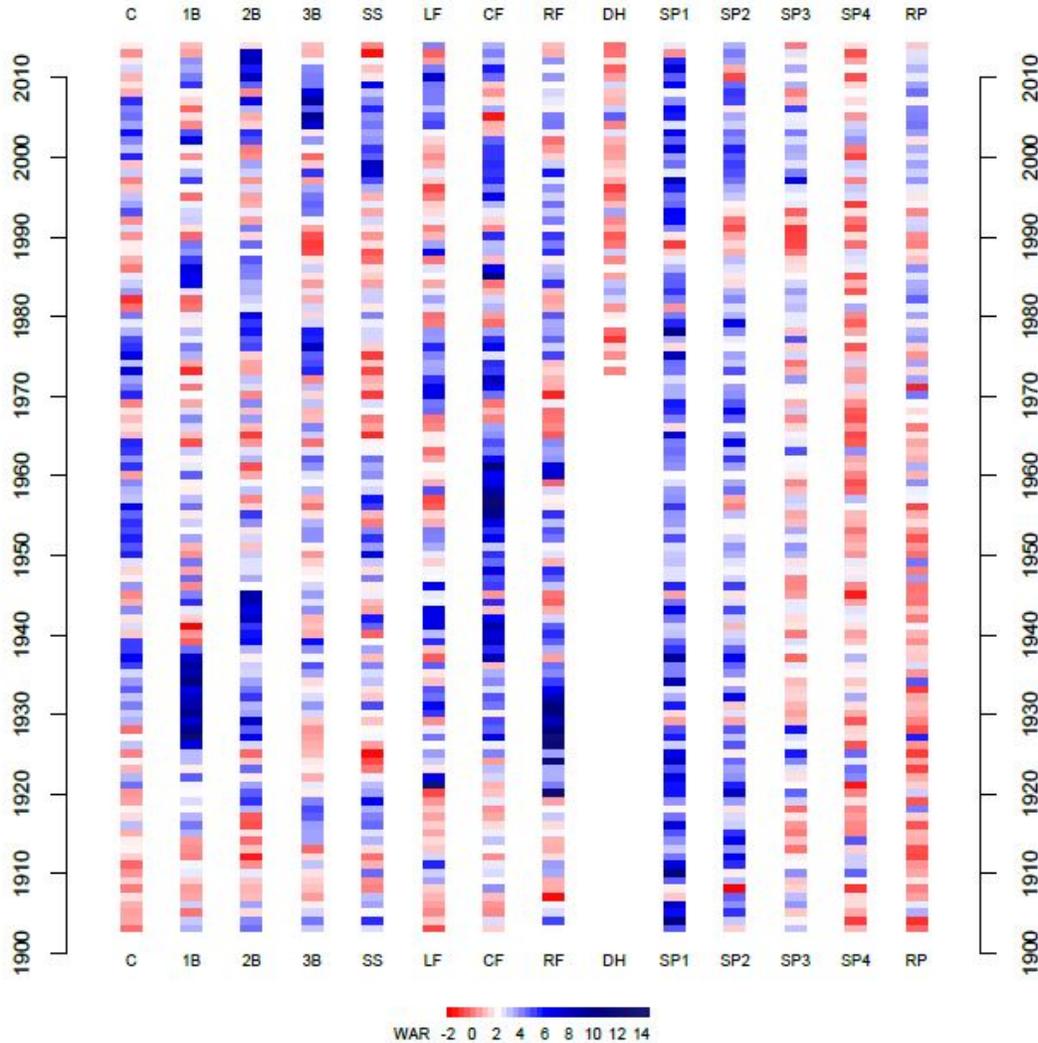


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# Pinch hitting: Steve Wang and Rich Wicentowski

Posted By [Chad Jennings](#) On January 23, 2015 @ 8:59 am In [Misc](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

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Surely we're breaking some sort of baseball rule on this one, because today we're using two Pinch Hitters in one at-bat. Steve Wang is an associate professor at Swarthmore College, teaching statistics and researching paleontology. He's been a Yankees fan since the days of the Bronx Zoo (favorite players: Ron Guidry and Bernie Williams). Rich Wicentowski is also an associate professor at Swarthmore College. He handles computer science and does research in computational linguistics. Rich's prized possession - "emotionally, if not financially," he wrote - is a mint copy of Don Mattingly's rookie card.

