

The Business of Baseball

An Interview with Jean Afterman, Senior Vice President and Assistant General Manager, New York Yankees

EDITORS' NOTE Jean Afterman is in her 21st season as the Yankees' Assistant General Manager and 11th as Senior Vice President. At the time of her appointment, she became only the third female to hold the position of Assistant General Manager in Major League Baseball history. Afterman has been an integral part of the Yankees' efforts and operations in Asia. In her first year with the Yankees, she was instrumental in developing the club's relationship with the Yomiuri Giants of the Japan Central League and signing three-time MVP Hideki Matsui. In 2007, she joined team President Randy Levine and General Manager Brian Cashman on a week-long trip to Asia that concluded with a working agreement with the Chinese Baseball Association. She once again joined Levine and Cashman in 2010, when the Yankees brought the 2009 World Series trophy to Tokyo, Beijing, and Hong Kong. While in Hong Kong, Afterman was given the honor of throwing out one of the ceremonial first pitches at the 2010 Phoenix Cup, an annual international women's baseball tournament. Her contributions and leadership have been repeatedly recognized throughout her baseball career. She was selected as one of the "50 Most Powerful Women in New York" by the New York Post in 2003 and 2007, and was named one of the 2004 "Power 100" by Sporting News. In 2007, she was profiled as one of Crain's New York Business' "100 Most Influential Women in New York Business," and in 2008, she was noted by Forbes as one of the top female executives in baseball. In 2010, Afterman



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was named by WISE (Women in Sports and Events) as one of the "Women of the Year," and was tabbed by New York Moves magazine as a "Power Woman." In 2013, she was again profiled on the front page of her hometown newspaper, the San Francisco Chronicle. In more recent years, Afterman was named one of Street & Smith's Sports Business Journal's 2017 "Game Changers," and her story was featured on the YES Network and ESPN.com. She was named one of Crain's New York Business' "2019 Most Notable Women in the Business of Sports," and was awarded Baseball America's "2019 Trailblazer of the Year Award," becoming the inaugural winner of the honor. In 2021, she was again honored when she was recognized by the Sports Business Journal as one of its class of 2021 members of "The Champions: Pioneers and Innovators in Sports Business." Afterman is a frequent guest speaker on the topics of women in sports and the business of baseball, having participated in events sponsored by Major League Baseball, Columbia Business School, New York University, SABR, Beyond Sport, the Sports Lawyers Association, and WISE, among others. In 2018 and 2019, she was a member of the Steering Committee for the Integrity and Impact Award presented at the BT Sport Industry Awards in London. Afterman joined the Yankees with a diverse business and legal background, focusing on international sports and licensing with an emphasis on U.S.-Japan matters. Earlier in her career, she managed her own practice, providing athletic representation and management with a specialization in

arbitration proceedings. From 1994-99, Afterman was General Counsel at KDN Sports, Inc., and handled business and legal affairs for international baseball clients, including Hideki Nomo, Hideki Irabu, Masato Yoshii, Alfonso Soriano, and more than 30 Major and Minor League players. Afterman has maintained an active role in the Bronx community, working closely with P.S. 35, an elementary school within walking distance from Yankee Stadium. For more than a decade, she organized Yankees-sponsored Read-A-Thons and directed a mentoring program which matches Yankees employees with fourth and fifth grade students. Additionally, she worked with high school-aged students through New York City's Explorers program, which engages young people through career-orientation programs. She received the 2009 "Exploring Leadership Award" for her work with the group. In 2012 and 2013, she served on the Board of Trustees of the Women's Sports Foundation, and in 2015, she was appointed to serve on the advisory committee that oversees the Commissioner's Front Office and Field Staff Diversity Pipeline Program. In 2018 and 2019, she served on the Board of Directors of DREAM (formerly Harlem RBI) and in 2020, she joined the Board of the Major League Baseball Players Alumni Association. In 2021, Afterman joined the Board of Beyond Sport. A graduate of the University of California at Berkeley, Afterman was the recipient of the Rosalynn Schneider Eisner Prize and the Mark Goodson Scholarship Grant. She received her JD from the University of San Francisco School of Law. In 2009, she was named "Alumni of the Year" by the Katherine Delmar Burke School in San Francisco.

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Did you always know that you had a passion for the game of baseball and what has made the sport so special for you?

I was always a baseball fan – I spent a lot of time in the bleachers at Candlestick Park in San Francisco as a child. But candidly, no, I did not have a passion for the game of baseball. Growing up, I had a passion for history, for theater, for music and poetry, for acting, for a lot of other non-baseball things, and I still do. When I started working in baseball in 1994 as a player-agent, I developed a passion for the business and the legal aspects of the game of baseball. Don't get me wrong, I love watching the game of baseball and I am still a fan of the game – I think it is the best sport in the world. One of the things that I love most about our game is that it is a social event; it is a game that you go to with family or friends and you actually connect with people around you. It is a game of strategy, on the field and in the front office, much like chess – if I move my Rook, am I exposing my Bishop? The stratagem involved in keeping and maintaining an effective roster, while also developing young players for the future, requires a lot of thought and preparation – a lot of Rooks and Bishops get moved around.

