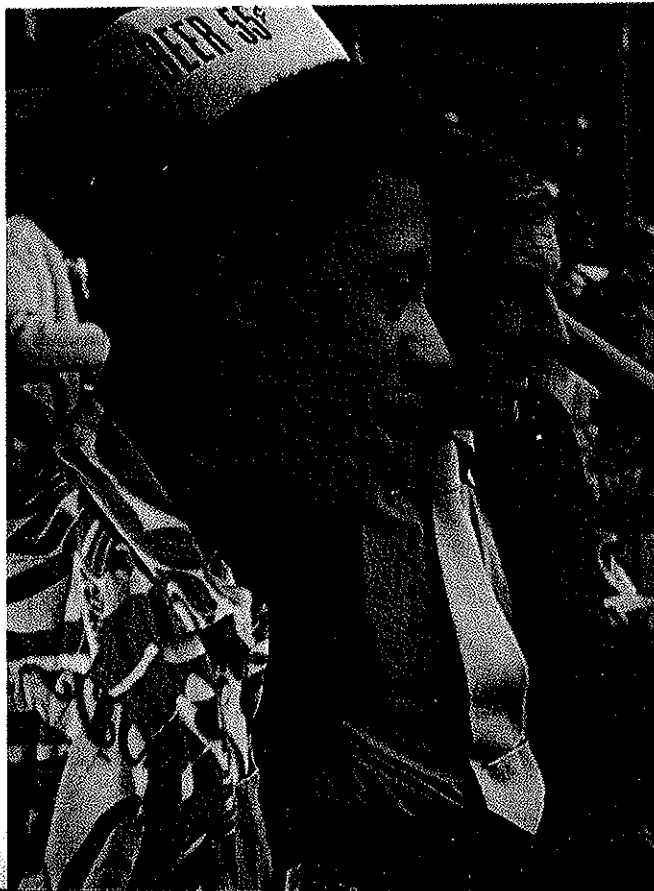


# "Hey Mike Burke, don't you wish you were the boss of the Mets?"

By Stan Isaacs

On July 8 the Mets surged into the thick of the pennant race by beating the Chicago Cubs in a gala, jubilation-filled baseball game at Shea Stadium. Later that same day,



the Yankees came up on the metropolitan area television sets losing a two-night doubleheader to the Orioles at Baltimore. The losses dropped the Yankees to 19½ games out of first place, but that was only academic. The double debacle in the face of the dancing-in-the-streets atmosphere about the Mets only underscored the difference between the once-proud Yankees and the Mets.

Mike Burke remembers the time of July 8 only too well. It marked the low point in his less-than-three-year stewardship as boss of the Yankees. To be sure, the Yankees had fallen to last place in the not-too-long ago when CBS first gained control of the team, but that was essentially in the waning of the regime of Dan Topping, following the just-in-time departure of Del Webb from the Yankee scene. When William S. Paley and Frank Stanton of the Columbia Broadcasting System installed Burke as the No. 1 Yankee Doodle Dandy, he came upon a team that had finished in last place for

Left: A Yankee president with the common touch, Michael Burke enjoys mingling with the crowd.

the first time in its 54 years, and he said things like:

"Tenth place isn't a dirty word to me. A comeback will occur more swiftly than most people think. My attitude is that the Yankees are indelibly champions and they will prove it by rising from last place just as they have come from behind during the season."

Well, that was said in 1967, and a lot of Yankee bats have swung and missed since then. Now it was July, 1969, and Burke was alone in his office on the mezzanine behind first base at Yankee Stadium. He was turning the radio off following the final out of the doubleheader debacle in Baltimore. Just how did it feel to be the No. 1 Yankee Doodle Dandy at that moment, Mike?

"I was down, all right," Burke says. "I just wanted to get away. I turned the radio off and started downtown. I'm like an animal when I'm down. I just want to go off by myself and lick my wounds." So Burke left Yankee Stadium to the bats and owls and drove down to the men's bar at the Plaza "where only the waiter might know me." He had three martinis. Then he drifted over to Patsy's on 56th Street for a mozzarella dish and a salad, and went home to bed.

