

# **THE POPE AND ME AT YANKEE STADIUM**

*My Life as the Beer Man & Stand-Up Comic*



**By Steve Lazarus**  
as told to Sanford Miles

*“It’ll leave you laughing in the aisles!”*  
-- Phil Mushnick, *New York Post*

**Like sands through the hourglass,  
these are the days of our lives.**

**I'm writing an unauthorized autobiography.  
- STEVEN WRIGHT**

## PREFACE

OKAY FANS, LISTEN UP!

Let me set the record straight right off the bat (no puns intended) and tell you the truth: I AM A LIAR.

*All comedians are.*

They say they're single, when they're really married. They say they're Ivy League grads, when they barely made it out of grade school. They say they've bought a truckload of products from the *Home Shopping Network* but have never heard of the Popeil Pocket Fisherman. They enlighten you with the trials and tribulations of their first sexual encounter, though they happened to be alone at the time.

This, however, is no fib: sorry Mr. Derek Jeter and Co., but I, alone, comprise the best double-play combination around: Yankee Stadium Beer Man by day, Stand-up Comedian by night.

Yup, The Fickle Finger of Fate tapped me on the shoulder long before it did Rowan and Martin.

*Sock it to me!*

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Back in 1964, two of the hottest things in The City That Never Sleeps were the New York Yankees and *The Soupy Sales Show*. Need I recite chapter and verse the long list of Bronx Bomber Championships even way back then?

Okay, I will: as of this writing, it's 26 World Championships, 39 American League pennants, and the most storied franchise in all of sports. Current worth? A *billion* dollars.

Need I tell you how often the late Hall of Famer Phil Rizzuto uttered, uh, *uttered* the legendary phrase *Holy Cow!* during 1964 – and his entire Yankee broadcasting career? Might I tell you how often I'd watch Soupy Sales take a daily custard pie in the face from “White Fang,” the world's largest dog, or some other zany character from his popular kid's show? Estimates say Soupy's taken one in the kisser a mind-boggling 25,000 times! Could I regale you with the cryptic conversations Soupy had with Fang, who was so large that you only saw his furry paw on screen?



Sure.

But I won't. It's simply enough to say I was hooked on the Yanks and the Soup Man like a fish on a lure. Sports and comedy, what a concept!

Is it any wonder then that I am what I am?

(Save the snide comments.)

Yes, you can say that the stage was set early on.

A year after Soupy Sales hit town and the season after the '64 World Series when the Yankees were swept four straight by Sandy Koufax and the Los Angeles Dodgers, my dad took me to my first game at Yankee Stadium.

I would stay there for over 40 years.

On April 20, 1979, in my second year as an up-and-coming Beer Man, Pope John Paul II visited Yankee Stadium. If you asked me how long he stayed that day, I'd have said *forever!* Time really drags when nobody's buying what you're selling. That day, I was selling hotdogs, *Hebrew*

*National* hotdogs. Vendors selling Rosary Beads and Holy Water, however, made a score!

The Pope entered the playing field in his “PopeMobile,” a weird bubble-shaped car that looked a bit like a Double Decker bus.



When I saw the PopeMobile, I remember thinking that I just wanted to push down on the top of it.

Remember that game “Trouble?”

*Kathunk! Kathunk! Kathunk!*

Hey! It’s the Pope-o-matic!



## **FIRST INNING**

### *A Bronx Tale*

*I don't get no respect. I joined Gamblers Anonymous.*

*They gave me two to one I wouldn't make it.*

**- RODNEY DANGERFIELD**

“AND WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE when you grow up, Steven?”

“I'd like to work outdoors and feed the hungry.”

“That's very nice, Steven.”

“*Yeah, I want to be a vendor at Yankee Stadium.*”

My Bronx classmates' giggles signaled the beginning of my comedy career.

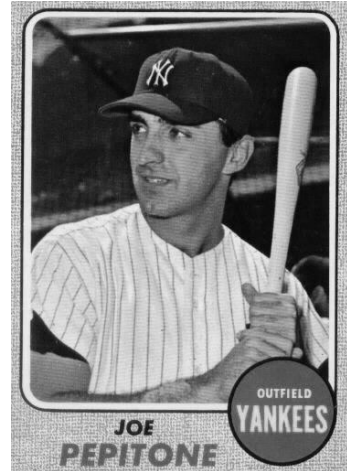
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I was eight years old when Aaron Lazarus took me to Yankee Stadium. Despite numerous attempts to persuade my father that the Stadium wasn't located in a Midwestern hayfield accessible only by donning goggles and commandeering a cropduster plane, that it was just on the other side of the Bronx, dad initially wouldn't bite – until fate intervened.