For their post, Steve and Rich built a graphic that they call: A Graphical History of Yankees WAR. I'll let them explain in the text below.

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Here in one graphic is the illustrious history of the Yankees, from their early days as the Highlanders, through their multiple dynasties, to today. The graphic shows the WAR values of the top Yankees starter at each position, plus the top four starting pitchers and reliever for each year from 1903 to 2014. WAR is an estimate of Wins Above Replacement: the number of wins a player contributes beyond replacement level (roughly equal to the quality of a marginal player who could be claimed off waivers).

On the graph, the color white represents a value of 2.0 WAR, or about the value of a mediocre regular; blue values are better, red values are worse (we used WAR values from [baseball-reference.com](http://baseball-reference.com)).

Note that the graph displays the single top player at each position rather than the total of all players who appeared at the position, and for each player it includes his stats at all positions that year (so if the regular left fielder played some center field, that center field playing time counts as well).

Starting pitcher slots are ordered by innings pitched, and a given pitcher can change slots from year to year (e.g., in his eight seasons with the team, Mike Mussina is classified as the No. 1 starter three times, No. 2 twice, and No. 3 three times).

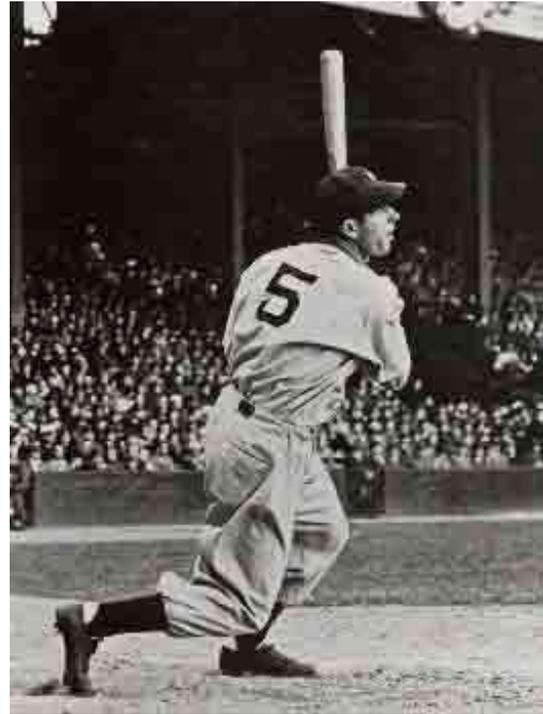
Some features jump out immediately:

- Not surprisingly, Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and Mickey Mantle were truly great (note that Ruth is classified as a left fielder in 1921–22 and a right fielder in all other years).
- Derek Jeter is clearly the best shortstop the Yankees have ever had long-term.
- The Yankees “glory positions” of center field and catcher stand out, and the team has yet to effectively replace Jorge Posada after his retirement.

Other features are less obvious:

- Reading across the row for 1998, you can see that every position was above-average for this historic team except DH, where Darryl Strawberry was outstanding but in limited action.
- The Yankees have never had a top long-term DH, like a David Ortiz or Edgar Martinez.
- Robinson Cano’s peak was outstanding and compares favorably to recent Hall of Fame inductee Joe Gordon from the 1940s. When Gordon served in WWII, he was replaced by Snuffy Stirnweiss, who put up WARs of 8.7 and 8.5, the two highest season totals ever by a Yankees second baseman.
- Bill James has argued that Roy White was a better player than Jim Rice — a provocative argument to be sure, but you can see here that White (left field during 1968–77 except 1974) was indeed an excellent player.
- Most early relief pitchers were ineffective starters, but Wilcy Moore — relief ace for the legendary 1927 team — put up a 2.28 ERA over a now unheard-of 213 innings (he had 38 relief appearances and 12 starts, including six complete games).
- Although Joe Torre’s teams may be better remembered for their powerhouse offenses, his pitching rotations in the early 2000s were perhaps the deepest the team has ever had.