The Mets won again the next day, and the Yankees lost again, sticking some more needles into the wound. "I was very depressed and very unhappy," Burke says. "I just don't like the impression to go around that the Yankees are sliding backward. Even if it isn't true and it's only an impression, it's disturbing. To the casual, and even to the ardent fan, the combination of the wonderful victory by the Mets and the losses by us that day left an impression we were sliding. Even if it weren't true—and I don't think it is true—I must be concerned because we live in a time when impressions can be more significant than the actual state of things. So it was not one of my better

Right: Tensions of the long season tell on Burke as he watches his team come up with six runs.



moments, you can be sure."

The impression was correct. At Shea Stadium the evening following the doubleheader loss—before Tom Seaver went out to pitch a near-perfect game for the Mets—Seaver mentioned that he had spent some of the previous evening watching the Yankees on television. He said, "They seemed so . . . so . . ." and he let his voice trail off, rather than damn fellow professionals. His father, a former Walker Cup golfer and a knowledgeable fan who had been visiting his son, said, "You know, they look like the old Mets."

Burke could only lament that things had seemed so much brighter at the end of last season. He said, "We were quite encouraged by our play the last third of last season. We were 32-19 with a 10-game winning streak, and we won our last two games to finish in the first division. On the basis of that, with a good pitching staff nucleus and kids like Bobby Murcer and Jerry Kenney coming out of the service, we thought we would do even better this year. But the kids haven't produced dramatically and the pitching hasn't been as strong as we might have expected, so things didn't go as well as we had hoped. We are faced with a situation where we've got to wonder if we can be tough enough for the long haul."

Other people have wondered about that for some time. Almost from the moment CBS bought into the Yankees, there have been doubts about the company's willingness to stick with the team. The Yankees are a loser and in the high-pressure corporate world; few people want a loser. So there has been talk. And talk. "Almost once a week," says Burke, "there are phone calls from people asking if it's true CBS is dumping the Yankees."

"This angers me. It annoys the hell out of me. We are in this to stay and a lot of people just won't believe that. They won't give us credit for sticking this out; they ascribe a lack of guts and courage to other people in a situation because they wouldn't have

the guts to stick it out if they were in a similar situation. They see that the Mets are having a wonderful, exciting explosive effect on the town, contrasted to our troubles, so they say CBS must be wringing its hands in despair. They attribute gutlessness to us.

"Oh, I'll admit there are days when we lose six in a row, when it's tough to screw up your guts to get up and go back to the job. After days like that doubleheader loss, I get disheartened and depressed, but not discouraged. It always comes down to knowing that you'll have to slug it through and that's just what we'll do."

Talk persists. The Yankees hold a meeting that prevents Burke and associates from getting out to see one of the games, so there is press-box conjecture that it is a meeting to sell the club. "It was," says Burke, "merely a meeting of the Yankee Foundation, a charity to distribute equipment to sandlot youngsters all over New York, and it ran late." A radio man with a high opinion of himself calls and says, "I've just heard on the very best authority that Paley is bringing in a man from the West Coast to run the Yankees."

"Bull," says Burke. "Where can they get anybody to do it better than me?"

"Look," says Burke, "I've been in tough situations all my life. If I hadn't, I might not be here today."

Burke, wearing a blue denim shirt and a flannel tie with the wide knot that he prefers, was sitting in his tasteful Stadium office. It is large and bright; the modern look of the couches and glass and walnut coffee tables is set off by prints of old baseball games. In the bookcase is a healthy sampling of baseball literature, some standard reference works, and Burke's current reading fare—two books by Eldridge Cleaver, a Jacques Servan-Schreiber book on DeGaulle, a Ross MacDonal novel, and the recent Carlos Baker book on Hemingway which includes anecdotes about Burke with Hemingway. "I seem to be dabbling in

my reading these days; I seem to be so wrapped up in this job, I don't read any of them through at one setting."

