis, no question about it."

Orlando Hernandez and **Posada** used to fight all the time. Now, Hernandez has become a contented superstar. In the 10th game of the season, Ramiro Mendoza, who was supposed to be a reliever, carried a perfect game into the seventh inning. That helps. It makes folks recall that it was **Posada** who caught David Wells' perfect game in 1998.

Posada's attitude works in his favor. He understands he has work to do to earn the pitchers' collective confidence. "I'm more relaxed, more confident," **Posada** says.

He's eager to prove he can do the job. Late in the spring, **Posada** named Clemens, Orlando Hernandez and Ed Yarnall (since demoted) as starters whose faith he had won or was on the verge of winning. Of Cone and Pettitte, **Posada** said, "It's going to take two or three starts."

It might take even longer than that.

But, Steinbrenner's worries aside, eventually it will happen. **TSN**

Jon Heyman is a national baseball columnist for Newsday in New York. E-mail him at jheyman@sportingnews.com.