Will you provide an overview of your role and areas of focus?

I have a dual role as business and legal affairs for Baseball Operations. I am the General Counsel for Baseball Ops, as Brian (Cashman, New York Yankees General Manager) refers to me, and so I cover rules, regulations and compliance for the Major Leagues, Minor Leagues, Player Development, Pro/Amateur/International Scouting, Contracts (player, employee, vendor), Grievances, Arbitrations, etc. – any legal, quasi-legal, rules or compliance issue that arises out of or affects any part of the baseball side of our organization passes my desk. I am also involved in trade discussions, acquisitions, etc., but not as a talent evaluator. I had been a player-agent and when Brian first hired me in 2001, he told me that he didn't need or want another scout or talent evaluator – lucky for me, because I am neither – as he already had plenty of those. He wanted me to essentially do the same thing for the Yankees as I had done for my players. I am fortunate to work with an amazing and talented group of people, all passionate about baseball and all passionate about the New York Yankees.

What has made the relationship between you and Brian work so well?

Ah, now that one is hard to define! Mutual respect, honesty, a mutual sense of humor, length of our relationship – we have certainly had tremendous Yankee highs and tremendous Yankee lows – and survived them all. Brian is the best General Manager in sports, one of the most collaborative, and one of the smartest men I know. He has my respect and my loyalty, and frankly, it's just very intellectually and professionally satisfying to be his Assistant GM – and at this point, after 20+ years, I hope he would say the same about me.

What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership and how do you describe your management style?

Leadership, by definition, has to mean that you are either leading people to something, or leading them away from something, so you have to be very clear about what the goal and vision is, and consistent with that as well; hopefully, inspire people to follow you in those goals and that vision. You have to be consistent in your leadership and management, and you have to be fair and be able to understand the other side, even if you don't agree with it. My view is that there is no problem that cannot be solved, that words matter. You can also lead by example of course – actions do sometimes speak louder than words. Respect matters, both the giving of it and the earning of it. I think that theme should run through leadership – that respect is something that must be earned, and sustained. I hope that my management style reflects that. When I left Paramount Pictures to go to law school, my boss, Dick Stenta, who was an amazing producer and line producer, told me, “I am going to give you the secret to success: return your phone calls and pay your people.” I have tried to follow that advice.

Are there strong opportunities for women to grow and lead in professional sports?

Working in professional sports is a matter of brain power, and brain power is gender-blind. It depends on how one defines the word “opportunity.” Can a woman do every job in professional sports? The answer is a resounding YES. But at the moment, no, I don't think that a woman is presented with or permitted the same opportunities in professional sports as a man. And some professional sports have an appalling record when it comes to its treatment of women once they join the ranks. In recent years, I think that MLB

has done a great job in providing women and diverse candidates with the opportunities that had been denied them in the past. But it's 2022, and women are still fighting the same – or in some cases, worse – battles for equality in this country and around the world.

You have achieved much success in your professional career. Do you enjoy the process and take moments to appreciate what you have accomplished?

Thank you for the kind words, but I don't know that I ever thought, or think, of it in those terms. I view it as just do the job and the rest follows. I grew up in a household where boys and girls were treated equally, and my parents instilled in all of us that we had the ability to do anything, so long as we used our minds. Louis Pasteur said that “chance favors the prepared mind” and I have tried to live by this. I have been given amazing opportunities in my career and fortunate to have had people, such as Don Nomura and Brian Cashman, who recognized something in me and believed in me and gave me the chance. It was an honor to represent the players I represented, working with Don. And working for the New York Yankees has been a singular honor and a privilege that I don't take lightly. I recognize that fortune smiled on me in all of this, and I was prepared.

What advice do you offer to young people interested in building a career in professional sports?

First, remember that chance really does favor the prepared mind, and if you are given your shot, make sure you are ready to take it and excel. Second, education means everything. Many times, women still have to be bigger, better, smarter, and faster than a man to get the same job. Going to law school changed the entire course of my life – it may not be for everyone, but for me, it was a game-changer. And I have said before, and I will say again: the business of sports is not for the faint of heart. It is rough-and-tumble, competitive, and swallows your life. So, you have to understand that going in, and be willing to commit to this life, 365/24/7. During my first spring training with the Yankees, something arose that I was not happy about, and I called my parents, spewing and sputtering. My dad said to me, “Well, this is what happens when you serve Rome – the question is, do you want to serve Rome?” – my father, a classicist, meant ancient Rome. I made the decision that I wanted to serve “Rome,” and that has made all the difference for me. ●