The Yankees, at the start of a decade-long slide after playing in five straight World Series (having won it all in 1961 and '62), still had a bunch of veterans from their glory years including Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris, Whitey Ford, and Elston Howard.

My favorite player was flaky and flunky Joe Pepitone. Of course, I wouldn't have thought of making the five-mile trek without my Joe Pepitone

Spalding Super Snare glove in tow. Many a glorious day I spent oiling that mitt with anything from mink oil, vaseline, and even some Barbasol shaving cream to make the leather nice and supple. (Dad would've flipped if he knew about the shaving cream!) Then I'd put a softball in it and wrap the glove mummy-like with some ace bandages and string and let it set overnight. I couldn't wait until the next morning to unwrap it and get out onto the makeshift field with my friends to imitate Pepe's slick fielding. It was always nice taking in the intoxicating smell of exhaust fumes that wafted in off the Bronx River Parkway!



The Brooklyn-born Pepitone, supposedly the inspiration for John Travolta's character in *Saturday Night Fever*, would gain immortality not so much for his playing days but for his *hairstyling* ways. He was the first baseball player to bring a hairdryer and hairspray into the clubhouse. He may also have been the first to wear a toupee, shoulder length. "I was the first to keep my toupee fashionably long!" he once said. Rumor has it that Pepitone had two toupees to cover his quickly balding scalp: one for his time off the field and one that fit "just right" under his baseball cap.

Do you know what Pepitone could've used to keep his hair?

*How 'bout a Ziploc bag!*

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*I have heard it said that a complicated childhood can lead to a life in the arts. I tell you this story of my father and me to let you know I am qualified to be a comedian.*

- STEVE MARTIN, "Born Standing Up"

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Early that defining Saturday morning, my dad shocked the world – well, my mom and me, anyway – when he announced that he *wasn't* going to Belmont Park. “Yeah, Marion, I got some schtuff to do and me an the kid are gonna take-a-ride . . . ,” he said, hooking his thumb at me. His ever-present stubby cigar oozed gobs of saliva. “I’ll jus drop Stevie off late-uh, then I’m goin’ to Yonkers,” as in Yonkers Raceway to gamble on the ponies. This was part of my dad’s usual day-night doubleheader. During the week he’d drive a small box truck delivering all kinds of paper goods in the tri-state area and do his best to finish up by mid-morning. (To this day I still have some of the plastic bags that fell off his truck.) Then he’d put the cherry on top with an all-night poker game. (How did my mom put up with him for *forty-seven* years?)

“Okay, Stevie,” he said. “You and me, kid, are gonna take a ride. Get what ya need.”

*Thanks Pop!*

Meanwhile, my mom was busy scribbling down her usual weekend checklist of things to buy in duplicates, triplicates and even quadruplicates to stack in her already overflowing cupboards.

There were seven of us for my mom to keep after, including my two brothers (one became a cop, the other a crook), my sister, and Grandma Rosie, who threw expletives around like a discus champion.

*Pass the fuckin’ salt she’d say. It’s too fuckin’ hot in here! And why’s there always shit on the tube?*



Like peeling wallpaper, we just got used to Grandma Rosie – well, until company came; then we cringed. Yes, Mom had her hands full big-time with the Magnificent Seven . . . .



My mom was the Queen of the Hoarders. We never had to worry about not having enough Charmin to squeeze or being down to the last drop of Maxwell House Coffee or having enough Bounty paper towels should Niagara Falls relocate to our cramped apartment on Bronx Boulevard.

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**On days when blizzards blanketed the area and traveling was hazardous to your health, people knew where they could still go food shopping: our house. My mom would hang a sign on our door.**

**WE HAVE MILK.**

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On that last day of July 1965, mom sensed where my dad was taking me – and was about to say something – “Don’t worry about it,” he said,

waving his hand and effectively cutting off any communication on the subject. “Stevie’ll be fine.”

“I got a surprise for ya, kid,” he said, in a raspy, sing-song voice.

*I’ll take door number three!*

He made it sound like Monty Hall but without any choices. To that day I had never given gambling much thought – though I sensed that whenever the subject of this seven-year-old needing a hand-out for, say, a scooter pie at lunch, it was best to ask my mom. I’d soon learn that my dad’s wallet was off-limits – unless there was a flip of the cards, a roll of the dice, or a horse to be wagered on.

