The Heroic Image: The Lives and Times of Superstars in Two Golden Ages of Sport

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The Heroic Image:

If the Summer Olympics of 1984 or the yearly Super Bowl extravaganzas are any indication, Americans continue to be sport-obsessed. It has become increasingly important that we reflect about professional athletes and the public's perception of their role in society. I would like to take a subjective, biographical look at four dominant athletes who influenced American civilization during our two Golden Ages of Sport, namely, the 1920s and the late 1960s-1970s.

The role of sport in twentieth-century Western Civilization can scarcely be exaggerated. Sport is not merely a diverting leisure activity; at times it has been integrated into life and death matters. Highly spirited soldiers from British units advanced rapidly toward enemy trenches while kicking at a soccer ball during World War I (a presumably deflating experience), while at the time of the later London blitz the rule's committee of one of that city's golf clubs decided upon a one-stroke penalty for replacing any ball blown away by a bomb!

Sport came to enjoy great popularity in an industrializing and urbanizing late nineteenth-century United States. Participants and observers were attracted to athletic contests that had largely outlived Puritanical condemnation as "worthless entertainment for gentlemen...and despicable rowdies."

In this century spectator sport has become increasingly associated with professionalism and commercialism. The trend away from the amateur ideal as personified by Baron de Coubertin's resurrected Olympic Games of the 1890s has disappointed proponents of competition-for-competition's sake. Money subverts. Athletes all-too-frequently cease dreaming of victory cup, laurel, and draped medal, demanding instead what critics devalue as fool's gold. Bill Rodgers disturbingly lobbies against tradition, preferring to be paid for running from Hopkinton to the Pru. Obscene contracts -- forty million dollars lifetime, fifteen million dollars for seven years -- mock those hard-working citizens who make the psychologically devastating mistake of measuring their worth by salary comparisons.

The greed of players, agents, and franchise-hopping owners aside, other issues lead to a rejection of professional sports in our times. Brutality, exploitation, sexism, and racism offend. Most especially, there is drug abuse. When today's pros prefer Coke as "the real thing" who can be certain that they are taste-test comparing with Pepsi? Certainly not a droll Senator Robert Dole who has suggested that in 1985 our nation needs decision making by realists, and that perhaps an NFL owner could lead through example by moving a franchise to sunny Colombia, South America. With so many associated problems, the cynically informed might concur with the words of Thomas Wolfe: "It is hard to get excited about the efforts of hired men."

Nevertheless, since the 1920s we have lived through "the Age of the Spectator" in historian Benjamin Rader's phrase. Millions of Americans for a multitude of reasons have lived vicariously by enthusiastically cheering for player and team. And a preponderant number of sports' most cherished crown jewels -- for example, the World Series and, more recently, the Super Bowl -- are in the professional domain.

What have the millions of loyal fans of professional sport come to expect of the performers who, over the past two generations, have provided them with entertainment? Certainly the evidence will reveal a metamorphosis of attitude as we pass through the Two Golden Ages, the first stamped with the Thornber's resurrected Olympic Games of the 1890s has disappointed proponents of competition-for-competition's sake. Money subverts. Athletes all-too-frequently cease dreaming of victory cup, laurel, and draped medal, demanding instead what critics devalue as fool's gold. Bill Rodgers disturbingly lobbies against tradition, preferring to be paid for running from Hopkinton to the Pru. Obscene contracts -- forty million dollars lifetime, fifteen million dollars for seven years -- mock those hard-working citizens who make the psychologically devastating mistake of measuring their worth by salary comparisons.

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with rice and a loaf of bread. Until he awakened with a hangover one day in 1905 and vowed temperance, Sullivan, an incredible tippler, had spent a fortune, mostly in barrooms. Even maintaining a healthy skepticism about Professor William Lyon Phelps’ assertion that Sullivan once consumed fifty-six gin fizzes in a single hour (!), he doubtless had an amazing capacity for drink. He would imbibe for days on end, even developing delirium tremens during 1888 and almost killing himself after one spree. It was potentially hazardous to one’s health to encounter Sullivan while he was on a bender, for the belligerent champ was always ready to deck those for whom he developed an instant dislike.

"King" Kelly of "Slide, Kelly, Slide" fame was a one-time Paterson, New Jersey mill bobbin boy who became the darling of National League baseball fans in the 1880s. Developer of the "Chicago" slide, now known as the hook slide, King Kel was a complete pitcher box (no mound then) to home plate, while the arbiter was preoccupied with the progress of the ball after an outfield hit. On another occasion at dusk in this pre-floodlight era, outfielder Kelly raced backward, leaped, slammed his fist convincingly into his glove and was credited with the game-saving "catch" of a ball that had traveled well beyond his reach.

