



Tens of thousands attend the April 2007 campus memorial service

VA Tech's Yankee Day

John Pinkman

Blacksburg, VA - This was one of the greatest days in the history of College Baseball. The day was so sad and so joyful at the same time. It was a study in contrasts at many levels.

The morning of April 16, 2007 began as most mornings in the quite little collegiate town of Blacksburg, nestled in the blue ridge mountains of VA. It's a beautiful campus and a gorgeous place to live. But by noon life would change forever for more than 35,000 faculty, students and staff. It would also permanently change for the parents and families of 32 students and faculty members whose children and spouses were shot dead in the worst school massacre in U.S. history. The sickest part of that sentence is the word "worst". The fact we have other shootings to compare defines tragic.

George Steinbrenner watched TV that day just as many across the country did. Without having any direct connection to the VA Tech community he opened his heart and his organization to aid the horror stricken university. Whatever you thought about him and his team, whatever you thought about MLB selfishness or indulgence...change it.

Steinbrenner called his sons and senior staff together, and "in moments, maybe 4 or 5 minutes" as his son Hal said, decided to donate **\$1,000,000** to the VA Tech Survivors Fund. But that was not enough. Hal Steinbrenner recalls his father saying that they needed to do more. So they decided to take the Yankees to Blacksburg and play an exhibition game. What follows was the greatest day I have ever witnessed for MLB and College Baseball.

It cannot start, however, without trying to recall in you, that sense in the pit of your stomach, that hollow feeling deep inside when you cannot express your emotions with words as you fight back the tears; that moment when sorrow and anger conflict, as you look to comfort so many and blame others.

This great baseball day was in memory of innocence.

1. Ross Alameddine, 20
2. Jamie Bishop, 35
3. Brian Bluhum, 25
4. Ryan Clark, 22
5. Austin Cloyd, 18
6. Jocelyne Couture-Nowak
7. Dan Perez Cueva 21
8. Prof. Kevin Granata, 46
9. Mathew Gwaltney, 24
10. Caitlin Hammaren, 19
11. Jeremy Herbstritt, 27
12. Rachel Hill, 18
13. Emily Hilscher, 19
14. Jarrett Lane, 22
15. Matt La Porte,
16. Henry Lee
17. Prof. GV Loganathan, 51
18. Prof. Liviu Librescu, 76
19. Partahi Lumbantoruan, 34
20. Lauren McCain, 20
21. Daniel O'Neil, 22
22. Juan Ortiz, 26
23. Minal Panchal, 26
24. Erin Petersen, 18
25. Michael Pohle, 23
26. Julia Pryde, 23
27. Mary Karen Read,
28. Reema Samaha, 18
29. Waleed Shaalan
30. Leslie Sherman
31. Maxine Turner
32. Nicole White



Photo: HokieSports.com

Immediately upon arrival, Yankees pay solemn visit to the Campus Memorial

The Day the Bronx Bombers Came to Town

March 18, 2008 the Yankees came to Blacksburg. Immediately upon arriving on campus the team visited the Memorial located on the Drill Field directly in front of Tech's most recognizable building - the towers of Burrus Hall.

The press conference featured Hal Steinbrenner, A-Rod, and Jeter, Joe Girardi. They each spoke of their personal feeling at the monument.

Hal Steinbrenner: "I'm a parent and it is unfathomable what those parents must be feeling."

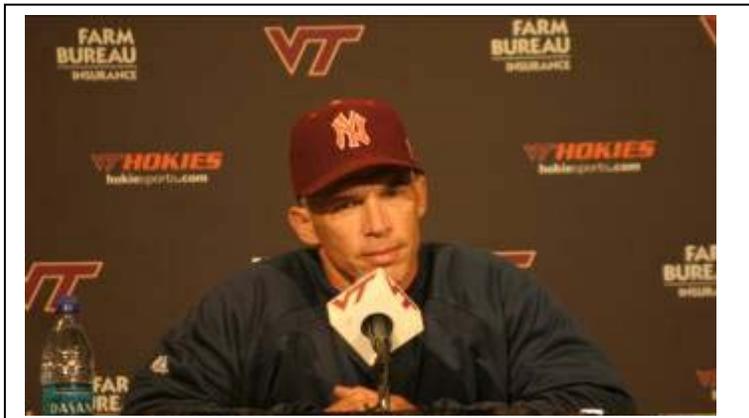


Photo: HokieSports.com

ARod wearing special
Yankee Hat in Hokie Colors

Alex Rodriguez: "This is the most important game I've played in my Yankee career." Choking back tears, ARod shared a meeting he had at the monuments earlier that day. "this girl comes up to me and asked me to sign her boyfriend's picture, (as he is signing it) she says thank you; he died in the shooting last year. I think it is very important for us to be here and unite with them for at least one day. Baseball can be a medicine... it can fix things for a short time. I wish we were here for something else."

