

The Week that Was

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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Some may regard this as one of the strangest weeks ever in Sportsworld. Certainly the less than forthcoming appearance by Lance Armstrong with Oprah had some surrealistic qualities. After years, or even decades, of denial, Armstrong told America's mother-confessor that, yes, he had indulged in all sorts of performance enhancement techniques to win his record seven Tour de France crowns. The fact that he had taken PED's surprised no one, but the fact that he did a TV confessional- "bless me Oprah for I have sinned"- surprised a lot of people both in and out of the cycling community.

Overshadowing all this was the story reported by "Deadspin" on Tuesday that the Manti Te'o story featuring the death of his "girlfriend" was bogus. There was no girlfriend, dead or alive. For those of us who thought that "catfish" was a featured dish in southern cuisine, it was even a bigger surprise, if not one of the most bizarre, weird, or creepy stories from the world of sport, at least post-Sandusky.

Notre Dame has done its best to protect Te'o and their image by backing their star linebacker completely. Te'o has now held his interview with Jeremy Schaap, off-camera rather than on. Manti says he was the victim of a hoax. The perpetrator has apologized via Twitter and has been fingered by several witnesses. All the answers are not yet in, and over the next days and weeks no doubt there will be more revealed, including the reaction of Manti's teammates.

Te'o has been in consultation with his advisors at IMG (There is a sentence that could only be written of a college athlete in the last couple of decades). They kept him away from the press until last night, and no doubt furiously prepped him on how to sound truthful and sympathetic while not necessarily revealing all. At this hour it appears Te'o has pulled that off, at least with Jeremy Schaap and those who decide on truth at ESPN.

While Te'o was making a run at the Heisman Trophy he seemed to be willing to talk with anyone holding a camera or a microphone, and he was especially forthcoming about the tragedy of the nearly simultaneous deaths of his grandmother and his girlfriend. His girlfriend had been in an automobile accident and while being treated for her

injuries, was diagnosed with leukemia. Through it all Manti was virtually and electronically at her side, inspiring her as he inspired his teammates at Notre Dame.

It was such a heart wrenching story given a perfect climax when Te'o played a great game against Michigan State the following Saturday. It didn't end there as he led the Irish to an undefeated season and the BCS Championship Game, and versions of the story were told over and over again.

It was the stuff of American athletic myth and the story of heroism by a student athlete. Te'o was described with a torrent of adjectives and adverbs that overrode the memory of Rockne and the Gipper. He was a warrior, a gladiator, a hero of gigantic proportions sprung from the ordinary soil of America and the culture of football. He was a leader of his team, a man dedicated to his teammates and his family, and someone who faced personal loss head-on in a manner befitting the gridiron greats and the great men in history.

The television announcers could not find enough superlatives to describe his every action. Brent Musburger was more moved by Manti than by Miss Alabama. His tackles were like no others. His techniques were the very best. When interviewed on television he choked up while recalling the wonderful qualities of his girlfriend. And as a bonus he was a religious young man, a man of the Mormon faith, who prayed over his decision to choose Notre Dame over Southern California, Holy Woods over Hollywood.

Reporters from reputable national newspapers and magazines repeated this heartwarming and heart-wrenching story adding bits and pieces to it. The American hero making machine was in top creative form and running overtime. *Sports Illustrated* reported on the car accident that didn't happen, while *The South Bend Tribune* reported on the bone marrow transplant that never was. The funeral, when it came, was in a city that didn't exist.

And it goes on and on.

What can be made of this inspiring story that was devoured by the press and the public? It really is quite simple. We love heroes and we especially love them when they are dressed in a uniform and are performing great deeds in or out of the arena.

Unfortunately this never seems to be enough. We want our sports stars to be heroes of character and quality. We want it so much that when a sports figure achieves greatness on the field of play, we almost immediately assume he or she must have the heroic qualities of a great human being. This tendency has led to disillusionment over and over again. Lance Armstrong is a recent illustration, as is Tiger Woods, while Pete Rose serves as a model from an earlier time.

It wasn't enough that Manti Te'o was a great football player, when it was so easy to make him so much more. The fallen sports stars litter the pages of sport history and their number will continue to grow as long as Americans want sports heroes and not just sports stars, and continue to mistake one for the other.

There will always be those around willing to create the sports hero out of the thinnest of evidence, as there is generally a buck to be made by someone out of this process. It sells newspapers, raises TV ratings, increases hits on websites and blogs, raises the profile of universities, and promotes Heisman Trophy candidacies.

There are a host of people complicit in this story, but none more complicit than a public longing for sports heroes and not just excellence in sport.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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