

New York Yankees President Randy Levine helps  
revamp GW Athletics and Recreation. BY HEATHER O. MILKE

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As GW's new strategic plan for athletics and recreation goes into effect, the university is "doing everything it can to win." So says New York Yankees President Randy Levine, BA '77, who led the university through a strategic review of its athletics programs. A member of George Washington's board of trustees, Mr. Levine came to campus in February to help announce the new strategy. In an interview with *GW Magazine*, the veteran sports executive shared his views on the plan and the university's steps toward a winning athletics program.

**GW** How did you get involved in GW's athletics review process?

**RL** Chairman Russ Ramsey and the board asked me to lead this effort, and of course I said "yes." I love this university. It's responsible for whatever success that I've had, and I feel I always owe something to give back, so I was delighted to do it.

**GW** What can you tell us about the review?

**RL** The review process had several goals. The university's athletics programs weren't performing the way they should be. We needed to find out why that was happening. Were they being funded properly? Were they being managed

properly? Were student-athletes getting what they needed to be great student-athletes? Because winning on the field is very important, but so is success in the classroom.

We also needed to open it up and make it transparent and get feedback from all levels: alumni, students, faculty, fans, customers—everyone—to see what was going on.

**GW** How does your experience come into play for this review?

**RL** Obviously, I've been in the sports business for many years, and the sports business has changed significantly over time.

Today the sports and entertainment business, as I'll call it, is very different. And it all centers on winning. You have to win. If you're not going to try to win, it's not even worth it, so how do you go about winning?

The first thing for this program was to hire an athletic director who is a man or woman for these times, because being an athletic director today requires different skill sets than it did years ago. You are a sports executive. You have to know marketing, you have to know sponsorships, as well as administration and general sports.

At the end of the day the first step was the hiring of Patrick Nero, who is terrific and has done a great job. And then we took input from everybody. We didn't want to drag this out; that's why we got it done in a year.

So now, we believe we've taken the steps to put this program on a path to win. Once you start to win, there's a real connectivity among alumni, students, everybody. People take pride in it, and it translates into more sports for the university, more marketing deals, or television or radio rights, or many other commercial properties.

In this 2005 photo, New York Yankees President Randy Levine, BA '77, discusses an architect's rendering of the new Yankee Stadium, which opened in 2009.



AP PHOTO/KATHY WILLENS

**GW** And you know more than most about winning.

**RL** I was trained by George Steinbrenner [former New York Yankees owner] that winning was everything, hence his famous motto, which he told me on the first day I met him. He said: “Show me a good loser and I’ll show you a loser.” And that’s the way we feel about it, and that’s the way I think this GW program is going to try to comport itself: doing everything it can to win.

**GW** When can we expect some changes?

**RL** I hope to see changes almost immediately, and this plan officially goes into effect in July. Some aspects have already gone into effect. So five years from now you’re going to see a very different program—a much better program. And we’re going to monitor it all the time.

**GW** You’ve achieved so much in life since your days at GW. What do you think about when you think back on your time here?

**RL** I love this place. It was a great period of my life. I enjoyed it, and I feel I owe something to it. Its location and people from everywhere give you an opportunity to grow: to meet people you may have never met, such as people from different countries, and to be in the heart of the nation’s capital.

In my first two years here, every afternoon I would take a couple of hours just to go see something. And that helped me grow. It’s a great place to go to school because there’s enough here to do with campus life, but you’re also in the nation’s capital and in an urban center, so there’s a lot more you can take advantage of.

I had great friends here. And I feel young when I come back here, which is getting hard to do.

**GW** How have things changed for you now that George Steinbrenner is gone? You frequently are seen as the voice of the Yankees organization now.

**RL** There will only ever be one George Steinbrenner. He was an iconic figure. He built this great franchise and this great company. So there’s only one like him. But I don’t believe I’m the voice of the Yankees. We have a lot of voices. We have Hal and Hank Steinbrenner. When it comes to baseball matters, our general manager is out there. Our manager and our players make decisions. Some of these things have not changed.

The great thing about the Yankees is that people care about the Yankees, and my job as the president of the Yankees and what I do all the time is to try to find ways that are good in a business sense and that connect with our fans. The only way to do it is to make sure the product is worthy of Yankee quality: great, winning championship teams; have our television network cover it in the best way possible; have our stadium be the best place possible so that when people go to the game they enjoy it; and on and on.