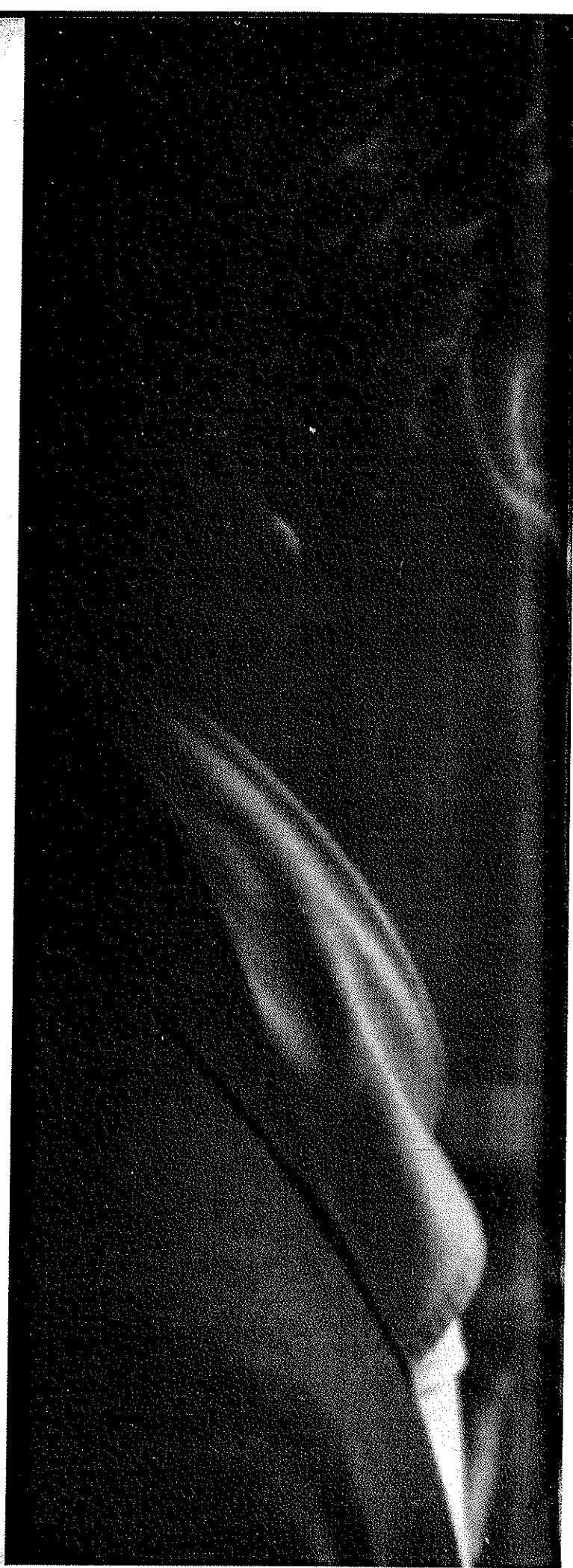
Burke is 52, only a few pounds heavier than the chap who carried the ball as a six-foot, one-inch, 180-pound halfback at Penn. His shock of steel gray hair and long sideburns top off his good looks. He is a dude who uses expletives as comfortably as he wears his threads. He has been around the block.

Burke was born in Enfield, Conn. He went to Kingswood Prep in West Hartford and to Penn on football scholarship and earned points in scholastics as well as on the football field. During World War II, Burke was an O.S.S. officer whose heroics on the Italian beach before the British invasion of Salerno in 1943 got him a medal and inspired the Gary Cooper movie, "Cloak and Dagger." He has been a film editor and writer; adviser to the U.S. High Commissioner for Germany, John McCloy; general manager of the Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus; and an outrider for CBS who directed the CBS European operation, helping bring about the company's investment in "My Fair Lady."

If all this suggests that Burke is a man's man—whatever that may mean—he is also a woman's man. He laughs easily, his humor is self-deprecating, he digs the arts and young people, he knows his way about good restaurants. He is, you might say, the executive hipster. To which he responds, "If by 'hip,' you mean being alert to what's happening around us, then I suppose I would qualify. My antennae work pretty good on the contemporary scene." Richard Helms, the head of the CIA who knows Burke from cloak and dagger days, called Burke "The last of the Renaissance men." Burke was more comfortable when told he was, at heart, "a jockstrap." "A jock who has read a book," he said.

For all the twitter in baseball circles about

Right: Burke takes time out to discuss the finer points of the slider with the younger set.



the flash of Burke's dress; it delighted a few people that when Burke showed up—casually elegant as ever—at President Nixon's White House reception for baseball people during the All Star game, his blue-and-white striped shirt was frayed at the collar and cuffs. The President with whom Burke shook hands on the receiving line was the same man he once had briefed about conditions in Europe when Burke worked under McCloy, and Nixon was a hotshot Senator boning up for Senate business on Europe.