Derek Jeter was asked by another girl for a picture with Derek next to the 32 Hokie Stone Memorials that the students on campus initiated. (Hokie Stone is the name of a particular type of stone used to build most of the campus buildings.) "Where should we stand?" he asked. "Can we please stand over here, next to my fiancé's stone?"



A reflective Yankee
Skipper, Joe Girardi

Joe Girardi: “When we visited the memorial it was very moving to me; it brought tears to my eyes. But to think what the families and the university went through ...and now that I’m a father to think about the anxious moments of parents (waiting to hear about their children that day) and those families whose children were lost must have been very difficult. There was a ton of emotions with all the players at the monuments. I’m sure this day will stay with our players for a long time.”

Batting Practice

As somber as the press conference was, batting practice turned into a celebration. I have never seen pro ball players more gracious and needing, yes needing, to talk to and be with the Tech team and baseball fans in the stands. Jason Giambi kept thanking the team and fans over and over. Every player must have had hand cramps from signing autographs for hours. Talk about a Kodak moment, *Yankee players* wanted to have their pictures taken with Tech students.



Posada signed everything in sight

The Hokies shared the field with the Yankees during BP. While each Yankee took his turn at the plate, others devoted time to talk with groups of players. The spirit was amazing. Every Yankee player, coach, and executive was extremely approachable and friendly in such a comforting way. Yes, these are some of the most famous people in the world, but that day you would never have known it. Everyone was just a ball player.

GM Brian Cashman, a former Catholic University player, told me he thought that it would be a great experience for his pros to look into the eyes of the collegians and see the love of the game, how they took the field each inning and how they welcomed players back to the dugout, slapping high 5’s for the smallest reason. “It takes time to organize and plan an event like this. You get caught up in the planning process. We were looking forward to coming but we had no idea that we would find such campus resilience. As we get on the bus tonight each of us will leave with much more than we thought. This was very meaningful to us.”

The Tech players hung on every word they heard and every nuance they saw in the cage that day. One Hokie said, “Did you see how loose and soft his grip was his top hand? He barely held the bat...and then how fast that bat moved... and far that ball went!”

Not many college teams east of Omaha get the media attention that the Hokies received that week. It culminated in BP. They handled it like true professionals.



Starting Pitcher Andrew Wells covered with media

English Field is not accustomed to crowds that large. Thousands of students and faculty vied for the hottest ticket on the east coast. The joy of being on the field that day will never pass from my memory. I’m sure the day did so much to help soothe tender memories of last April.

Game Time

Just prior to the game, 32 very large orange balloons were released on the outfield warning track. The students carrying them were spaced several feet from each other but they covered the track from foul line to foul line. The visual image could not be photographed adequately to convey the spirit of the stadium as the ever present Blacksburg wind soared them into the sky, each representing a lost friend or child.

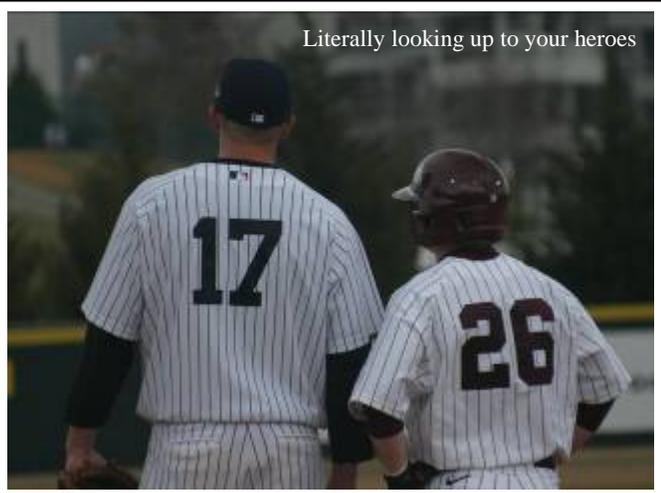
How do you prepare for a game like this? Or play a game like this? Do you prepare a game strategy or tactics? Not a chance. You coach nerves and anxiety. You tell players to keep breathing. As starting pitcher Andrew Wells passed by me on his way to the mound I reminded him -- it’s just another guy with a stick.

