

BASEBALLSUNDAY

THE RUNDOWN | HOWARD J. RUBENSTEIN, PINSTRIPE PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICER

Meet the man behind the Boss

Howard J. Rubenstein is the man behind the curtain, a faceless name that popped out of nowhere for Yankee fans the past couple of years, slipped in as "spokesperson" into every one of George Steinbrenner's prepared statements, as the once-uncontrollably blustery Boss continues his strange retreat into utter silence.

But Rubenstein, 75, whom Steinbrenner hired 21 years ago, isn't any ordinary flack or spin doctor but a superstar in his own right, an undeniable power broker whose masterful p.r. skills have lured him a slew of clients among the richest and most celebrated and infinitely infamous, people such as Donald Trump, Naomi Campbell, Mike Tyson, Rupert Murdoch and Leona "Queen of Mean" Helmsley. He's often the first guy that famous people run to when there's no place else to run, when they're suddenly steeped in trouble and sinking by the minute and in need of a public makeover desperately — and ASAP.

When he's not brokering some peace between angry parties or accentuating the positives of someone or something, his is a life of attempting to clean up sullied reputations.

When Michael Richards' racist rant made it everywhere on the planet, guess who got the call?

"The Fixer," is how The New Yorker once referred to Rubenstein, a small, bespectacled avuncular figure with an amiable smile and a soothing voice.

"They said it in a kind way, so I wasn't upset," Rubenstein tells RUNDOWN during an exclusive interview. "But I would've preferred The

Negotiator, because what I really do is fix (a crisis) through negotiation."

Coincidentally or not, Steinbrenner came to Rubenstein during that singularly rare decade of

pinstriped crisis, in which the Yankees not only didn't win a World Championship but reached just one World Series, in 1981.

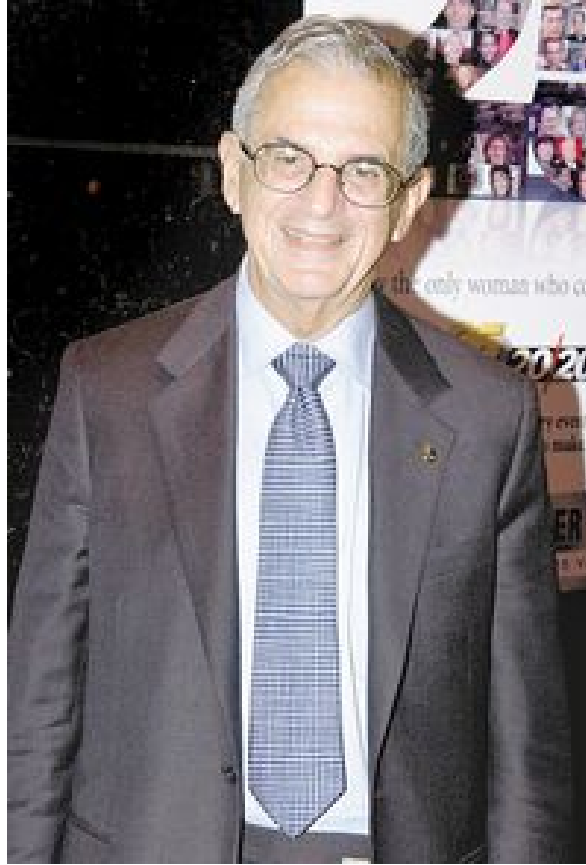
"We met through a charity I was working with, the Association for a Better New York. Someone introduced us," Rubenstein

remembers. "Then, one day, I went to the Stadium (with a photographer) to take pictures of him on the pitcher's mound for a poster promoting New York. And we became so friendly that someone suggested that he should hire me — and he did."

And Rubenstein claims that after all these years of working together the two have never shared a "harsh word."

"I have such admiration for him," he adds. "He's as tough as nails, but behind it all, he's very kind. He's portrayed as bombastic and with a temper — and he still has a temper — but (in recent years) he has decided not to let (loose). I think he made up his mind that it's time to not shoot from the hip anymore. He once said, 'I shoot from the hip and I hit my foot.' He doesn't look for explosive statements (to get) into the newspaper (now). These statements I put out (of late) aren't wild but very measured."

It's for that reason that there's such great curiosity and suspicion among members of the media these days about whether Steinbrenner is even involved in those press releases at all. That if the Boss were still the Boss he'd be both seen and heard and loudly, not simply issuing these brief and tepid thoughts



Getty Images

Howard Rubenstein is a longtime friend of Yankees owner George Steinbrenner. More and more recently, he's also his mouthpiece.

on a mere piece of paper.

The prevailing theory is this: That because of Steinbrenner's declining health the words are more Rubenstein's than anyone else's.

When I relay this assumption to Rubenstein, he's not surprised in the least. He knows those feelings are out there, although he's quick to point out — with a dismissive chuckle — that they have no basis in fact.

According to Rubenstein, this is how those statements happen:

"If a p.r. issue of any sort comes up, we'll talk as a little group — George, myself, (Yankee president) Randy Levine, (team COO and General Counsel) Lonn Trost and sometimes (GM) Brian Cashman. After that, I'll chat

privately with George and ask him what he wants to say.

Then I'll write something and read it to him over the phone, or I'll e-mail or fax it to him. Then he'll edit it — he considers himself a very good editor.

"It's really George talking. I'm just a vehicle for George. I don't put out one word without George saying that it's OK. I never would do that.

"In fact, my tactic with all my clients is to not make anything up."

I doubt this explanation will end the widespread doubting about these occasional releases — the old Steinbrenner was never one to speak his mind by committee — but at the very least it gives us a peek of insight into the mystery of the behind-the-scenes process.

More Rubenstein ...

And now, ripping away the curtain, here's a deeper look into Rubenstein:

► **His childhood:** Raised in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, he's the son of a crime reporter and rooted for the Dodgers until they went West. "Unlike a lot of people in my neighborhood, I was never a Mets fan. But eventually I converted to being a Yankees fan."

► **How he landed in public relations:**

Rubenstein went to Harvard Law School, but dropped out after only two months and returned home. "I was a failure, a mess," he once admitted. His father, Sam, who did p.r. on the side, suggested the idea. "He even got me my first account, the Menorah Home & Hospital for the Aged and Infirm. I made \$100-a-month gross, including expenses. My dad taught me how to write a speech, how to find the human interest in stories, and connected me with all his friends. All of a sudden, my stories started ending up in the papers."

► **His father's lecture to him on the p.r. business:**

"He told me to draw an ethical line in the sand and never cross it. To never beg. And to always consider what reporters need and try to meet that. In other words, don't send out things that aren't stories, that are really nothing but advertising."

► **His business:** He's the president of the agency that bears his name, which he founded in 1954. It's one of the nation's largest independent public relations agencies, with more than 450 clients and a staff of more than 200.► **His No. 1 ground rule for working with clients:**

"Tell the truth. If you want me to work for you, you've got to at least tell ME the truth."