The newspapers' penchant for whitewashing the non-athletic antics of Sullivan and Kelly was precedent-setting for the next sixty years, particularly during the 1920s, "The Era of Wonderful Nonsense." Though that decade featured a galaxy of stars -- Jack Dempsey, Red Grange, Bobby Jones, Big Bill Tilden -- American spectators were overwhelmingly drawn to the self-proclaimed "national game" of baseball. This dominance had not been easily maintained, for since 1910 major league attendance had failed to keep pace with the general population growth, with World War I proving particularly disruptive.

Worse still, by the beginning of the 1920s organized baseball was sorely in need of house cleaning. Just as the country was returning to "normalcy" and the Red Scare was petering out, a distraught young boy was reputedly exclaiming, "Say it ain't so, Joe." The Great Black Sox scandal had broken. Shoeless (illiterate) Joe Jackson, Ed Cicotte and several other Chicago White Sox players had conspired with gamblers to lose the 1919 World Series to Cincinnati. Frantic owners sought to rescue the game's sullied reputation by granting absolute power to Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis as commissioner of baseball. Nevertheless, another type of savior was required, one offering more than the simple integrity of the rigidly authoritarian Landis. Organized baseball turned to the playing field for help.

Ever since breaking into the majors in 1905, Tyrus Raymond "Ty" Cobb had thrilled baseball aficionados. By the time he retired in 1928, "Mr. Baseball" had amassed more than four thousand lifetime base hits, won twelve batting crowns, including nine successive titles, and achieved the game's highest batting average. As the most aggressive of competitors, Ty had been a terror on the basepaths who thrived on intimidating opposing infielders with his flashing spikes and slamming slides en route to stealing 892 bases.

For all his achievements, Cobb would not be baseball's savior during the 1920s. Ty, though remaining colorful and extremely competent, was by then an old-style representative of "deadball" play which had featured single runs scored by bunting, base stealing, and hit-and-run strategy. Purists might be pleased, but for the fans of the Roaring Twenties low scoring contests were a bore.

Cobb's one "failure" was in not hitting many home runs. But he was not alone. No one had ever hit many homors. This key ingredient in stimulating patron excitement was suddenly provided by George Herman "Babe" Ruth, destined to become America's best-known athlete, its quintessential hero (just ask Hank Aaron and Roger Maris). Cold statistics illustrate his remarkable...
achievements. In 1919 he broke all previous
records by slamming twenty-nine home runs
for the New York Yankees. When his total
soared to fifty-four during the ensuing sea­
son, no other major league team as a whole
managed that number. Although both fig­
ures have been exceeded, his sixty homers in
1927 (one-eighth of that year’s American
League total) contributed to a career total of
714, the two most famous numbers in Amer­
ican sporting history.

The Bambino, the Sultan of Swat, revolu­
tionized baseball. Management adapted to
the sudden craving of spectators for batting
power. Fences were moved in, a livelier ball
was introduced, and the squeamish were
delighted when a pitcher’s best friend, the
spitball, was banned.

Ruth, as Cobb before him, had become
the great American idol. “It is part of our
national history,” proclaimed sports column­
ist Jimmy Cannon, “that all boys dream of
being Babe Ruth.”

Parents, beware of youthful emulation!

Ty Cobb was in fact a psychotic competi­
tor willing to maim for victory. At his Social
Darwinist best, he reminded readers of his
autobiography:

I didn’t play for fun. . . . It’s no pink tea,
and mollycoddles had better stay out. It’s a
contest and everything that implies, a
struggle for supremacy, a survival of the
fittest.

His career was marred by altercations, not
only with opponents but with teammates as
good who hazed him unmercifully as a rookie,
goaded him into fistfights with the club­
house strongman, nailed his uniform to the
wall, etc. Convinced of a conspiracy against
him, Cobb gave no quarter: “I had to fight
all my life to survive. They were all against
me . . . but I beat the bastards.” They
apparently included the physically handi­
capped spectator who Cobb once went into
the stands to punch. During his career this
pistol-carrying loner also slashed a hotel
detective with a penknife, beat up a young
butcher’s assistant in an argument over the
quality of a few pennies worth of food, and
on two occasions was accused of assaulting
what he termed “nigger” women. Before his
death, Cobb had alienated family and friends.