Easy for me to say. Think about this for a moment. Andrew was about to face the top of the Yankee order in front of the largest crowd (by thousands) who ever attended a Hokie home game: Damon, Jeter, Abreu, ARod, Giambi, Posada. That’s enough don’t you think?



Starting Pitcher Andrew Wells

The Hokies took the field in special Pin Stripe uniforms made especially for the day. They also wore Yankee emblem hats, but in unique Hokie colors of Chicago Maroon and Orange. When asked how the Tech team played, Girardi said, “I was impressed. You got to know they were nervous. I tried to put myself in the starting pitcher’s place when Alex steps to the plate in the first inning with bases loaded and the score board says ...**Alex Rodriguez 3 time MVP** in big red letters.” He had that coach’s grin as he went on, “what was even better is the memory I know he takes with him for the rest of his life as he got Alex to SAC fly and Jason to hit into a double play to end the inning!” After pitching his one inning for the day, Wells came of the field with the look on his face somewhere between joyous relief and the fatigued adrenaline rush of pitching a complete 9 inning game.



The stadium was absent of standard home or visitor sentiment; just cheers no jeers. For a Yankee game that’s unique. Girardi in his driest sense of humor said “you know the Yankees are not necessarily welcomed everywhere we travel. It’s unusual to be cheered when we were introduced.” That’s the way the game went. If you didn’t see who was up you’d never know who was batting by the sound of crowd cheering so loudly.



Posada shares a moment with 1st base coach and former Manager of the Year Tony Pena

The Yankees took the game as seriously as the fans and Tech players hoped they would; but seriously having fun too, as only a true professional at that level can.

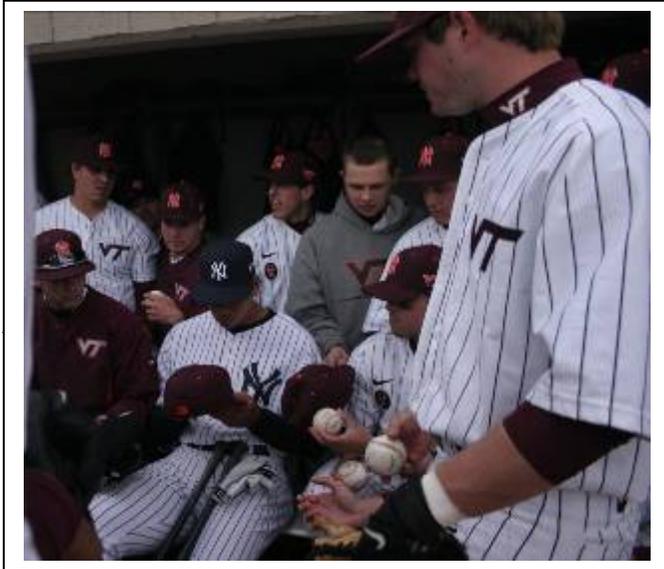


After lining out on the first pitch of the game Sean O'Brien can only smile and wish it was just a little bit higher.

Photo: HokieSports.com

Leadoff hitter Sean O'Brien hit perhaps the hardest hit ball of the day for either team. His screaming line drive to deep left center off the first pitch of the game had *double* written all over it. The Hokie fans went wild as the wood bat and the ball collided. Its solid echo bounced off the wall and into the Blue Ridge Mt. air in a way not heard in the aluminum world of college baseball. But similar to the Mighty Casey, it was snagged by centerfielder Melky Cabrera in a tragically effortless manner that only a major leaguer can do.

The seven inning game was indeed a real ball game. But what was going on in the stands and dugouts was remarkable. ARod walks over to the Hokies dugout and spends two innings talking to players, signing autographs and giving them anything that he could modestly remove from his body.



ARod in Hokie Dugout



Terry Duncan climbs into the stands via the top of the Yankee dugout and is mobbed by Tech fans while Damon.

