From Office Boy to Chairman of the Board

Eddie Ford was born in New York and remembered being a Yankee fan from the time he was 5 years old. Eddie was so baseball crazy that he refused to attend his local high school because it did not have a baseball team. He chose instead to ride a bus two hours a day to attend a vocational school which had a team. The school was supposed to train Eddie to be an aviation mechanic, but he was there to play baseball. The lefty thrower gravitated toward playing first base and pitching, and when he attended a Yankee tryout camp during his senior year, he listed his position as first base.

Famed Yankee scout Paul Krichell noticed Ford’s strong arm in the fielding drills and told Eddie, who at the time was 5-foot-9 and 150 pounds, that he was too small to make it as a first baseman and would do better to concentrate on pitching. Krichell showed Eddie how to improve his curve and sent him home. When Ford graduated, no team was interested in signing him. He got a job as an office boy with an insurance company and kept working on his pitching in a local semi-pro league. He continued to improve and caught the attention of three teams when he won the championship game 1-0 in ten innings, on a 2-hitter with 18 strikeouts. The Yankees, Red Sox, and Giants all offered him contracts. Whitey bluffed the Yankees into outbidding the Giants by $500, but if push had come to shove, he would have taken less money to sign with his beloved Yankees and possibly get the chance to play with his idol Joe DiMaggio.

Eddie went to his first spring training with the Class A Binghamton Triplets, managed by Lefty Gomez. The former star pitcher could not be bothered to learn the names of the pitchers who were likely to be farmed out to a lower level, such as 18-year-old Eddie Ford, and noting Eddie’s light blonde hair, Gomez simply referred to him as “Whitey” and “Blondie.” It was “Whitey” that stuck.

With a mediocre fastball and breaking stuff that was still a work in progress, Ford was sent to a Class C team and was so unimpressive that his minor league salary was cut by 20% for the next season. But Whitey grew an inch and gained twenty pounds, which improved his fastball. Combined with his greatly improved curveball, he began pitching well and climbing the ladder. Over the next two seasons (1948-1949) he was 32-13 with a fine 2.16 ERA. The next spring he started off in AAA but in late June was promoted to the Yankees. When he debuted on July 1st, the 21-year-old was thrilled to be in the same lineup with his boyhood hero Joe DiMaggio. Working as a spot starter and reliever, Whitey was 9-1 with a 2.81 ERA — the best ERA on the staff among pitchers with as many innings. Manager Casey Stengel was so impressed with the youngster that he started Ford in Game 4 of the World Series. Whitey clinched the Series with a 5-2 victory in which the two runs he allowed were unearned.

The kid’s progress suffered a lengthy detour when he was drafted into the army and missed all of the 1951 and 1952 seasons. When he returned in 1953, DiMaggio was retired and replaced by a 21-year-old kid who would be Whitey’s best friend in baseball for the rest of his career, Mickey Mantle.
Whitey immediately became a mainstay in the Yankees’ rotation, and by age 26 (1955) was recognized as their best pitcher when he led the league in wins and his 2.63 ERA ranked second in the league. The next year he led in ERA and winning percentage, followed by an off-year when a sore shoulder disabled him for most of ten weeks. Whitey was fabulous the next season (1958) through August 8th. He had thrown a career-high seven shutouts and was 14-5 with a league-leading 1.66 ERA, which reduced his career ERA to a brilliant 2.49, by far the best of any pitcher during his career to that point.

But Ford was also on pace for new career-highs in complete games and innings, and all his seasons of relying heavily on his signature pitch, his great curveball, led to a sore elbow. He did not win again that season, posting a weak 3.82 ERA in his remaining 7 starts and then pitched poorly in the World Series. Ford made some adjustments and pitched reasonably well the next two years, averaging 14 wins with a 3.06 ERA in a reduced workload.

Because Casey Stengel had used Ford in a 5-man rotation and generally tried to keep his workload down, Ford had never been a 20-game winner under Stengel. When Ralph Houk took over the team in 1961, he put Ford in a 4-man rotation, and with the newly expanded schedule that gave Ford 10 extra starts. Blessed with great run support — the Yankees scored 5 runs or more in two-thirds of his starts — Ford led the league with 25 wins despite finishing 10th in ERA, his worst finish in his eight qualifying seasons thus far in his career.

Expanding his repertoire with illegal pitches, Ford continued to pitch well in Houk’s 4-man rotation through 1964, and led in wins (24) a second time in 1963. Whitey began to slow down at age 36 in 1965, which was his first qualifying season in which he did not finish in the top ten in ERA. He pitched only part-time the next year, just 73 innings, due to a circulation problem impeding the blood flow to his arm. It was surgically corrected and he got off to a brilliant start in 1967 with a 1.35 ERA in his first five starts. But in his next outing he had to leave after three innings due to excruciating pain in his elbow. He skipped a start, and when the pain was still there in the first inning of his next start, he never pitched again, announcing his retirement less than 10 days later.

