

At 73, Bobby Richardson seems to have reached his prime. His glory days with the New York Yankees, his highly successful run as baseball coach, his equally laudable tenure as an athletics administrator—all just an extra-innings prelude to this season in the Sumter native's remarkable life.

How can that be?

Perhaps it's simply the blessed residue of a life well lived. Perhaps it's that an extraordinarily gifted man has found new gifts. But it is clear Bobby Richardson today can, in the vernacular of baseball, turn the double play, run the bases and, in a pinch, knock it out of the park. He just does those things now metaphorically, as a grandfather, spiritual leader, public speaker and ambassador nonpareil for the sport that gave him a livelihood, a platform and a sound preparation for this second round of glory days.

"I have 15 grandchildren, and they are all involved in basketball tournament play," he said earlier this year. "I'll come over to Lexington to watch a granddaughter play, then go up to Black Mountain,

North Carolina, to see a grandson play, then go to Rock Hill to see a granddaughter and grandson play. That's kind of the time I am going through right now."

The state that produced Shoeless Joe Jackson, one of the most notorious and controversial figures in baseball history, also produced one of the sport's all-time good guys in Bobby Richardson, who enjoyed tremendous popularity in a city—New York—known for its capriciousness in both embracing and rejecting its baseball stars. Richardson, a small-town boy, thrived in the spotlight of the big city, starting at second base for nine years.

He remembers being awestruck the first time he walked into Yankee Stadium. But he also remembers a sense of camaraderie and team loyalty that helped him overcome the rookie jitters. "The veteran players would look out for the younger players. If the Yankees got in the World Series, the older guys would vote the younger players a full share, even if the young guys had been there just part of the year."

# MVP

## Most Valuable Patriarch

### *Baseball Great Bobby Richardson Remains Active In the Game of Life*

By Bond Nickles

PHOTOS COURTESY BOBBY RICHARDSON



*The Yankees in the early 1960s had what is considered one of the best in-fields in baseball history. From left: Moose Skowron, first base; Richardson, second base; Tony Kubek, shortstop; Clete Boyer, third base.*

*Facing page: World Series, 1962, Yankee Stadium. As slugger teammate Roger Maris looks on, bat in hand, Richardson grinds home from third base on a passed ball. Jack Sanford is the San Francisco Giants pitcher. The Yankees won the Series—thanks ultimately to Richardson’s ninth-inning, Series-ending snag of a line drive that would have turned the tables. Richardson is known still as one of baseball’s finest defensive players.*

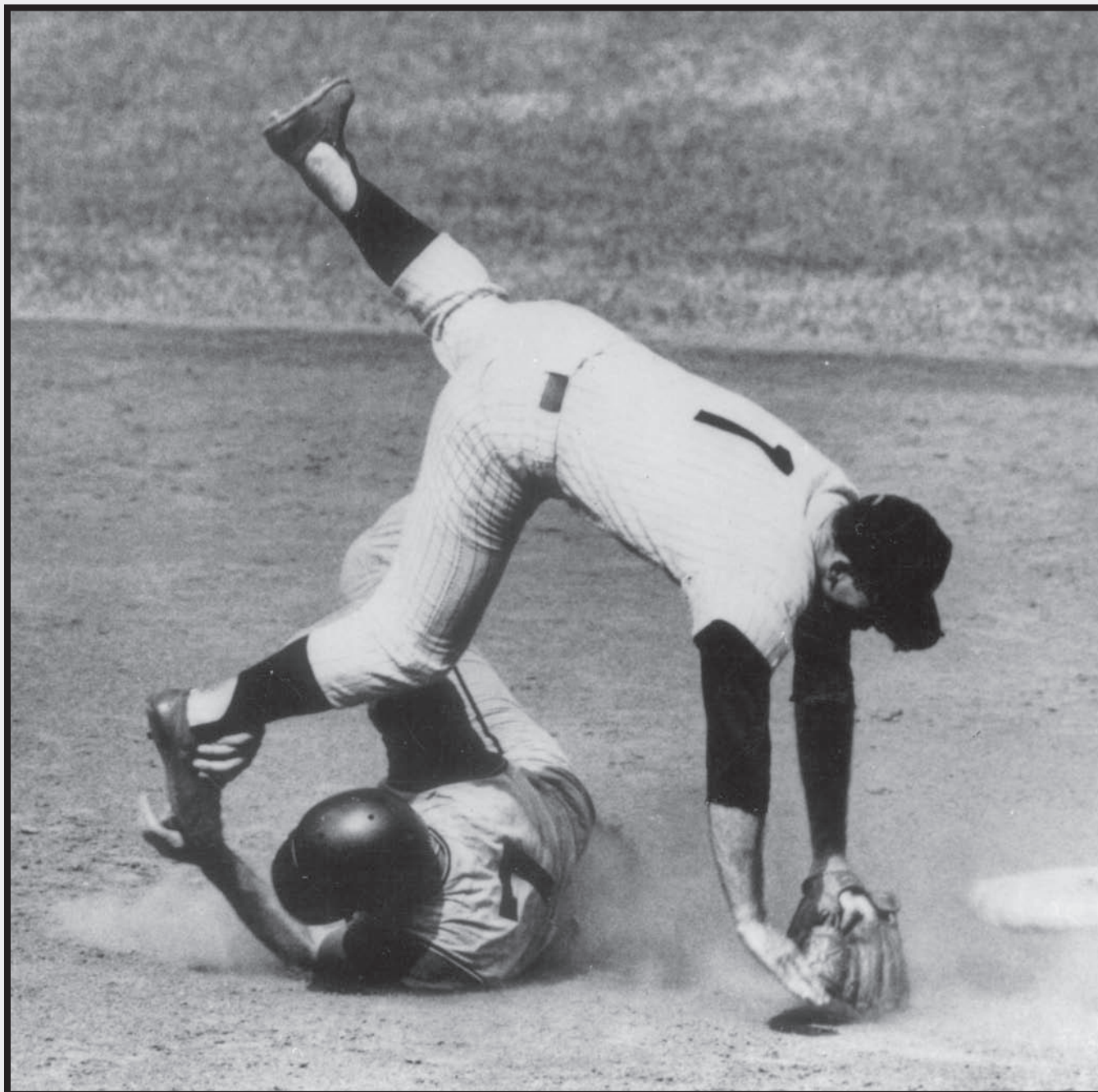
Off-the-field challenges compounded the learning process, but his Christian faith and upbringing helped him steer around newfound temptations. While some of his teammates famously cavorted through the city’s bountiful after-dark entertainment scene, Richardson kept it clean, establishing a reputation as a no-nonsense, teetotaling man of conviction.