Coach Joe Girardi coached a few innings from the 22nd row with Frank Beamer, Tech Football Coach, who, due to knee replacement surgery, could not come to the dugout. While they were there a young girl asked Joe to sign a picture of her brother. She said “my brother died in the shooting last year and my mother wanted me to come and say thank you to the team.” Joe broke down after that.

Locker Room Memories After the Game

The Yankees were impressed with the character of the Tech Players. VT Head Coach Pete Hughes said, “I came here (from Boston College) and knew there were good people, but during the tragedy I found out how great they really are. What a pleasure to be part of such a tight knit community as this.” Hughes had been on the job less than two months when the shootings occurred. I had heard from the players how Hughes had made such a big impression during those days. He confirmed it. “I had all the players come and eat out my house during the days after (the shootings). If we didn’t hear from them, we tracked them down to make sure they were ok. Those seniors who were here last year were very special kids. They came to practice every day and answered every (press) question after April 16 with class. It’s a shame, I wish those kids could have played today.”

Coach Gambino (or Beno as he is called) said, “We didn’t want to be out there, the kids didn’t either, but we knew we had to.” Tech baseball was the first campus event after the tragedy. They knew it meant a lot to the campus to unite in sports. “In light of what happened, how can you get mad at a kid when he makes an error or strikes out on a bad pitch?” said Beno. He said it was in a strange way very hard to coach the remainder of that season. On one hand trying to win games and the other never forgetting it was only a game in relation to the massive tragedy.

Senior second baseman **Matt Hacker** began his career at Tech with now retired legendary coach **Chuck Hartman**, adjusted to the new coach Pete Hughes, experienced April 16th, and played seven innings against the Yanks - a bit of a collegiate roller coaster experience. He remembers, “I was really impressed by how comfortable the Yankee players made me feel. They would talk to me as if I were on their roster with them (hanging around) in the club house. One day I’ll be able to tell my children I hung in there against the best baseball players in the world!”

Senior first baseman **Sean O’Brien**, who rocketed a blast into the long arms of Cabrera said, “well that’s the way my season’s been going. I’m hitting it hard but right at people, why would it change against the Yankees?! I was leading off and thought I’d see the best pitch to hit right off, so I was sitting on the fastball. I really thought I got a hold of it. Buuuut!?”

Sean, how did you feel about the Yankees? “They are really 1st class people. Each one that came to first talked to me as if I were their friend. **But this wasn’t about us.** We were just lucky enough to play them. **They came here for the whole community** - the fans and the students, and that’s what they made it for.”

The Wrong Life Altering College Experience

The murderous tragedy that occurred on the VA Tech campus will undoubtedly alter the lives of thousands of students and faculty. They will never be the same. Some will change majors. Some will drop out. Some will write books and lecture in their classrooms about the experience. It will never go away. Many will see the faces of their friends frozen in the time of their death as they themselves age through life.

As I made the four hour trip back to my home in Reston, VA I recalled that 38 years ago almost to the exact date, on May 4, 1970, I too had a college experience. Four students were shot dead and nine wounded at Kent State. That moment changed my life. That week I left baseball (for several years) after turning down a bus ticket and \$500 a month to play for Cincinnati. How could I play a game when students were being killed? Over 4 million students and faculty across the nation walked out on strike later that month in protest of the senseless killings. It is impossible for many of you to know the passionate and emotional crisis that was so broadly felt on campuses in those days of the Vietnam War after Kent State.

I learned in those days that baseball is a game that we **play**. It's not a battle or a war as many have defined. We have seen the carnage of that on campus. Baseball should not define us just because we are players or coaches. We need to bring the definition of our character to the game. For a very few of us it has become a profession and life style. Don't kid yourself; there is very little money to be made outside of playing in the majors. So it would be wise to see the game as a learning experience or a giving opportunity. Either way you will win.

The VA Tech sorrow was relieved through the kindness of the New York Yankee organization. The Yankees donated fantastic life long memories. It was a great day for College Baseball, a great day for Professional Baseball; a day of contrast to that devastating tragic morning a year ago. A day at the ball park that so many will remember, happily.

NCAA Misses Opportunity and Comes Off Looking Very Small

VT Head Coach Pete Hughes called the NCAA headquarters to seek approval to allow a number of Red Shirt players to participate in the Yankee/Tech game. This was a compassionate move by Hughes to get each of his players into the game that they all would remember for a lifetime. NCAA's response – NO the circumstances were not extraordinary. Really?