Burke was kidded about this. "You were an almost All-American halfback at Penn and Nixon was only a scrubbini who never got into a game for three years at Whittier College. Where did you go wrong?"

Burke laughed and recalled a meeting with Nixon in Europe. The press of business had forced Nixon to convert a dinner date with Burke into an 8 AM breakfast chat. Burke rolled in late the previous evening—he takes a drink—and he came to breakfast hung over. It turned out that Nixon was bleary-eyed, too, and both laughed about having gone through with a breakfast each would rather have slept through. "It was one of the few times I've seen him come across as a real human," Burke said.

Burke's heartiness produced instant rapport with Ernest Hemingway. They met between planes at the bar in Foynes Airport in Ireland during the war. Hemingway asked who would like a gin and tonic. Burke accepted. "We had drinks and talked. It was an accident of chemistry that we hit it off and became friends." Carlos Baker's book on Hemingway describes a few occasions when Hemingway playfully challenged Burke at football, and his attempts at tackling the ex-halfback. Burke gave Hemingway the leg-crossover move an old halfback never forgets, and Hemingway grabbed a handful of air.

Ex-athlete Burke likes athletes. "I'm struck by being close to the baseball action. Close up, your sense of appreciation for the good player is heightened. When you watch those

pitchers throw—when they really let out the cork—it is hard to conceive that anybody can hit the ball. The appeal of baseball is fundamental. It is one man with a ball against one man with a bat. In other sports, you can fake it. In football, 90 per cent of the fans don't know if a man has made his block or missed a tackle. In baseball, a man is naked and exposed. It is absolutely basic and true."

Nor does the "Renaissance man" find it at all difficult to be involved with an enterprise no more earthshaking than baseball. "Not in the least," says Burke. "One searches for what he can do well and enjoy. It's important to be able to apply full talent and energy and a full mind to an objective. We are all governed by an accident of circumstance. I'm totally absorbed in this. What more can you ask?"

Well, meaningfulness, for one.

"I've devoted myself to a lot of meaningful things. I fought a war when it was my generation's turn to fight a war. I gave more than three years to the government's high commissioner's office in Germany, and my work enlarging the CBS structure could be described as meaningful if communications are at all meaningful. Now, in my view, the goal of giving New York the finest in baseball has sociological ramifications at a time when people are increasingly surrounded by steel and pavements, and are in need of the relaxation baseball brings."

In the face of the formidable challenge to win a pennant, Burke must reassure himself that the moves made so far have been correct ones, because the daily standings aren't always comforting. On the other hand, while the team's position represents no success story, Burke has turned things around in the front office. When he took over, Yankee Stadium reeked of dreariness. The last years of the Topping-Webb regime had seen the whole apparatus run down. All the arrogance of Yankee dynasty years seemed

**Right:** The best-known Yankee makes his rounds, attracting more attention than the game.

to come back to haunt the club and there was no great sympathy in baseball about seeing the once-proud lords of the game sinking into the gutter.

For Burke, an urgent concern was the "absence of a sense of joy about Yankee baseball." He moved with dispatch to remedy that. Operating in the manner—if not the flamboyance—of Bill Veeck, he has brought as much a measure of good feeling to the Stadium that a lousy baseball team will permit. The Yankees have instilled courtesy and gladness into their operation. They have been among the most enthusiastic in staging giveaway days—handing out bats and balls and helmets with the relish of the oldtime movie operators staging dish nights. They have made the final tributes to Mickey Mantle tasteful; they showed an appropriate awareness at Yankee Stadium when the Astronauts landed upon the moon. They have had a few exciting innovations like birthday parties, complete with cakes, for youngsters right in their grandstand seats. The ploy that seems to bear the particular stamp of Mike Burke is coming up with an off-beat personality to throw out the first ball at the Opening Day festivities. In 1967, he called in Marianne Moore from the culture bullpen in recognition of her eminence as a poet and baseball fan. This year he reached into pop music for Paul Simon of Simon & Garfunkel because it was Simon who wrote the song "Mrs. Robinson" with the lasting line, "Where have you gone Joe DiMaggio?"

**The sight of longhaired Simon throwing out the first ball disgusted some of the stadium Neanderthals, but it helped make a segment of the swinging young set aware that the Yankees are still alive.** Said Burke, "It seemed quite appropriate to invite Paul Simon. After all, who has sung so gloriously about a Yankee in recent times?"