Further aiding his growth and development was his decision to live not in the city but across the George Washington Bridge in the town of Woodcliff Lake, New Jersey. A cousin who lived in the area helped him find the place, and he ended up being neighbors, more or less, with teammates Moose Skowron, Jerry Coleman, Ralph Houk and Yogi Berra, who lived in Ridgewood, Montclair, Saddle River and other New Jersey towns. “I was in a carpool with Yogi and Moose Skowron and some of the ones like that,” he said. “I would ride over to the games with them and ride home with my family.”

He didn’t altogether escape the city without some ribbing as the team’s token goody-goody, but

there was always a firm undercurrent of respect, which grew with time as his teammates retired, aged and, ultimately, faced their mortality. Evidence of that respect is nowhere more profound than in the fact he was asked by six of his former teammates, or their families, to play a major role in their respective funerals. He delivered the eulogy and/or sermon at services for Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris, Dick Howser, Steve Hamilton, Enos Slaughter and Clete Boyer. It was at Maris’ funeral that Mantle approached Richardson and made the request. “I took a little kidding at the beginning,” he said. “But the respect was there. We had a wonderful time together.”

**R**ichardson is able to enjoy the fruit of that respect today. At his disposal are dozens of standing invitations to speak or appear at various functions, from small church gatherings to Fellowship of Christian Athletes banquets to major-league stadium openings, such as the one at the new Yankee Stadium he planned to attend when the team held



*Richardson made the double-play throw from second before getting his legs clipped from beneath him. The sliding runner is believed to be Johnny Romano, Cleveland Indians catcher. Facing page: Richardson today.*

its Opening Day in mid-April. The only downside, as he sees it, is that he has to decline attractive offers.