And then there were the women in his life.
A frequenter of brothels, Ruth had the repu­
tation of having a girl in every town when the
Yankees made their annual trek northward
in 1925 after breaking spring training camp

The advice was ignored and the Babe
remained awash in food and prohibition
boozes. Though he broke into the majors
weighing a solid 195 pounds, he worked at
acquiring his famous torso, a pot belly that
seemingly placed impossible pressure on his
spindly legs. On a comparative basis John L.
had been a crash dieter. Stories of Babe’s
adventures is gastronomy, some surely
apocryphal, are legion. Eighteen eggs for
breakfast. A midnight snack of “eskimo pie,
apple pie, pigs trotters, beans, and beefsteak
pie!” Or the evening when he devoured a
restaurant meal consisting of a double por­
terhouse steak, double orders of lettuce with
dressing, potatoes, and apple pie a la mode.
The next stop was Coney Island where he
washed down eight hot dogs with the same
number of sodas. Before retiring, he returned
to the restaurant and duplicated his earlier
dinner feast.

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A frequenter of brothels, Ruth had the reputa­
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In Florida. During this sojourn Ruth was taken seriously ill and hospitalized, supposedly suffering from "The Bellyache Heard Round the World." It is instructive to note that reporters chose to fabricate by relating the medical problem to the lesser sin of gluttony when the suspicion of insiders was that he had been stricken with "something a bit lower," i.e., venereal disease.

Hindsight provided by a plethora of biographies led to Michael Novak's 1976 devastating denunciation of the "Buffoon, a boor, a sot, a mouthstuffing, insatiable pig."

Novak's was an age for debunking, far removed from the era of Ruth's contemporary sportswriters. No such denunciation, even if inwardly felt, would have been penned by Grantland Rice or Paul Gallico who instead crusaded to convince readers of the wholesomeness of sport. These two luminaries were leading representatives of the "Gee Whizzers" school of sport journalism in the twenties. Professional sport heroes were sanctified by such writers and by the hyperbole of radio announcers whose voices helped convert multitudes of listeners into fans. It was vogue to embellish athletic performances while screening fans from the unpleasant realities.

Sports reporters thus saddled the professional athletes of the first Golden Era of sport with the responsibility, however unsolicited, of being paragons of virtue. They and successors superstars were elevated into the first, the ideal citizens of the land. Despite plays-for-pay lives, from that time until the mid-1960s the typical portrayal was of real-world journalism in the twenties. Professional sport heroes were sanctified by such writers and by the hyperbole of radio announcers whose voices helped convert multitudes of listeners into fans. It was vogue to embellish athletic performances while screening fans from the unpleasant realities.

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This time-honored image which created an innocence of expectation among propagandized fans did little to cushion them from counter-culture shock during the late 1960s. Suddenly, as professional sports popularity surged to unparalleled heights, the media assumed a new role, comonumental with the times. Premising its coverage on the validation of the counter-culture concept that it was psychologically healthier for the average American to look at one another rather than "upwards" for inspiration, TV announcers and especially writers ushered in the age of the anti-hero in sports. Demythologizing a la Jim Bouton's Ball Four became the order of the day, a show-and-tell tearing away at the cover of propriety, pricking the falsely balloonized images of perfection. America's middle class was bewildered and dismayed at this damaging assault, for virtuous sports heroes had been models for dispensing its value system. Sensing its vulnerability, the over-thirty generation was ready to react angrily and with a siege mentality.

Enter Joe Willie Namath and Muhammad Ali. These two performers have had the greatest impact on the nation of any athletes since Babe Ruth -- and greater than the Babe in the sense that their influence extended beyond the gridiron and boxing ring.

After the New York Jets won the bidding war for the University of Alabama's quarterback in 1965, "Broadway" Joe quickly helped turn the AFL pumpkin into Cinderella to the delight of its team owners who via merger of leagues began sharing bonanza TV revenue with their NFL brethren. The 1966 peace settlement did not, however, seem to guarantee playing-field parity, for Green Bay under authoritarian father figure Vince Lombardi methodically whipped AFL opponents in the first championship games climaxing the 1966 and 1967 seasons.

The next year, 1968, stands as the most tragic of a turbulent decade. The year began with the Tet offensive. Americans were then buffeted by assassinations, student unrest, the infamous Chicago convention, and a dramatic transfer of presidential political leadership. Animosities plagued a confused and polarized society.

In the wake of this chaos came Super Bowl III in January, 1969 (the year of Woodstock). The contest assumed meaning disproportionate to a mere game. Traditional NFL fans had to reckon with Namath who, to their way of thinking, had become in two ways the most offensive player in the land. Namath represented an obstruction in the movement to stay the youth culture which was associated with the sexual revolution and peace-now demands. He personified the open, permissive, do-your-own-thing society. No sense in looking for support of tried-and-true values from the man who would author I Can't Wait Until Tomorrow - Because I Get Better Looking Every Day. Flouting his hedonism, eschewing the solid citizen, crew-cut image of Johnny Unitas, careless in violating sacred canons. Namath gleefully informed reporters that his Saturday night method of preparing for Sunday's big game was to "take a broad and a bottle of scotch to bed."

