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Money talks, Mussina walks

By Ronald Blum
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — After beating the rest of baseball on the field, the New York Yankees beat everyone to Mike Mussina.

"It just came down to who really seemed to want me on their team the most," Mussina said Thursday after agreeing to an \$88.5 million, six-year contract.

The deal gives the three-time defending World Series champions a starting rotation that includes Roger Clemens, Andy Pettitte, Orlando Hernandez and Mussina. With just 16 players signed, New York's payroll is \$80.4 million.

"It probably isn't fair," Yankees manager Joe Torre said. "But, again, George Steinbrenner has had winners here in New York and he probably thinks about how to keep doing it."

Mussina, who turns 32 on Dec. 8, compiled a 147-81 record with a 3.53 ERA in 10 seasons with the Baltimore Orioles. He gets a \$12 million signing bonus payable over six years, \$8 million in 2001, \$9 million in 2002, \$10 million in 2003, \$14 million in 2004 and \$17 million in each of the final three years.

New York has a \$17 million option for 2007 with a \$1.5 million buyout, and Mussina gets a complete no-trade clause.

And he's not even the ace.

"It's been a long time since I wasn't considered the No. 1 starter from the first game of spring training," he said. "We might go to the playoffs next year and I might not even get a chance to pitch. That's how strong they are."

The rest of baseball took notice.

"It makes it very difficult," Seattle general manager Pat Gillick said. "They've got two or three No. 1s now."

Last week, Mussina cut his finalists to the Yankees, New York Mets and Boston Red Sox. After Thanksgiving, he decided the Yankees were his first choice.

On Monday, he drove to Rye Brook, N.Y., for his physical, and Torre and general manager Brian Cashman took him to dinner in Greenwich, Conn.

Mussina's agent, Arn Tellem, negotiated by telephone Tuesday and Wednesday, then traveled from Los Angeles and concluded the deal Thursday morning. Tellem said he could have pushed the dollars higher by extending negotiations, but his client instructed him to conclude a deal with the Yankees, wanting to reciprocate the interest they showed him.

"New York was the best fit for me," Mussina said. "It came down to who I was most impressed with, and I was most impressed with the Yankees. Joe Torre called me not even a week after the World Series, before he went on vacation. To me, that was a pretty big gesture."

He walked past a life-size picture of Babe Ruth when he went into the news conference at Yankee Stadium. The Yankees brought Torre to the news conference along with Hall of Famer Yogi Berra. They presented Mussina with uniform No. 35 — Berra's first number before he switched to No. 8, which has been retired in his honor.

The Yankees gave a box of roses to Mussina's wife, Jana, then gave her presents to take home to the children in Montoursville, Pa. —

including a Yankees Barbie doll and teddy bear. Mussina said he felt like a high-school athlete being wooed by colleges.

"It seemed like every guy on the team called," Tellem said. "Every day, he'd tell me who called."

With a \$14.75 million average annual value, the deal makes Mussina the second- or third-highest-paid pitcher in baseball, depending on how Clemens' new contract is evaluated.

While Clemens and his agents consider his \$30.9 million extension a two-year deal that averages \$15.45 million, the Yankees say it's a three-year contract that averages \$10.3 million.

Mussina also trails Kevin Brown of Los Angeles, who averages \$15 million under a \$105 million, seven-year contract.

The only position players with higher average salaries are Toronto first baseman Carlos Delgado (\$17 million) and Atlanta third baseman Chipper Jones (\$15 million).

"With the signing of Mike, we should have another chance to make a run at the World Series again next season," Pettitte said.

Mussina, who has won 18 or more games four times, is 3-4 with a 3.45 ERA in 10 career starts at Yankee Stadium. He went 11-15 with a 3.79 ERA for the Orioles last season.

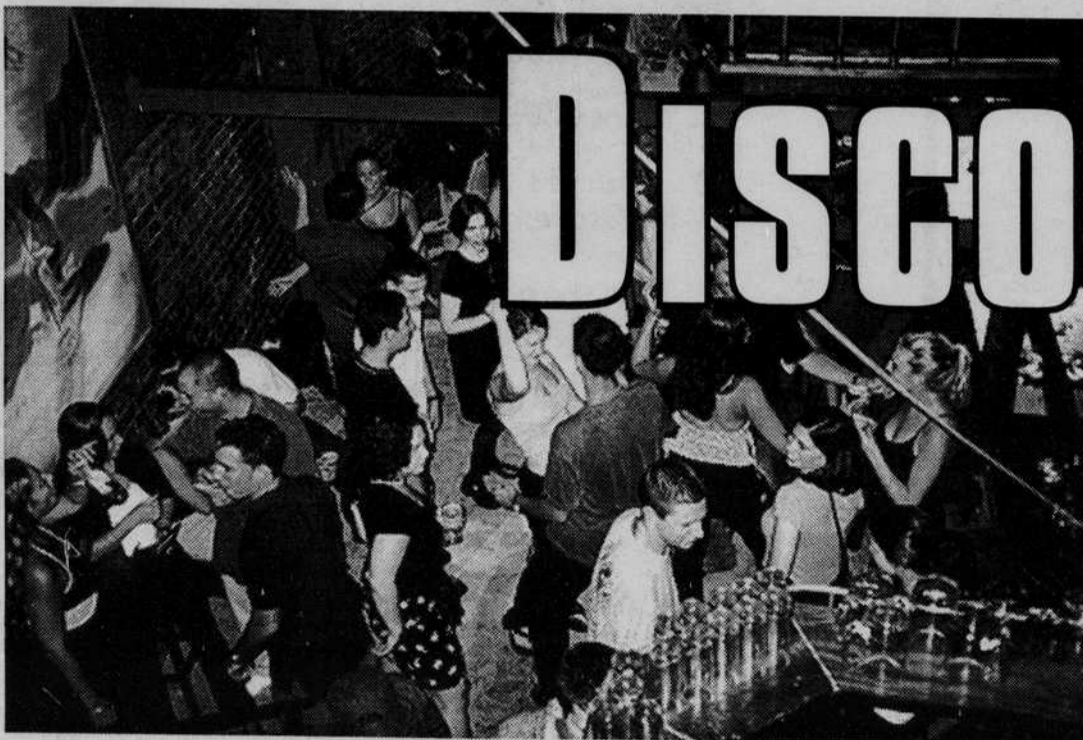
"Losing Moose, it's like a lot of fans have been stabbed, and that wound is going to be hard to heal," Orioles pitcher Chuck McElroy said.

"We're all disappointed he's not coming back ... but not surprised," manager Mike Hargrove said.

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