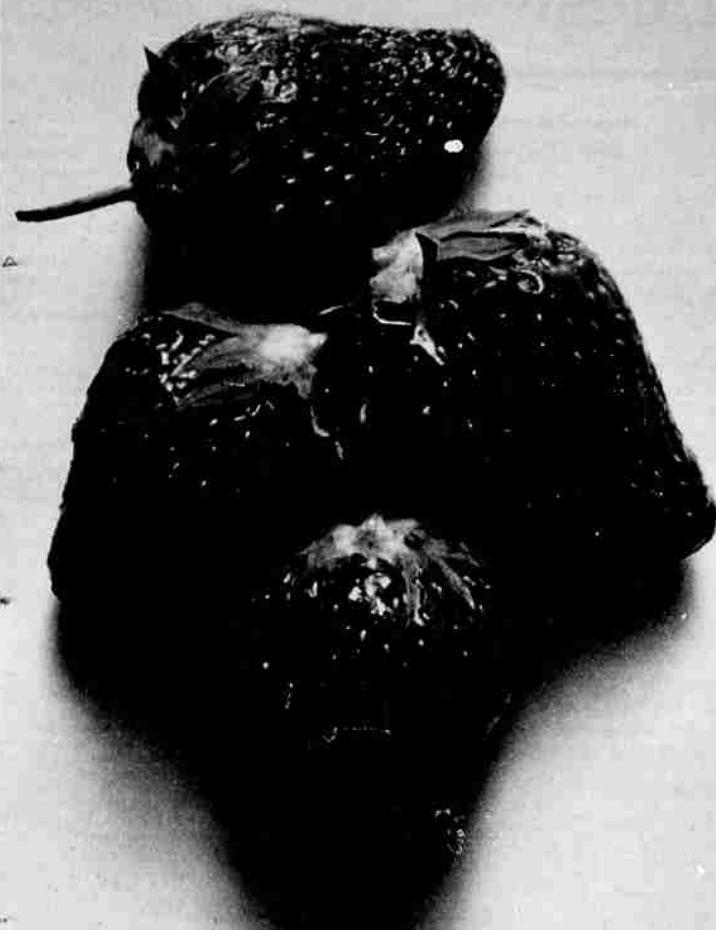




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SPORTS

Roger Maris—



What made the cheers
are Raj's chances of winning

LAST SEPTEMBER, cheering fans made Roger Maris step from the New York Yankees' dugout to take an unprecedented bow after hitting his historic 61st home run.

Today the sight of his No. 9 can shake a stadium with boos as leather-lunged bleacherites bellow at his reddening neck.

Fickle fandom has turned many heroes into villains but seldom with the vengeance reserved for "Raj." And Maris is much too honest to deny it bothers him.

"How do I like it?" he repeated my question. "How do you think I like it?" And there is enough bitterness to show that the small-town boy who was genuinely embarrassed by last year's adulation is genuinely disappointed by this year's vilification.

Clutching a soft-drink bottle as if it might be some tormentor's

neck, he will tell postgame interviewers that booing is "part of the game" and that much of it can be explained because of a slow start this spring which sent his batting average under .150.

But Maris' soft-spoken philosophies vanish when he talks about "a few, a dozen or so fans among all the thousands out there." These hecklers, he says, shaking his boyish head, "get rough; they get vulgar even about your family." His voice trails off, but his silence is tough and sour—even tougher than some of the retorts he has fired back at hecklers in the 75-cent seats.

THIS LAST HABIT of Roger's gives a clue to why he has become the-player-you-love-to-hate—and how, within the limits of ingrained stubbornness and suspicion, he is trying to become a baseball favorite again.

In a lifetime of athletic prowess, Roger Maris has consistently played into the hands of the fans, writers, and dugout jockeys who feel part of sportsmanship is sticking pins into sacred images. In high school in Fargo, N.D., for example, he and his older brother Bud, now his business manager, were stars in football, baseball, track, and basketball. But the pair felt they were being downgraded by a new football coach. Other athletes might have worked harder to convince the coach he was wrong. Not the Maris boys. They switched to a rival high school.