Actually, having a dad like mine today could be beneficial to a growing youngster, and perfect for learning the alphabet:

*A, B, C, D, E, F, G, off we go to OTB.*

*H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, don’t tell your mother you went with me!*

We ended up at the Allerton Avenue Social Club – a poker room located directly under the elevated subway on Gun Hill Road. Years later, my brother Ira would show me the employee “benefits” of working at a business – in this case a plant store – located directly beneath an elevated line. “Lemme know when you hear the train coming,” Ira said one day when I visited him there. “The boss won’t hear the register when it opens.”

*Cha-Ching!*

The Allerton Avenue Social Club was my first look at a “legal” poker room. In the years ahead, I would learn that, in NYC, poker rooms and illegal betting parlors were as commonplace as betting windows at a racetrack. This club, however, was nothing like you’d expect if you were weaned on *The Godfather* trilogy or read the *New York Daily News* or *New*

*York Post*. There was no Vinny ‘The Chin’ or ‘Fat Sally’ or Sammy ‘The Bull’ or anyone with classic literary monikers that hung out there. And there was no wannabe Playboy Bunny with cleavage up the wazoo, either. That was a Bronx Tale, Hollywood at its finest.

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**Remember the scene in *The Godfather* where Sonny Corleone gets massacred at the tollbooth? I was thinking, Sonny Corleone could still be alive today if he had E-ZPass!**

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The smoky club was like a frat house for older men. It was a gathering for misguided souls, husbands that were cheating on their wives and stopped by to freshen up a bit, husbands who were thinking of cheating on their wives, secret meetings, and money drops. More than anything, though, it was a place to go to chill out and escape from the banalities of life. Plus, win a few bucks at cards or a roll of the dice.



It seemed like there was some type of gambling going on there 24/7, 365. The club was a small series of inter-connecting rooms with a kitchenette and small island set off by a curtain of beads, which was the “in” thing back in the mid-1960’s. The dinette featured a scarred hardwood poker table, each player having their own little slots for things like poker chips, bills, makeshift ashtrays, and stray M & M’s (plain or peanuts). The tiny living room featured a threadbare couch accompanied by a lamp with a pleated shade, an old Zenith with rabbit ears encased in aluminum foil, and a massive jukebox that took up an entire wall. How many times did I watch

with utter fascination as that mechanical marvel plucked a record out of its slot, deposit it onto a tiny record player in the exposed glass, and watch it spin . . . and spin . . . and spin?

I mean, back then I was just a bit too young to gamble, so what else was I supposed to do? Eventually, the novelty of the jukebox wore off and I got sick of hearing the same old songs! There were more geezers in that thing than a nursing home: crooners like Dean Martin, Perry Como, Bing Crosby, and Frank Sinatra were the only records the jukebox was stocked with.

*Yikes!*

Seriously, how many times could a sane individual hear Sinatra's *That's Life* or *Strangers in the Night* without going nuts? And now they won't let me forget it: at the end of every Yankee home game, win lose or eliminated from the playoffs, Sinatra's new "classic" signature song, "New York, New York" is played after the final out. (Luckily, beer sales in the stands stop once Kate Smith belts out "God Bless America" in the seventh inning, and I'm on my way home.)

There were so many times we went to the club and my dad said, "Jussit down there for a little while, woncha, Stevie? Hey Delores, get the kidda Coke!" Then he'd shoo me away like a bothersome fly. "C'mon Stevie, just sit over there and . . . we'll be outta here in a lil while." Then he'd go back to his poker hand and flip a bunch of chips into the pot. His buddies used to say, "Stevie, go punch in some songs on the juke." Then they'd turn to my dad. "He's a fine kid, Aaron. Hopefully he won't turn out like you!"

They'd have a good laugh at that.

“Just siddown on the couch and be a good boy, Stevie, and we’ll be outta here soon. Promise.”

Just how many times did I fall asleep watching television and leave the club with my disgruntled dad long past midnight? How many times did I leave that place with tufts of hair going this way and that and my father silent on the quick ride back though the darkened neighborhood, still smoking that smelly cigar!

A few middle-aged women worked the club and waited on the boys in turn for a meager salary and tips from their poker-playing studs. They made the tuna fish sandwiches, wiped up the *O* rings left by a cup of coffee or a can of coke with a splash of vodka, and answered the phones. Those they answered with deft touches, naturally. “*Louie? No, no . . . he’s not here . . . and I haven’t seen him in a while.*” “*Paulie . . .? I’ll ask around for him, but he ain’t been here in a few weeks!*” Meanwhile, there was Louie studying his poker hand as if contemplating buying a fine timepiece while Paulie sat over on the couch watching Willis Reed snatch another rebound. Most of the “broads,” as my father called them, looked like they’d spent many a night warming themselves on a subway grating.