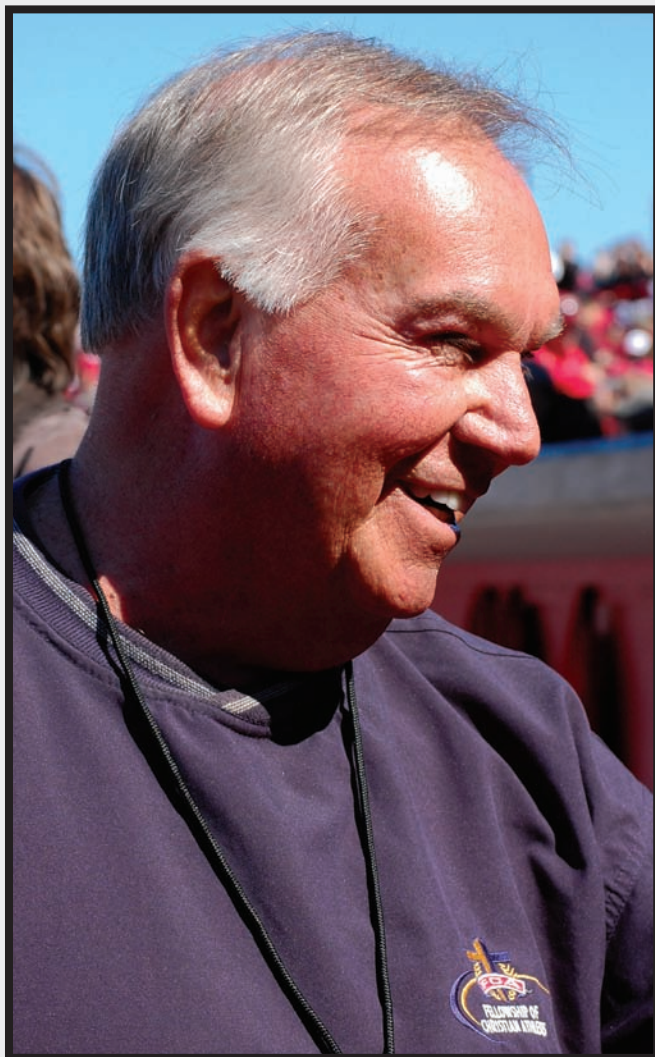
“I’ve got to be honest, when the invitations come in, and they are back-to-back, and you have to say, ‘No,’ that is a difficult thing,” he said. “Because friends call, and they think their place is the only place you’ve been invited to. So I’ve had to learn to say, ‘No.’”

One invitation he could not decline came from the University of South Carolina, which asked him to be a part of the opening ceremonies of its new baseball stadium. As the universally acknowledged

father of Gamecock baseball, Richardson took over the program in 1970, four years after retiring from the Yankees. And from basically the ground up, he created a powerhouse, ultimately making it to the final game of the College World Series in 1975.

He was asked to throw out the first pitch of the first game at Carolina Stadium, which he did last February 21, sharing the honors with university president Harris Pastides and June Raines, the coach who succeeded Richardson at Carolina.

What does he remember most about his years at Sarge Frye Field? Richardson naturally recalls that



'75 team that featured All-Americans Earl Bass and Hank Small. But he quickly notes with fondness two players from earlier teams, catcher Drew Choate and outfielder John Gambrell, who went on to seminary training and are now serving as pastors.

In baseball or sports administration for practically his entire adult life, Richardson did venture into politics after the 1975 baseball season. Although his 1976 run for U.S. Congress was not successful, he was not without his backers. Gene Autry, the former singing cowboy and owner of the California Angels, sent him his first check, for \$500, and organized an old-timers baseball game in southern California as a fundraiser for the young Republican. At the post-game dinner, Autry, slightly tipsy but wholly enthusiastic, urged attendees to cast their votes for Bobby Richardson—never mind the fact that voting for a representative of South Carolina's 5th Congressional District was not an option for California residents.

Yankee greets Joe DiMaggio and Mantle were there, and both offered their services to

the Richardson campaign. "We'll both come across the country, at our own expense, and do anything you like," Richardson recalled one of them saying. "Neither one of them knew which ticket I was on, but they said it didn't matter."

The two old centerfielders both made good on their offers. DiMaggio showed up for a barbecue in Sumter that attracted 3,000, and Mantle came to a rally in Rock Hill. "I'm not sure Mantle helped me quite as much," Richardson said, recalling his former teammate's penchant for mischief, "because we got in a motor home, and he got on the CB radio and said he wouldn't vote for Bobby for dogcatcher. And then he started laughing."

Richardson lived in Asheville for two years after the election, teaching and coaching girls basketball at Ben Lippen School, then moved to Bradenton, Florida, to work with a Christian foundation established by the owner of Tropicana. "At that time, I thought I was out of baseball. Then the position opened at Coastal Carolina for head baseball coach and athletic director, and I took that and really got back in and enjoyed it."

For two years, 1985-86, Richardson led the Chanticleers before another opportunity arose, this time at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. The Christian-based school gave Richardson basically the same positions that he had at Coastal—coach and director of athletics—plus assistant to the chancellor. He stayed there until his retirement in 1990.

These days, Richardson shuttles back and forth from his home in Sumter, which he built after his World Series MVP performance in 1960, to Litchfield Beach. In addition to his many public appearances, he enjoys the outdoors, especially quail hunting with his three sons.

One of his sons conspired with his wife last year to arrange for the entire extended family—grandchildren and all—to make it to New York for an old-timers game. "The only way I found out about it was the Yankees called one day, and I answered the phone, and they said, 'We've got your tour worked out.' I said, 'What tour? I'm not even coming to the game.'"

The surprise element gone, the trip proved a hit nonetheless, and many of the Richardson grandchildren got to see Yankee Stadium for the first time—a special treat for the erstwhile rookie who remembers the same thrill. "I've enjoyed every phase of life, each one as much as the last.

And it has been a real good retirement." ❖

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