

Wearing Many Different Hats

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



Jean Afterman

EDITORS' NOTE Jean Afterman is only the third woman to hold her current position in Major League Baseball history. Prior to joining the Yankees, she managed her own legal practice, providing athletic representation and management with a specialization in arbitration proceedings. From 1994 to 1999, she was General Counsel at KDN Sports, Inc., a player-agent, and handled business and legal affairs for international baseball clients. Afterman graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in 1979 and received her JD from the University of San Francisco School of Law in 1991.

COMPANY BRIEF The New York Yankees is a premier Major League Baseball franchise, based in the Bronx borough of New York. As Major League Baseball's most successful franchise, the Yankees (www.yankees.com) have won 26 World Series Championships and 39 American League Pennants, making it the most successful franchise in North American sports history.

You wear many hats as Assistant General Manager. How do you define that role?

It's hard to define the role of Assistant General Manager in a ball club, and at the Yankees, we break the mold in every position. Everybody wears many different hats. Before I came to the Yankees, I had represented players – that's how Brian Cashman [Yankees' General Manager] knew me. He also knew that I had expertise primarily with U.S./Japan baseball

issues, players, and relations. When he brought me here, he wanted one of my jobs to be compliance officer because we are – both internally and externally – a heavily regulated industry. Because I am an attorney and former player-agent, he also wanted me to assist in contract negotiations and drafting, as well as assisting in Asia and with international baseball. In addition, the person who sits in this chair has to be able to assist the General Manager in literally all aspects of the GM's work.

In many ball clubs, the Assistant GM is a former player who knows the game. You come from the outside and have never played ball. Does that give you a different perspective?

I spent about 10 years in the theater, with occasional forays back, so when I go to the theater, I probably know a little more about what's physically happening on stage. I think it's the same thing with baseball. I have a great appreciation for the people who played baseball and are in front offices. But because baseball is now such big business, I don't think the key element to being a front office leader is being a former player.

How much of a focus is Asia for you when you look at bringing in more players and extending the brand?

My business partner, Don Nomura, and I broke a lot of barriers bringing Japanese players to the United States. Japan is a huge consumer market, and the Japanese fans are crazy about baseball. It will be interesting to see how Nippon Professional Baseball is going to survive and thrive in a world where the focus is increasingly on Major League Baseball. Both Taiwan and Korea have very active professional baseball leagues as well. China has 1.4 billion people, and those numbers have an unmistakable allure from both a business and a baseball operations perspective. China has historically produced top international athletes. Don and I used to say, when we were representing players, that we know there is a six-foot nine-inch left-hander or right-hander somewhere in northern China who can throw 100-plus miles per hour – we just have to find him. Now, I think about the Yankees finding him first.

You don't see many women in this business. Can more be done to open it up?

One of the most fundamental gender issues in baseball is that people see a woman in baseball and feel a disconnect. People don't

understand what she's doing there, and think she can't possibly be doing what they were told she is doing, especially if it's a traditionally "male" function, such as working in baseball operations front office. It's a tricky thing, because you should always hire somebody based on merit and not on gender. And I think there's a hesitancy to hire people who didn't play the game. My colleague, Kim Ng, the Assistant GM with the Dodgers, actually did play college softball, I believe. It's also difficult for a young woman to get a job in baseball, because there could be some perceived awkwardness about certain things a front office employee might do as a matter of routine, such as being in the clubhouse or trainers' room. I don't have a problem with that, because I recognize the situation and accommodate for it. Without belaboring any similarities to the theater, the same potential for awkwardness exists when men would walk into a woman's dressing-room, so I am sensitive to it. I do think Major League Baseball could do more to encourage, or even assist, qualified women to become involved in the baseball front offices.

Some people say you will, at some point, be a General Manager. Is that something you have envisioned for yourself?

It would be dishonest to say never. This may sound disingenuous, but right now I want to get as close to perfect in this chair as I possibly can. I think the decision to accept a GM job is one that has to be carefully thought out, because if you're the first or second woman GM, the truth is that you're going to be more harshly scrutinized and judged on a different standard than the average male GM. You could essentially mess it up for all the women to come, unless you are fairly close to perfect. So you can't accept a job or seek a position unless you're absolutely positive that you can fully succeed in all aspects. The margin for error is slim, and putting together a championship baseball team is neither an art, nor a science, but a little of both, with a lot of luck thrown in.

Is your relationship with GM Brian Cashman a key part of your job?

Yes. He hates it when I praise him, but working with Brian has been one of the most rewarding things about this job. Nobody else in the world can do the job the way Brian does it. I also think that if you don't get along with your GM, you're in big trouble in any organization. ●