The Maris combination changed Bishop Shanley High School from underdog to all-around winner. The most delicious victory was over the coach who snubbed the Marises—Roger caught two touchdown passes from Bud for the win. The coach lost his football assignment, and the teen-age Marises chortled in triumph.

They could never understand why local sportswriters felt they had showed poor sportsmanship, and even today Roger is puzzled because he has never made it as a home-town hero. He claims he



When bothersome boos led to dangerous bottle tossing, Maris had to be led back to work by umpire.

The Story Behind the Boos

go sour for the slugger who set a home-run record last season—and what back the popularity he deserves? **By JACK RYAN**

doesn't care: "I live in Kansas City now (actually suburban Raytown where he has just built a sprawling new home), and that's what counts. Most of my friends are there."

The Fargo incident helped deepen Maris' natural suspicions of anybody who questions what he does. It also convinced him that if he could take on Fargo and win, he could take on anybody. When the first boos reverberated on his sensitive eardrums last season, Roger was advised to ignore them. Instead, he said:

"They (the boosers) are a lousy bunch of front runners, that's what they are. Hit a home run and they love you, but make an out and they start booing. I have as much love for them as they've got for me." Later, he said he wished he had apologized for the remarks. But he never did.

ABOUT THIS TIME, the jeers swelled mostly around fellow slugger Mickey Mantle, but 10 years with the same scapegoat is wearying. Besides, Mickey, once hot-tempered and graceless, had mellowed with experience. He could now flash a disarming,

freckle-faced smile at barbs and fend off bothersome questions with an ingratiating backwoods humor. The gods of sport had delivered Roger Maris to the sacrificial altar on schedule, and Maris was most obliging.

"If people are going to like me," Maris says, "they'll have to take me as I am. My friends understand me. The others don't count."

This may have been true in Fargo with the Maris boys standing against half the town. But now Roger stands alone in right fields across the nation in what amounts to open warfare kindled by newspaper communiques: "Maris the Whiner, a Threat to Yank Pennant," and "A Bushy, Says Rogers Hornsby of Mr. Maris."

His unpopularity so overwhelmed Maris this spring that he ran from clubhouse to apartment like a hunted man. Manager Ralph Houk finally called for a truce among sports writers, at least. Houk got the truce, and since then Maris has falteringly attempted to bring out the side of him which inspires great loyalty among teammates and unquestioning affection among family.



Critics call Roger sullen, but wife Pat says he's good-natured. Susan (on Dad's lap), Roger, Jr. (center), Kevin (right), and Randy (not shown) agree.

And it is team and family that motivate Roger's efforts at a new look, not any personal capitulation. For example, Roger was accused falsely of hurting the team with his feuding. Actually, he's a favorite among the cliquish Yankees. In the television room of the Yankee clubhouse, a wide sofa accommodates weary players after a game. Anybody can sit there, but tacitly it's reserved for the most respected and best-liked players.

After one recent game, Maris stopped to congratulate John Blanchard on a game-winning homer. He was the last man in the crowded tv room—but a spot on the sofa awaited him, between bantering Mantle and Moose Skowron.

THE IMPORTANT reason for Maris' more expansive mood is his family—his wife Pat (whom he met at Bishop Shanley) and their four children, all under five. In his more despairing moments, Roger has admitted he looks on baseball chiefly as a way of winning financial security for them; there is little love and no sentiment toward his career. But he is stuck with it for the next 10 years or more—and, much to his chagrin, so are Pat and the kids.

"Do you think I like to have my parents and wife read things about me that aren't true or are all mixed up?" he asks. "Do you think I like to have my wife call me up and say, 'Your father wants to know what's going on—what's the matter?'"

The Marises obviously have been hurt by Roger's battles more than he has been, and Roger would rather stifle his inclination to fight back than upset his closely knit family.

By himself, Maris might go through life stacking chips on his beam-length shoulders, but he realizes now he is not by himself. What he says or does hurts those he likes and loves more than it does his detractors.

"I'm Roger Maris, nobody else," he frequently explains, "and I can't change that." But those who know his devotion to team and family think he's overestimating his surliness and characteristically playing down the nice-guy side of a deserving hero.

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