Now growing up in these environs might seem strange, but I never thought it was much different than how other kids were living – until you’re old enough to realize that it wasn’t quite “normal.” Let’s just say my upbringing wasn’t in the *Father Knows Best* mode; it was more like *Leave it to Beaver* on steroids.

Not too hard to predict, but when I got older, I started playing in the poker games at the club, and even against my father. I sometimes won a lot; I sometimes lost a lot; and often I beat my dad out of big pots. (I had my beaten-up Volkswagen Fastback by then so I didn’t have to worry about a

ride home.) One day, I asked innocently enough, “Hey, how ‘bout a little Elvis or the Beatles in the jukebox? I mean, I’ve been hearing the same shit for years!” Ralphie, who ran the club, wouldn’t have any of it.

“Lazarus?” he said, pointing at me with dead seriousness. “One more crack like that . . . and it’ll be the last time you ever play here.”

Like Frank and Nancy Sinatra, I’d said something stupid.

It was, however, because of my dad’s trivial pursuits at the club that we ended up at Old Timers’ Day at the Stadium on July 31, 1965 with the Yanks taking on the Cleveland Indians: one of dad’s poker-playing buddies didn’t have the cash he owed him but offered him a pair of left field seats to the game, instead. My father wasn’t happy about that, no sirree Bob, but I guess he figured he could kill two birds with one stone – and never have to listen to me beg him to take me to a game again.

*How many times do you need to actually go to a game?* he’d say later when the subject of a return trip to the Stadium arose. *What’s wrong wid watchin’ the Yanks on Channel 11?* Old Timers’ Day would turn out to be the first game, and the last, I’d ever see live with dear old dad.

Shock!

I remember originally thinking that Oldtimer’s Day meant that the older crowd, over fifty I guessed, would get into the Stadium for free. My dad, with his receding Vitalis-styled hair, bushy eyebrows set strongly over his Jack Benny glasses, and Salvador Dali mustache, was forever over fifty.

We made a few “stops” on the way to the game, and each time my dad would tell me, “Be patient, Stevie, we’ll get there.” (Hmm, looking back, I wonder if the stops had anything to do with gambling . . .) We made it to the

Stadium by the fourth inning, but the thrill of that day was overwhelmed by my dad's strange behavior during the game.

We got to the game after Joe DiMaggio hit a homerun in the Old Timers' game; after Joe Pepitone swatted a homerun in the third inning of the regular game (darn!); and only after my father finished complaining about, in no particular order: the damn Stadium traffic, ticket takers, people crowding us in the stands, ushers, Pinkerton guards, and everything short of the state of affairs in Bangladesh.

Ironically, no Stadium vendors ever served us – *You ate already at the club, dincha? How couldja be so hungry already?* – so I never got to try those ballpark franks, those same-style dogs that would be sold for the ungodly sum of five bucks at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. (In hindsight, I probably spared my dad some gambling money on Roloids.)

What we weren't spared was an unobstructed view of the game! Our outfield seats were behind one of the many huge steel beams that supported the old Yankee Stadium like dental implants.

Can you see them in my program?

But even that didn't bother me so much; I just craned my head when I had to. My "fondest" memory of that strange day has nothing to do with seeing the historic facades that circled the Stadium or the immense electronic scoreboard with the familiar red-white-and-blue Yankee top hat logo that stood out like the Bat Signal. (The scoreboard even blotted out most of the apartment building and Bronx County Courthouse directly behind it.) Nor was it was seeing how the silken grass was cut into perfect diagonal



strips or how the fabled monuments sat smack-dab at the base of the centerfield wall . . .

What will stay with me until they lower me into position in my birthday suit as *The Pope and Me at Yankee Stadium* plays Broadway with a Shakespearean-trained thespian in the lead, is this: with the Yanks down two late in the game, my man Pepitone smashed one outta the park to tie the score – only to see my dad curse under his breath.

*Huh?*

At the time I just couldn't understand it and was too confused to ask what was up with that? Didn't he know Pepitone was my hero? Wasn't he thrilled he'd just tied the game? When the game ended with the Yanks eking out a win in the bottom of the ninth, my dad stood silent as the crowd erupted in ecstasy. Then he made like The Flash and dragged me back to the car.

I didn't get it: hadn't he wanted the Yanks to win? Why wasn't he thrilled when they did? And why was he giving me the silent treatment?

What had I done wrong?

So many times I watched him at home root for Mickey to belt one out of the park or Whitey to strike out the bastard or Tony Kubek to start the backend of a double-play . . . so why was he so unhappy when the Yanks won that day?

At my age, how was I to know he'd simply bet against them?



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**I always knew my dad was a terrible gambler.  
I mean, who else would bet against the  
Harlem Globetrotters?**

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