Are Athletes Role Models? Essay, Research Paper

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Lately, a topic of great controversy has been whether or not athletes should be looked upon as role models by their fans. Does an athletes responsibilities pertain solely to his performance on the field of play or does it also extend to his personal life as well? There are many who claim that it is wrong for a sophisticated society to impose a set of behavioral expectations on fallible people who just so happen to excel in sports. Some players themselves agree with the fact that they do not and don t expect to be considered role models, such as stated at a press conference by Charles Barkley (www.yaleherald.com/archive/xx/9.8.95/sports/mantle.html). It is my argument that athletes are not only role models but, in today s media driven world, it is their responsibility to exhibit extraordinary judgment and exemplary actions off the field as well.

From the beginning of time, man has looked outside of himself for examples of strength, leadership, and guidance. For heroes. Perhaps it is an acknowledgement of a human flaw. Even the mythological gods possessed powers beyond those of mortal men. Legends are told of men with superhuman strength, endurance, and wisdom. So why would it not seem natural for that same kind of idolatry to be transferred to other human beings with ultra human physical traits? Even fictional characters such as Superman and Paul Bunion had such enormous strength that their contemporaries held them in higher esteem than any mortal. Idealizing may be a sign of a human flaw, but it is natural for someone to see a character performing extraordinary feats and pretend, even for the slightest moment, that themselves have that kind of power. This is the reason why our civilization is so drawn to sport figures, because we see people who are mortal and similar to us do things with their body that we cannot do. As children, we all ran and swam and played ball so we can personally appreciate the difficulty of performing to such high degrees of excellence. For example, I myself am a baseball player. When I look up to professional players such as Ken Griffey Jr., I praise the fact that he has the ability to run from home to first in four seconds, or hit a baseball 500 feet, or make acrobatic plays in the outfield. I see that we are both human and have two arms and two legs, so I can acknowledge the fact that he has some much more potential than myself. Because of that, I praise him.

On a greater scale, sports figures have an enormous impact on many aspects of an individual s life. Children look up to these sports figures as idols who are invincible. And because so many people get emotionally invested while watching sports and become so involved in the game, sports consequently holds a great importance to them in their lives. As Richard Harris Jackson states, the enjoyment we experience emotionally from witnessing the success or victory of a competing individual or team increases with the degree of positive sentiments . . . we feel toward that party (Jackson 135). Thus we look up to great superstars as celebrities. Various commercials and promotional ads place these sports figures on a pedestal that is right in the public s eye for all to see. With the media s portrayal and the athlete s advertising appeal, sports play an exalted role in our lives.

All one has to do is examine the chronology of the 20th century in America s history to note the interrelationship between athletic heroes and the influence they have had on the masses. Babe Ruth is one of the greatest known sports heroes and legends of this century. His strength was prodigious to the point where even today the phrase Ruthion is synonymous with great power. However, it is the time that the Great Bambino came into America s consciousness that added to his stature. For it was in the wake of the Black Sox Scandal that he reclaimed the trust that the public had lost for the game that they loved. And it was ten years later, during the Great Depression that the nation was still able to lose itself in the heroics of this hero who appeared to be unscathed by the financial woes of normal people. Branch Rickey, the ex-owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers stated, he has created an expectation of hero worship on the part of the youth of this country, and it was a most fortunate thing that Ruth kept faith with the boyhood of America because they loved him (http://www.baberuth.com/quote2.html). Likewise, what heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey displayed in the boxing ring also took the country away from their worries. [Dempsey] is widely regarded as one of the pioneers of modern boxing and has gone down in history as one of the toughest men ever to enter the ring (www.cmgww.com/sports/dempsey/dempsey.html). A few decades later, on April 15, 1947, the first black baseball player set foot on a major league baseball field; his name was Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson gave black America hope of one day having equal rights as white America. But as Branch Rickey explained to him then, Jackie was going to experience a great deal of public hatred by racist fans and fellow players. But because the world was going to be watching this great social experiment, he advised Jackie to turn the other cheek. Rickey recognized Robinson s behavioral responsibility and the fact that he was going to be challenged and constantly tested. Jackie s reply of I have more than one cheek, Mr. Rickey was his response. But could one imagine what terrible fate the black cause may have suffered if Robinson, as subject of a nations scrutiny, had acted as combatively as those who baited him. Thus, he broke the color barrier while containing his emotions, which makes him a hero.

