

MUSIC OVER MANTLE — In 1968 the legendary Mickey Mantle played his final season and the New York Yankees were looking for his replacement. They wanted to sign a slender centerfielder from The Bronx, but Joel Levine had another great offer to consider.

Southwestern 1, Yankees 0

Teenage Joel Levine had a tough choice — sign with the NY Yankees or accept a prestigious music scholarship

BY ANDREW SANCHEZ
Staff Writer

A capacity crowd at Yankee Stadium fell deathly quiet during Game 2 of the 1951 World Series when transcendent rookie Mickey Mantle writhed in agony on the right field grass after stepping on a sprinkler, his knee shredded. Seconds earlier Mantle had veered out of the way of iconic New York Yankee center fielder Joe DiMaggio to avoid a collision on a fly ball by Willie Mays.

The venerable Yankee Clipper stood over the kid from Commerce, concerned about his teammate and heir. Mantle left right field on a stretcher, never the same. It remains one of the most notorious injuries in baseball history.

Joel Levine made sure to avoid the sprinkler.

Southwestern College's dean of Language, Literature and Humanities, Levine stepped over the Mantle sprinkler when he stepped onto the outfield turf at America's most venerated baseball stadium. He also stepped across hallowed ground during his 1968 tryout with the New York Yankees.

A South Bronx native, Levine grew up near Yankee Stadium during the Golden Age of the "Bronx Bombers," who appeared in 13 World Series in the 1950s and early '60s, winning eight. Like other young New Yorkers, he played baseball and stickball in the streets when not on a grass field playing youth ball. In high school he was a talented pitcher and center fielder.

He was also a very talented musician who even as a child demonstrated precocious virtuosity and flair on the clarinet. Levine dreamed of baseball, but his mother encouraged him to play music. For years he did both, he said, dreaming of playing center field for the Yankees during the day, and first chair clarinet for the New York Philharmonic at night.

Fate collided as Mantle and DiMaggio almost had.

Manhattan School of Music had an eye on Levine and offered him a full scholarship. MSM was and remains neck-and-neck with The Juilliard School as the New York Yankees of music universities, all-time champions. The Yankees had an eye on Levine, too, and invited him to a tryout the summer after he graduated from high school. He grabbed his glove and spikes and headed to The House That Ruth Built, the Bronx baseball cathedral of Yankee Stadium.

About 300 high school and college baseball standouts were invited to the tryout. Most were sent home after the first day.

Levine stuck. And he kept on sticking.

For two grueling weeks he kept sticking. Yankee scouts liked him as a pitcher, but also liked his bat and saw his powerful arm as an asset in the outfield — possibly as a replacement for Mantle himself, who in 1968 was hobbling through the final season of his Hall of Fame career.

Levine took flyballs and fungos in the outfield, stepping around the Mantle sprinkler and gliding in front of "Monument Park" where bronze and stone obelisks stand erect through time honoring Yankee greats Miller Huggins, Lou Gehrig, Babe Ruth, DiMaggio (and a short time later, Mantle.) He gloved fly balls where the mighty Ruth trod in the 1920s, threw from the same places DiMaggio had cut down baserunners in the 1940s and guarded the gaps like home run champion Roger Maris early in the 1960s.

After a fortnight of relentless workouts, the Yankees winnowed the field down to 20 teens who had risen above the rest. Levine was left standing. The New York Yankees wanted to sign him.

Levine said he was ecstatic, but his mother conflicted. She was proud of Joel for being offered a spot in the Yankees organization, but concerned about his spot at Manhattan School of Music and his scholarship. She had never liked the sport and her baseball-obsessed husband did not help, chain smoking in front of the TV, watching every possible Yankees and Mets game.

Young Joel said he still remembers the bright Bronx morning when the phone rang around 9 a.m. At that time of the year sunlight reflected off the fifth floor tenement across the alley into the Levines' tiny unit.

Mrs. Levine happened to answer the phone the day the Yankees scout Arthur Didi called to make Joel a formal contract offer to play late summer rookie baseball in the Yanks' system.

"I don't want my son riding in a bus all over the country," a horrified Levine recalled his mom telling the Yankees representative. "He's got better things to do with his life!"

He coaxed the phone away from his mother and set up a personal meeting with Didi. Rookie league for high school players started in late August, he was told, about the same time Manhattan School of Music started fall classes.