The dramatic mini-war game was for vindication. To the consternation of most "expert" forecasters and NFL enthusiasts the brash, never unassuming Namath ("And we're going to win Sunday, I'll guarantee you") used superb skills and intelligence in guiding his Jets to the Great Upset. Score one for the counter culture.

If Namath rankled the silent majority, Muhammad Ali came to evoke feelings of revulsion from a significant segment of middle class white America. The process was evolutionary, for Cassius Clay's life style and values were initially more satisfactory than Namath's. The apparently patriotic Clay earned gold as the light-heavyweight Olympic champion of 1960 and four years later, as a professional, gained the heavyweight crown by scoring a popular victory over Sonny Liston. To this point the handsome kingpin of boxing had enjoyed every opportunity to broaden his appeal. Few would deny that his considerable skills and wit were doing for boxing what Ruth had done for baseball.

Suddenly the acclaim for the Louisville Lip became muted. "I am the greatest" could be dismissed as acceptable, ticket-hyped entertainment. Dark thoughts of an uppity Jack Johnson-type champ and dreams of a Great White Hope began to develop, howing the solid citizen, crew-cut image of Johnny Unitas, careless in violating sacred canons. Namath gleefully informed reporters that his...
demonstrations that culminated, at least within the world of sports, with the black power clenched-fist salutes from the victory stand by John Carlos and Tommy Smith during a rendition of the “Star Spangled Banner” at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics.

Ali especially twisted the central nerve cord of American society by refusing induction into the armed services and insisting upon conscientious objector status. “I ain’t got no quarrels with them Viet Congs” became a rallying slogan for youthful peace­niks who, of course, ignored the irony of their man’s violent, brutalizing profession. Why balk, why not play the game? Assuredly, there would be special treatment and no worry about being sent to the fighting front. Couldn’t he understand that the object was for the hero to put on a patriotic show for public consumption? History gives us the example of Jack Dempsey trying to overcome his reputation as a World War I shirker by laboring at a defense plant during World War II. Wasn’t that an inspiring proposition? The private lives of Ruth and Cobb had gone unscrutinized, at least compared to those of Namath and Ali. Furthermore, because of natural reticence or media-imposed blinders, these giants of the twenties would never have wandered from the track to comment upon or become involved in issues and events beyond the world of sports.

Conversely, the two unbridled modern superstars thrived on media exposure of their lifestyles which often overshadowed their athletic performances. What’s more, they also, particularly Ali, had the effrontery to vocally advocate political and social causes. Detractors prefer the old-time athlete and can only condemn Namath and Ali for not knowing their place and thereby degrad­

ing the ideal heroic model. Obviously, star­gazing is in the eye of the beholder.

One final note. Though the concept of hero has survived the counter-culture, its meaning has changed. Thus, while debates continue about the responsibility of professional athletes towards social issues, and the degree to which media intrusion into their lives will be tolerated, it is no longer credible to suggest that sainthood is synonymous with athletic prowess. These performers, it appears, have been relieved of a heavy responsibility.

Lest they relax and permit virtue to slip completely away, a warning should be given about a lingering ambiguity towards sports heroes even in our post-innocent society. Halls of Fame continue to proliferate, meccas attracting the faithful to their enshrined heroes whose exploits are immortalized. Our expectations of role models, while changed, have not disappeared. Pure, simplistic hero worship is passe, but the idea of the athlete with special status and special obligations to society, particularly its adolescent component, has not. There are limits to the public’s toleration of reprehensible anti-social behavior.

Baseball speedster Willie Wilson laments that he has been singled out for excessive punishment by being jailed for a drug offense conviction. Unsympathetic fans applaud the sentencing judge. Even in a liberalized society normally devoted to fostering freedom of action, superstars like Wilson would profit by heeding the bitter humor of Finley Peter Dunne’s Mr. Dooley: “When ye build yer triumphal arch to yer conquerin’ hero, Hen­nussey, build it out of bricks so the people will have somethin’ convenient to throw at him as he passes through.”

Phil Silvia, professor of history, teaches a Sport in American Life course. Dr. Silvia co-authored Greater Fall River Baseball: Twenty-Five Major Leaguers in One Hundred Years (1983) and presented a paper at the 1984 national convention of SABR (Society for American Baseball Research) held at Brown University.