

Checking in with Joe Girardi, today's honorary captain. . .

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In 2007, Northwestern alum Joe Girardi was hired as manager of the New York Yankees, choosing to wear No. 27 on his uniform as a symbol of his wish to lead the organization to its 27th World Series title. The next year, the former Northwestern baseball player did just that, guiding the Yankees to their 40th American League pennant and 27th World Championship in 2008.

Girardi, who won three rings during his celebrated 15-year career as a big-league catcher, is known now for his staunch stance and stoic gaze in the Yankee dugout. But look past the pinstripes and you'll find a man filled with humility and inspiring determination. His success over the years has not come by accident.

"[Joe was] disciplined, dedicated and somebody who just loved to play the game," said Northwestern head baseball coach Paul Stevens, who was an assistant during Girardi's time at NU. "He was as genuine of an individual as you could find with tremendous time management skills and work ethic."

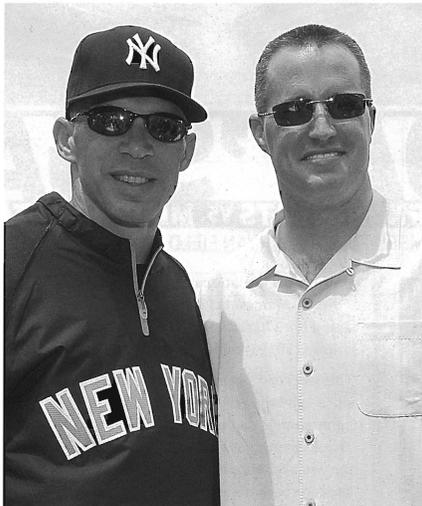
Girardi discovered a passion for baseball at the age of six while playing in the backyard with his father and brothers. He began playing on the Little League fields of Peoria, Ill., shortly after, and by the time he reached his senior year of high school, he was looking at a number of schools to play his college ball. A visit to Northwestern in June 1982, however, changed everything.

"At the time [of my visit], my mother was sick with cancer. Education was always extremely important in our household, and when Coach [Ron Wellman] offered me a scholarship, her eyes lit up," Girardi said. "I knew that was the place for me."

Girardi was a tireless worker who "left no stone unturned," according to Stevens, when it came to his athletics and academics. His work ethic was infectious; he was the first freshman to be elected president of a fraternity and his three-hour study sessions at the library on weeknights soon became group events with teammates.

"Even back in college, I think a number of us knew that not only was he a really good ballplayer but [that he] was going to be a great manager," said Grady Hall, who was a

pitcher in the same class as Girardi. "He just had that instinct. He had that command of the game from a strategic standpoint and he was able to motivate others."



Joe Girardi with NU head football coach Pat Fitzgerald

The pitcher describes what their team shared as an "unbreakable bond," one that manifested itself off the field. When Girardi's mother Angela died after a battle with cancer the summer before his junior year, several current and former teammates traveled great distances to attend her funeral in Illinois.

"It's the support that I've always had from my teammates that has been unbelievable," Girardi said.

Even years later in 2006, Hall organized a surprise reunion at Girardi's home during a tough time in Girardi's managerial career—a testament to the team's lifelong friendships.

"I think the thing that stands out the most for me about Joe Girardi is his compassion for people, his genuine caring for the people around him. He's someone who has always taken the time to make time for whoever and whatever situation might be in anyone's life besides his own," says Stevens. "Family has always been extremely important to him and the players on his team were definitely family to him. That's the way he thought about it then and that's the way he thinks about it now."

By the time he graduated in 1986, Girardi was a three-time All-Big Ten catcher and three-time Academic All-American. His love for numbers had led him to earn a degree in industrial engineering, a skill set that only enhanced his ability to evaluate hitters and opposing pitchers. Girardi would also meet his future wife, Kimberly Innocenzi, during his senior year at NU, confiding in his teammates after only one date that she was the girl he would marry. The couple now have three children: Serena, Dante and Lena.

"Northwestern really has shaped my life and who I am," Girardi said. "When you're 17 years old and you're thinking about baseball in college, I don't think you realize the importance of the academic institution that you picked and how those four years in college are going to shape the rest of your life. I had a wonderful time. I had great teammates. I had a great example in Ron Wellman. I had great coaches."

That bond has kept Girardi a part of not only Northwestern baseball but Northwestern football as well. In 1995, the success of the 'Cats on the gridiron kept Girardi up into the wee hours of the morning to catch game scores when he was overseas. He remains a loyal fan and a good friend of head coach Pat Fitzgerald.

"I didn't really see [Fitz's] love for the game and the passion that he had until I saw him on the sidelines," Girardi said. "I have so much respect for that because I truly believe that he gets it, that he cares about his players more as individuals than what's going to happen to him. I just love watching them play because I think they play with his character and his heart."

The two men have developed a close friendship over the years, connected by a bond that comes only from being a Wildcat. "He's just such a tremendous leader," Fitzgerald said of Girardi. "To see the professional career he had and then to read about his work ethic, his demeanor; the way he approaches the game of baseball and the way he leads his players—a lot of it is by example. It's great to have one of the greatest Wildcats in program history come back. It's very fitting: Senior Day, Thanksgiving, playing the top team in our conference. To have Joe here is very special."