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Close Doesn't Always Count in Winning Games

By [BENEDICT CAREY](#)

AMPA, Fla. - The most extravagant collection of celebrities this side of Oscar night meets in a windowless bunker every workday before 9 a.m.

Here in their stocking feet are Jason Giambi, who has emerged at the center of a nationwide steroids controversy; Alex Rodriguez, who has been fending off insults in the news media from opposing players; Kevin Brown, the pitcher who last year broke a hand by punching a wall; and, a few lockers away, the newcomer Randy Johnson, the 6-foot-10 pitcher whose first visit to New York as part of the Yankees resulted in a public scuffle with a cameraman.

Looming nearby, always, is the principal owner, George Steinbrenner, who on Feb. 26 vented his anger at Giambi's agent, using a profanity when referring to him and producing more tabloid headlines.

Yet at the eye of this hurricane, the clubhouse feels as sleepy as a back porch on an empty afternoon. This is not a team on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Nor is it one that - like its archrival, the world champion Boston Red Sox - exhibits the kind of passionate team cohesiveness that analysts and many sports psychologists consider critical to success.

But social scientists who have studied group performance under pressure say that often it is decentralized groups (like the Yankees) that prove more resilient than strongly connected ones (like the Red Sox); they are better able to weather outside criticism and internal quarrels.

Evidence from personality profiles and from studies of military, corporate and space flight crews suggests that looser ties between group members can be a strength, if the team includes individuals who can generate collective emotion when needed. And the Yankees have several of them.

"So much of psychology and sociology emphasizes the importance of communicating and creating strong bonds to improve group performance, but in a lot of situations that is just not how it works," said Dr. Calvin Morrill, a professor of sociology at the University of California, Irvine, who has studied group behavior in competitive corporate situations and in high schools. "Baseball is an odd mix of an individual and team sport, and an ideal

example of where a diffuse team with weak ties to one another may help the overall functionality of the group."

In interviews during the first week of spring training, Yankees players said there was no single dominant personality in the clubhouse, no boisterous leader. The diffuse nature of the group seemed evident. The team's stars have corner lockers, or lockers next to open spaces, and a few of them are centers of gravity. In one corner, pitcher Mike Mussina anchors a group of pitchers and other players. In the opposite corner, outfielder Gary Sheffield centers another small group. And in a third corner, catchers Jorge Posada and John Flaherty sit. A clutch of Spanish-speaking players occupy a bank of lockers in the center of the room. Shortstop Derek Jeter, the team's captain, made the rounds of the clubhouse on his first day, then settled at his locker like any other teammate: hardly a portrait of the take-charge leader many imagine.

"You could be a fly on the wall in the clubhouse all season long, and if you didn't know already, you couldn't even tell who the leaders of this team are," Flaherty said.

Insulate the Team

But the culture in the Yankees' clubhouse seems to put the team first, in one often overlooked sense: It presumes that front-line players can handle their own problems, and that they will protect the team from controversy, rather than the other way around.

"I certainly like it" when players take individual responsibility, Manager Joe Torre said in an interview in his office in Tampa. Torre said he made it clear to players that they would not be insulated from criticism, from the news media, from Steinbrenner or from anyone else. He said that he expected players to address controversy or criticism immediately and that his role was not to shield them but to reduce the stress it causes "by letting them know that they're not the only ones getting criticized, and that it does go away."

When reporters early last month invited Yankees players to defend Rodriguez from barbed comments in the newspapers that were attributed to Red Sox players, they declined, saying the issue was between him and his accusers. A few days later, Rodriguez shrugged off the comments in interviews and even suggested a mock headline for his response: "A-Rod Doesn't Back Up A-Rod."

When Giambi, the first baseman who reportedly admitted using steroids, arrived for his first spring training workout, he entered the clubhouse just after the coaches and the other players left for the field. With his career in the balance, and his integrity under question, he faced a swarm of reporters with queries about his personal and professional life for more than 20 minutes. He was the only Yankee in the room.

Johnson, who pushed aside a cameraman on his first visit to New York as a Yankee in January, said, "My understanding of the way it works is that everything you do or say gets noticed, and if you make a mistake you are personally accountable for it." Johnson

made a public apology within days of the incident.