Because these people hold our interest and our imagination, whether it is fair of us to or not, it is natural that they are placed in the position of being role models. In the early part of the century, when mass media was still in its infancy, there was a respect that journalists had for the purity of the image of the hero. In those more simple times, the mere act of reporting those events accurately was the main task at hand. And the mere confluence of events, circumstance and timing made the personality of an individual emerge, that was more than enough to satisfy human interest. Back then, if reporters knew of an event that would scar an athlete they simply kept it to themselves. It was as if the journalism community had an unspoken pact that certain personal traits were off base in terms of their reporting. Today, with all the news sources, the Internet, and the rate that news travels, the media is looking for other ways to gather ratings or sell their papers and have consequently looked elsewhere for that edge. For instance, how many ways can someone report game five of the World Series or if someone rushes for a 100 yards in a game? So instead of reporting just the events, the media now digs into the personal lives of these heroes and makes it public. One of the earlier occurrences, happened in July of 1970, when Jim Bouton, a pitcher for the Yankees, published a book, Ball Four, which reported the previous untold stories of his Yankees teammates and other experiences he had while being a professional athlete. This is the first time anyone had ever exposed this kind of negativity about athletes and, at that time, the book was considered to be a breach of loyalty among fellow teammates. For instance, Bouton told about Mickey Mantle s problems with alcohol. Prior to that, in the public s eye, Mantle was a Yankee slugger who was considered to be a hero to anyone who saw him play the game with power and grace. Bouton s book became an instant bestseller and (coupled with the proliferation of media outlets such as cable T.V.) seemed to open the floodgates as to what was fair game for the public consumption. And, because the gossipy part of human nature seems to thrive on people s problems, children were now exposed to the news about these athletes. It wasn t too long before Darryl Strawberry s cocaine abuse and Mike Tyson s rape charges and Dennis Rodman s sexuality were getting more airtime than sports accomplishments.

Children, especially the underprivileged ones, have always believed that success can be gained from thriving in sports, which will eventually lead to money and a ticket out of the ghetto. As stated in the Dictionary of Sports Quotations, by one of Sports Illustrated s writers in 1968, Sports has increased the opportunity of the Negro, and other minorities, to go to college (9). These disadvantaged children, look at the status of these icons, and think to themselves that by playing basketball or football, etc., they could also be there in years to come. From the days that young Native Americans looked up to (and pinned their hopes on) decathlete Jim Thorpe, Italian immigrants to Joe DiMaggio, and black women to Olympians Wilma Rudolph and Florence Griffith Joyner and emulated their every move. And, while it s understandable, I m also thankful that these heroes off the field moves were also worthy of emulation.

By no means is anyone perfect. Even our fictional heroes were flawed or had points of weakness. The Greek warrior Achilles had a body that was indestructible except for a vulnerable heel, and Superman himself was susceptible to kryptonite. So, to idolize a baseball player who’s considered a superstar if he only fails seventy percent of the times that he gets up to bat is, in itself an admission of the nonperfection of the human effort. Then is it too much to expect these fallible human beings to conduct that part of their lives which is out of the spotlight in superstar fashion as well? However, I still maintain that on a mass psychological level it is only human nature to admire our idols – even if it’s for our own selfish needs. Therefore, as long as we’re a society where a disappointed little boy can say Say it ain’t so, Joe to Shoeless Joe Jackson (after his hero was found guilty in the Black Sox scandal of 1919), or a nation where billboards and commercials urge young people in 1999 to Be like Mike, we must accept the fact that the emulation of heroes will always be a part of our lives and that athletes do have a responsibility to behave like Michael Jordan as opposed to Mike Tyson. Therefore, sports figures are definitely role models, but not all are necessarily good ones.

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