

Bring on the Bubbly

When it comes to clubhouse champagne celebrations, the wetter the better.

By Jonathan Lesser

It starts with finding a local wine distributor that can deliver 60 cases of champagne on a moment's notice. Then you have to order enough plastic to cover the clubhouse floor and all the lockers. Lastly, you have to retain a cleaning company that can come at all hours of the night.

Although the results may be fun, organizing a clubhouse champagne celebration is far from easy.

"I'm trying to keep guys from spraying three or four bottles at a time and running out," says Jim Schmakel, the clubhouse manager for the Detroit Tigers since 1978. "It's a big clubhouse, and I have to make sure the coaches and manager and everyone has some. It's fun, but I'm working."

For the players, though, the work is definitely over once the corks are popped.

"There are no rules," says Yankees catcher Jose Molina, who has been to the postseason with both the Yankees and the Angels. "You win, man, and anything goes. The wetter you get, the better."

Chicago White Sox relief pitcher Scott Linebrink, who was on Padres playoff teams in 2005 and '06, recalls ambushing teammates in every corner of the clubhouse, from back rooms to shower stalls. "No place is off limits," he says. "It's a time to let your hair down."

There may be no rules to a clubhouse champagne celebration, but there is a bit of etiquette when it comes to spraying the bubbly around.

"You try to stay away from guys' eyes," says White Sox catcher A.J. Pierzynski, who had been to the postseason three times entering this year. Pierzynski chooses not to wear goggles to protect his eyes from the alcohol like many players do these days. "It's a good burn," he says, "because you're feeling good."

Molina seconds that opinion: "No goggles. With the goggles, you're preparing for it. It's a better feeling when you're taken by surprise."

Veteran Yankees pitcher Mike Mussina suggests carrying around a towel on your shoulder to wipe the booze from your eyes, but teammate Joba Chamberlain sees no use. "A towel just gets soaked," Chamberlain says. "You just kind of wait it out."

"I don't think you should walk into a clubhouse during a celebration and expect to keep your dry cleaning in order," adds Linebrink. "All bets are off."

Sure, a little bit of imbibing goes on during the party, but most of the liquid ends up in clothing and carpet. "You just spray and spray everywhere," says Chamberlain. "Your mouth is open half the time because you're screaming, so you swallow it. But most of the time you're just spraying it."

The most important role of the clubhouse manager during a champagne celebration is to make sure there is enough of the stuff on hand for the whole team to have a good time.

Schmakel, who provided the bubbly for the Tigers in '84, '87 and '06, likes to make the parties wetter and wetter the further his team advances in the postseason. In 2006 he ordered 30 cases for the playoff-clincher,

45 cases for the Division Series celebration and 60 cases for the League Championship Series.

That much booze makes for a lot of cleaning up, and it has to be done quick.

"You're going to have a workout, if not a game, the next day," Schmakel says. "Unless, of course, it's the World Series."

But there's no thinking about tomorrow when the champagne is on ice. A euphoric clubhouse celebration is one time when a baseball team's hierarchy disappears. It's okay for rookies to soak veterans, for players to soak coaches, the manager, even team executives. Members of the media also must beware.

"[Commissioner] Bud Selig is the only one we were told we weren't allowed to get," Pierzynski says. "Everyone else is fair game." ♦

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