As you peruse the graphic, you will no doubt discover other features of baseball’s most storied franchise.



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## Year by year, Yankees longevity stands out

Posted By [Chad Jennings](#) On January 23, 2015 @ 11:58 am In [Misc](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

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My first reaction to seeing the graphic in this morning's Pinch Hitter post was a bit of criticism: where were the names?

It seemed awkward to look at a chart that was created by individual players and showed no individual names, but as I looked at it a little longer, the lack of names became one of my favorite parts.

Whether intentional or not, one thing Steve and Rich really emphasized in their graphic was the value of longevity.

If you're looking for individual superstars, they're easy enough to find — just look for the huge patches of blue. Lou Gehrig and Don Mattingly are easy to spot in the first base column. Yogi Berra, Thurman Munson and Jorge Posada stand out at catcher. Joe Gordon, Willie Randolph and Robinson Cano are obvious at second. It's not hard to spot Babe Ruth, it's easy to find Derek Jeter, and the transition from Joe DiMaggio to Mickey Mantle is obvious.

There are some important specks on that chart — one speck is the year Rickey Henderson moved from center field to left field — but the graphic really emphasizes sustained success, either through one long-term player or through one very successful transition. And the Yankees are in a period of obvious transition without a lot of blue in these most recent years.

So what positions are close to developing large patches of sustained success?

Center field and left field could be heading that direction. There's a 2014 dot of blue in left field because Brett Gardner had a nice season, and that season came after a very small gap of red following the mix-and-match left field success of the late 2000s. Jacoby Ellsbury also provided a blue dot last season as a transition from Curtis Granderson to Gardner to Ellsbury in center field. Gardner

and Ellsbury are signed long term and could continue that outfield success through the end of this decade.

If a guy like Rob Refsnyder can take hold of the second base position, that could be another strong and relatively quick transition after the standout seasons of Robinson Cano. Maybe Dellin Betances can provide a strong transition in the relief column. Obviously the top two starters have generally provided a lot of blue-dot success over the years, and Masahiro Tanaka and Michael Pineda seem poised to keep that going as long as they stay healthy.

Plugging short term holes is helpful and necessary along the way, but sustained success is what really stands out.

*Associated Press photo*

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[Add a comment](#)**Brian Morrissey** · Northwestern University

Gehrig really pops. Sustained greatness. It wasn't just all those consecutive games. It was all those games at such a high level of performance.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · February 22 at 7:20am**Pam Buda** · Realtor at Terra Firma Global Partners

Really interesting and worth spending some time with..thanks from a fellow Swarthmore alum and also a lifelong third generation Yankee fan. There are not too many teams in any sport where this would be appreciated by so many.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · January 23 at 6:53pm**Frank Giancola** · ★ Top Commenter

Very interesting. Thanks for the work involved and posting. I've often had questions about this very topic.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · January 23 at 9:09am**Michael Levinson** · ★ Top Commenter · Miami Beach Senior High School

What I like about the guest postings is that you never know what you are going to get. This was certainly interesting. Thank you for the posting.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · January 23 at 7:36am**Ed Conde**

Great chart. Thanks for posting.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · January 23 at 7:23am**Pat Scopelliti** · Works at Xerox

Without a doubt, this is one of the best charts I have ever seen. It presents so much information in a clear graphical way that is very easy to interpret. (Could almost be put in The Visual Display of Quantitative Information by Edward Tufte)

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · January 23 at 6:17am**Barry Lane** · ★ Top Commenter · Owner at 4 Directions Entertainment Ltd.

The graph is an unreadable bore. The worst single item I've seen on Lohud.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · January 23 at 6:38am

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