Winning is more likely to create team unity than vice versa, Torre has said repeatedly, and the evidence backs him up, said Dr. Richard Moreland, a professor of psychology and management at the University of Pittsburgh. Team cohesion is a hard thing to measure in the first place, Dr. Moreland said, and dozens of studies of sports teams find that, although having players who feel team unity helps performance, "it is not a strong effect, compared to the effect of performance on cohesion."

Torre puts it this way: "Look, I was on teams in St. Louis, we would go out 10 or 12 of us at a time, but we finished third or fourth. We got along, we liked each other, all that stuff, but all that meant is you weren't alone a lot."

When a common purpose is shared, loosely tied groups can function better than strongly bonded ones when it comes to containing dissent or bickering, research suggests. In studies of neighborhood organizations and corporate teams, social scientists have observed that members with weak ties can withdraw from disagreements without disrupting the group or their own work.

On a tightly knit team, by contrast, a falling out between key members can divide a squad, forcing people to take sides, psychologists say. "The idea is that any sort of problem is likely to ripple more strongly and quickly through a close group than one with weak ties," said Dr. Mark Granovetter, a professor of sociology at Stanford.

Psychologists who have studied the personality profiles of people who face far greater pressures than winning in October - including special-operations forces and astronauts - agree that those who do well share distinct qualities: they tend to be independent, confident, able to tolerate uncertainty and socialize easily with others.

"But they are not too outgoing, not socially needy, not the sort of people who need others for support," said Dr. Lawrence Palinkas, an anthropologist at the University of California, San Diego, and the chief adviser to the National Space Biomedical Research Institute, which studies spaceflight.

Whether such independent, loosely tied people ultimately succeed as a unit depends not only on strong management, researchers say, but on the presence of individual group members who can circulate through disparate parts of the team, reduce conflict and help generate collective spirit when it is needed.

In one continuing investigation of a highly diverse high school of 1,600 students, Dr. Morrill found that a single 16-year-old white skateboarder had been critical to the reduction of conflict. "He moves between black, Asian, Hispanic and white groups, and he's one of these kids who's always bringing good news," he said. "He's a very important person in this school."

The Go-To Guys

While high schools are hardly baseball teams - there aren't many A-Rods on skateboards - ballplayers acknowledge the same kinds of people can keep a clubhouse united despite multiple strong cliques. "I can attest that on the 2001 Arizona Diamondbacks," Johnson said of the team that beat the Yankees in the World Series that year, "we had a couple players like that, Craig Counsell and Danny Bautista, that helped keep us playing as a unit."

Torre says he pays close attention to who socializes with whom, and is pre-emptive if he perceives a problem between players or groups. "If I'm uncomfortable with a situation, I'll ask a player to check it out for me, because as a player you can get in where I, as the principal, can't," he said.

In the 1990's, he said, he often asked catcher Joe Girardi, now a coach on the team, to help head off potential problems between players. Now, he said, he may ask Jeter, Posada or outfielder Ruben Sierra, whom Torre sees as a kind of prodigal son. The Yankees traded Sierra away in 1996, despite his power, because of what Torre called his "self-involved attitude." Sierra later asked for his job back and returned as a backup player in 2003, a source of good cheer in the clubhouse and one of Torre's most important conduits to Spanish-speaking players.

Several players also note that Posada, who is bilingual, moves easily throughout the group and may support as well as challenge individual players, as needed. In an interview, Posada acknowledged that he would immediately approach other players if he saw them having trouble, whether mechanical, baseball-related or personal. "If I see a problem, I say something right away," he said. "I don't wait two or three days."

He may not be able to wait two or three pitches, come October. If the Yankees do go down to the wire again with the Red Sox, a single signal or word from Posada, Jeter, or Torre may be enough to change a game or turn the tide in a series. And no researcher can predict at that point which system will prevail, the centralized passion of the Red Sox or the diffuse professionalism of the Yankees.

One thing is certain for the Yankees, though: if they fail, they will face another off-season of hearing how soulless they are compared with Boston's band of brothers.