# ATHLETICS STRATEGIC PLAN DETAILS

The university's five-year plan for the Department of Athletics and Recreation outlines a strengthened and expanded commitment to the university's athletics, health, and wellness initiatives. Specifying increased resources for team operating budgets, scholarships, facilities, and staffing, the plan addresses the areas of concern that were identified by the university's yearlong strategic review.

Specifically, the plan includes:

- A commitment to facilities, including a budget allocation to replace all of the university's fields every 10 years. Additionally, the plan allows for increased funding for the Lerner Health and Wellness Center, which sees a daily average use of 2,000 people and supports the university's 1,000 club sports athletes and 3,000 intramural participants. (As part of the plan, club sports will be given a priority in on-campus facility scheduling.)
- Overhauling the operating budget to put GW intercollegiate athletics on par with the top-funded programs in the Atlantic 10. (Currently GW's operating budget ranks 13th of 14 teams in the A-10.) Additional funds will primarily be directed at coaching, recruiting, travel, marketing, and fitness.
- A partnership with Janssen Peak Performance to establish the George Washington Student-Athlete Leadership Academy. Janssen operates similar academies at North Carolina, Georgetown, Michigan, and Yale, among other Division I schools.
- A new office of athletics development that plans to generate more than \$2 million annually within five years.
- A continued commitment to maintaining GW's current intercollegiate sport offerings. Additionally, the plan calls for the transition of sailing from a club sport activity into a coed, varsity intercollegiate program—making it GW's 23rd varsity sport.

The special committee of trustees, supported by senior administrators, was appointed to oversee the review and planning process and ultimately make final decisions in regard to GW's strategic direction for athletics and recreation. A steering committee, composed of a variety of GW community members, including faculty and staff members as well as alumni, oversaw the development of the strategic plan, while seven subcommittees looked into every aspect of the athletics and recreation department, with accumulated input from more than 400 individuals.

To watch Randy Levine and others speak about the review, visit [gwsports.com/about-ath/StrategicPlan.html](http://gwsports.com/about-ath/StrategicPlan.html). A written version of the report is also available there.

So a lot of what I do when I speak is: One, try to reach out and communicate with Yankee fans all over the world. And two, because we're the Yankees, you know, we're in the news a lot, people have opinions, good, bad, whatever—it's my job to make sure that the record is straight.

**GW** Your television network, the YES Network, has been up and running for a while now; your new stadium has been built and opened. What's your next big project?

**RL** We just built—it's now two years old—another really terrific company called Legends Hospitality Management, which I think you're going to see grow. We hired Dave Checketts, who used to run Madison Square Garden and owns the Saint Louis Blues and the Real Salt Lake Major League Soccer team. And we own it along with the Dallas Cowboys and Goldman Sachs. It's been incredibly successful, and I think it's going to be a platform to grow into a lot of other sports-related businesses.

And there's plenty else to do. We're constantly reaching out in different ways to expand our brand all over the world and in different ways. It's no secret today that with new media you have to stay ahead of the curve. And it's no secret that when it comes to ticketing and selling ticketing with the advent of the secondary market and StubHub, there are challenges in the ways of doing things.

So every day is a different challenge. This is a big enterprise, and like every big enterprise in order to be competitive and keep winning and be a champion both on and off the field, you've got to try to stay ahead of the curve. That's what we try to do every day.

**GW** Do you think baseball will ever reach the kind of world popularity that is enjoyed, for example, by the game of soccer?

**RL** It depends where you go. If you go to Central America, baseball is very popular. Or if you go to Japan. And it's really popular in Australia. But it's the American game. It's our pastime. We have the World Baseball Classic, which continues to get better every year. We have a partnership with the Chinese government and the Chinese Baseball Association, where we're helping to develop baseball in China. We have partnerships all over the world. So this is part of the outreach we try to do—to not only reach out for the Yankees but to try to globalize the game. I'm on the international committee of Major League Baseball, so this is something I think about a lot.

**GW** Is there anything else you'd like alumni at home to know?

**RL** We're real excited about the work of this committee. Likewise, people should take the time to think about helping GW because, as I said about myself, it has contributed to where we are today.