While Burke has changed the climate around Yankee Stadium, he admits the Yankees "have been fairly orthodox" in their approach to the baseball end of it. He agrees that the sense of hubbub around

the Yankee front office these days is not reflected on the field or in the dugout.

**"If anything, I've been over-cautious in expressing my own opinions and ideas and thoughts about baseball matters per se.**

I have had respect for the fact that Houk and MacPhail spent their entire lives in baseball while I'm in it only a short time. This has been a learning period for me," Burke says.

There comes a restlessness in any intelligent man for action in the face of failure, and associates have wondered if there hasn't begun to be something of that itch in Burke. Recently, he watched batting practice for a while and wondered idly if the batting practice pitcher could do something more than just serve up soft, straight pitches. He questioned whether it might not be more helpful to have the pitcher try and simulate game conditions to help sharpen up batters who certainly needed sharpening.

Burke was told they would probably have to carry an extra pitcher on the team to do that; that nobody else did it; that it was never done before. The words "never been done before" pained Burke and left him muttering and wondering about a lack of verve that is something less than the tone he wants to see in the Yankees.

If Burke would like to be daring, while his manager is a traditionalist—what the trade calls "a good, sound baseball man"—that in itself does not imply an incompatibility that is bad for the team. Awhile back, the Yankees prevailed *uber alles* when a flamboyant manager, Casey Stengel, worked with a grim general manager, George Weiss. Yet, it is possible the Yankees may need a shaking up that is alien to Houk, who won three pennants in as many tries because he had extraordinary personnel and was smart enough not to tamper with it. Since stepping down from an unproductive tenure as general manager—coaxed adroitly enough by Burke—Houk has operated in *laissez faire* fashion with personnel not so sparkling. The players

admire and respect him for giving them every chance to prove themselves. In certain similar situations, though, other managers—like Leo Durocher in Chicago—have made bolder judgments and moved quickly to shake up their teams. There is beginning to be some question about what kind of medicine the Yankees need.

Houk's contract runs out this year, but Burke has given no indication that anybody but Houk will be managing next season. Figuring out what will happen would be a mind-reading act, but the Yankees are floundering before the Mets in New York town. **They are in need of an elixir. A new manager? A black manager? The acquisition of the controversial Richie Allen?** Burke does not want to press any panic buttons, yet he is concerned about "the impression the Yankees are sliding" and he is not afraid to try something because "it never has been done before."

Meanwhile, it is the time of the Mets and possibly Burke's reaction to the Mets success tells something about the man. There are days now when Burke hates to go down to the garage to get the car and drive up to the stadium from his apartment on Madison and 89th Street. People are solicitous enough. They also say things like, "The Mets won again yesterday; don't you wish you were the boss of the Mets?"

Burke says, "Even though I am disappointed that things haven't gone well with us this season, I love the Mets. I am rooting for them to win the pennant. I run the Yankees, but I am also a baseball fan and a New Yorker and I can see what joy they are bringing to this town. Also as a human being, you have to root for the ugly duckling to turn into the prince and marry the princess and the Mets are the ugly ducklings come to life."

You know what talk like that is? It's subversive. It's unfair to Yankee haters.

**Being a Yankee hater in New York is not something that came lightly.** It took decades and decades of suffering from rooting against the Yankees; of thinking, time after time, they had been beaten, only to see them

rise up and whale the bejabbers out of the opposition. Being a Yankee hater meant suffering Mickey Owen; Don Newcombe pitching to Yogi Berra; Johnny Pesky of the Red Sox not scoring from third base on a single; Billy Martin catching Jackie Robinson's pop fly; the day of rain that aided the Yankee pitching in the 1951 World Series. It meant rooting against the clutch-hitting, great-fielding, arrogant, Bronx Bombers-of-Mel Allen, goddamn lucky Yankees.

And now—now that the Yankees are bloody and bowed, down and out, now that the Yankees are, as Tom Seaver's dad said, "like the old Mets," what about right now? Well, they are in the hands of a swinger and a fan; they are in the hands of a human being.

If the Yankees win again, there may be, as Burke promises, a greater sense of joy around Yankee Stadium. But something will be missing and that probably will be Mike Burke's fault. There won't be an army of anti-Yankee fans to root against Burke's Yankees.