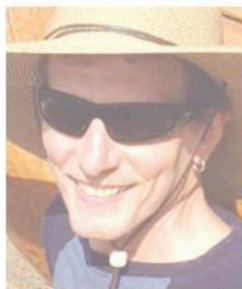
It was a pivotal moment in his life, Levine recalled.

"Time slowed down," he said. "Even though I was very young, I knew I was about to make a lifetime decision. I still remember how the light looked reflected off the fifth floor windows. I figured I could play the clarinet long past the time I could play baseball."

He chose music over Mantle, college over professional baseball. He told the Yankees he did not want to abandon his scholarship.

"It's okay, son, you are still young," Levine recalled Didi telling him. "We will watch you play in college and see how you progress there. We can sign you up later."

Levine said he did not have the heart to tell Didi that Manhattan School of Music was not exactly an intercollegiate baseball powerhouse. In fact, it had no sports programs at all. It enrolled about 450



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—Dr. Joel Levine,
SOUTHWESTERN COLLEGE
DEAN OF LANGUAGE,
LITERATURE and
HUMANITIES

students at that time -- all musicians. "Not a Babe Ruth or Willie Mays in the bunch," Levine said.

Levine had hit that moment in time where so many young men with dreams of baseball stardom reluctantly arrive. His baseball career was over.

Other great adventures lay ahead.

As the baseball cleats grew cold in the crisp fall air, Levine's clarinet was hotter than ever. His scholarship paid for almost everything at MSM except lunch, he recalled, so he took a thermos of soup, a sandwich and an apple to campus each day to fuel his music. One of his classmates was Santo "Sunny" Russo, the already-legendary trombonist for "The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson," who came to school during the day to study music education.

Levine earned a B.A. in music with an emphasis in clarinet performance in 1972. He completed an M.A. in music in 1973, while working in several education classes, also at the Manhattan School of Music.

He completed a teaching credential program in 1975 at Columbia University, where he developed a love for the science of education. In 1980 he earned a second Master's and a Doctorate in education administration from Columbia, completing both degrees from the

venerable Ivy League University in just two-and-a-half years.

Levine was offered a cushy job in mostly-white, upper middle class Staten Island, but turned it down to teach in low-income, mostly-minority Spanish Harlem.

"Best decision I ever made, it was great," he said. "That experience taught me so much about inequities in our education system and what we needed to do to elevate disadvantaged communities."

Teaching in NYC's barrio communities helped to spawn and nurture what became a decades-long devotion to developing critical thinking skills in underserved students on Native American reservations and borderlands schools. He took that mission with him to Pittsburgh, California in the East Bay north of Berkeley, then to work for the Campo Band of Mission Indians (who now refer to themselves by their ancestral name of Kume'yaay).

In 1989 he ignored discouraging naysayers and staggering odds to write a successful grant application to the Federal Indian Act of 1988. Levine's Campo Indian Education Project was awarded \$250,000, which he used to establish a preschool on the Campo reservation, hire counselors, employ seven after-school tutors and build two modern classroom structures. In eight years the Native American high school dropout rate nearly flipped, dropping from almost 90 percent to just over 10 percent.

Levine arrived at SC in 2006 as dean of Language, Literature and Humanities. He teamed with Professor of Reading Dr. Sylvia Garcia-Navarrete and instructor Yuki Yamamoto to develop the award-winning curriculum "My Reading Toolbox" that has spawned successful textbooks and requests for workshops and classes around the globe. Levine also serves as a mentor and adviser for doctoral students at San Diego State University where he serves on dissertation committees.

He is, colleagues agree, still a wicked clarinetist who practices every day for 60-90 minutes.

"I actually think I'm better now than ever," he said. "That makes sense because learning should be continuous. We can all continue to improve at whatever we like to do as we grow older."

Levine said he enjoys performing with Dr. Cynthia McGregor, Dr. Jeff Nevin, Dr. Jenna Posey and other talented classically-trained musicians on the SC faculty at recitals and concerts. He played in the SC Orchestra performance of the "New World Symphony," conducted by Nevin. One of his favorite all-time gigs was playing the world premier of the Joseph Julian Gonzalez choral "Misa Azteca," which featured SC's lauded Concert Choir directed by Dr. Teresa Russell.

His career in education has been richly rewarding, he said, but during baseball season he occasionally wonders "what if?"

"If I had the opportunity for a do-over maybe I would pick the Yankees," he confessed. "But I love where I am in my life and love serving as a dean. I am grateful for the opportunities I've had. I've had a great life and I love being part of Southwestern College."