Whitey Ford’s career ERA of 2.74 is the lowest of any pitcher in the Live Ball Era with at least 3000 innings. Leading some of the greatest Yankee teams in history, his .690 career winning percentage is the highest of any pitcher under the modern rules.

The Yankees were so good and business-like in dispatching their inferior competition, it was written that “Rooting against the Yankees is like rooting against U.S. Steel,” which at the time was the number one steel corporation in the world. Catcher Elston Howard had no problem with the team being perceived that way and gave Whitey Ford his famous nickname of “Chairman of the Board.”
Was the “Chairman of the Board” really a former office boy? Yes. During his time in the army there was a small article about how Whitey Ford had once worked for an insurance firm as an office boy, and that the company comically assured him his old job would be waiting for him when he got out of the army if the Yankees didn’t want him.

Most of the obituary articles on Ford mention, or at least imply, that the great sportswriter Jim Murray was behind a quote that said “Rooting for the Yankees was like rooting for U.S. Steel.” That’s not quite true. The belief likely relates to an article that Murray wrote in the spring of 1950 — when Ford incidentally was still a minor leaguer — that was headlined “I Hate the Yankees.” While that quote was not in his article, the idea behind the quote was a sub-theme in the column and Murray specifically made a comparison of the Yankees to some dominating corporations. Jim wrote: “For my money the Yankees were and are super champions for the same reasons General Motors or U.S. Steel or Standard Oil are super businesses.”

The actual quote that caught on a few years later used “Rooting against” rather than “Rooting for,” and interestingly makes the point either way about the team’s dominance. It first appeared in print in *The Sporting News* on October 21, 1953, with writer Harold Rosenthal writing that he heard it in the World Series press box, but did not identify from whom. He likely heard it from Tommy Holmes — the writer, not the ballplayer — who was in the press box representing *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. Holmes reported in his own column having heard the clever line in the stands during the World Series from comic actor Jimmy Little, who later gained fame as Sergeant Grover on the Phil Silvers Show. Holmes likely shared Little’s line in the press box.

Comedian Joe E. Lewis is said to be the author of the “Rooting for” version, but that claim was not made until June of 1958. The line by Lewis was likely inspired by the “Rooting against” version that had already been around for five years, or possibly he based it on the theme in Jim Murray’s article eight years earlier.

Whitey loved being a Yankee and could hardly believe how his life had turned out. In his autobiography he wrote: “It never was anything I imagined was possible or anything I dared dream about when I was a kid growing up on the sidewalks of New York. I never really thought I would make it as a kid because I always was too small.” On Whitey Ford day at Yankee Stadium in 2000, he said, “I’ve been a Yankee for 53 years, and I’ll be a Yankee forever.”

Whitey was delighted to be inducted into the Hall of Fame the same year as his good friend Mickey Mantle.

Ford initially seemed headed for the most common of baseball nicknames when newspapers started referring to the minor leaguer as Eddie “Lefty” Ford. It was harder for the “Lefty” nickname to catch on because it was already the nickname of the most famous Yankee pitcher at that time, Lefty Gomez.

Whitey Ford was well-liked by his teammates. He was a consummate professional on the diamond and a fun guy to be with off the field. I thought he was among the most witty players of his generation. I have been impressed with the many stories that make it clear that Ford treated people well, but it has always stuck in my craw that pitching for “U.S. Steel” he felt justified in cheating when things got tougher for him. He started off throwing a mud ball, and then graduated to throwing a scuff ball, with catcher Elston Howard surreptitiously cutting the ball for him on a sharpened section of his shin guards. Ford went so far as to create a phony wedding ring that had a rasp like surface on the palm side with which he scuffed the ball.

Ford, of course, pitched in the original Yankee Stadium which greatly favored left-handed pitchers. His career ERA at Yankee Stadium was just 2.58, largely due to his home run rate being reduced by over 30% at Yankee Stadium. Casey Stengel saw that Ford’s ability and style made him especially tough to beat when the home run threat was reduced. In 1954 Stengel correctly deduced that it was worth altering the rotation from time to time to get Ford more starts at Yankee Stadium, and on the road to keep Ford from pitching in Fenway Park, where lefties were vulnerable to homers, while increasing his starts at Comiskey Park, which was the toughest home run park in the league. For the rest of Stengel’s career managing the Yankees, from 1954 to 1960, Whitey had 14.3% more starts at Yankee Stadium than on the road. In those seven seasons Stengel allowed Ford to start at Fenway Park just four times, compared to twenty-one starts at Comiskey Park. Ford’s career ERA at Fenway Park was 6.16. It was 2.48 in Comiskey Park.

Ford’s pitching style relied heavily on throwing what the batter was not looking for. He commented, “You would be amazed how many important outs you can get by working the count down to where the hitter is sure you’re going to throw to his weakness, and then throw to his power instead.”

I realize it is odd to do an article on Ford without mentioning his pitching in the World Series. That is being saved for the next story.