

6-30-2015

A-Rod

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "A-Rod" (2015). *On Sport and Society*. 11.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/11>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
June 30, 2015

The past few weeks have been full of riveting sport. The Stanley Cup Final proved to be one of the most exciting in several years as no team enjoyed more than a one goal lead until the last few minutes of the final game. The NBA finals were marked by expected and unexpected star performances. The College World Series went down to the final game in the best of three series with Virginia besting Vanderbilt. And continuing this week is the Women's World Cup which has offered both newcomers and established teams a chance to shine in this world class event.

Despite all of these marvelous displays of sport I have been increasingly captivated by the resurrection of Alex Rodriguez who is having an improbable run after the absence from the field of play for a full season. The experts assured us that no one, particularly at A-Rod's age, could possibly perform at a high level after such a layoff. It simply could not be done.

Watching A-Rod and watching those watching A-Rod has been a hypnotizing exercise especially in the reactions to his achievements. What are we talking about when we are talking about A-Rod: His failures? Our naiveté? Our own fears? The violation of our values? Or something deeper than that, something well below the conscious level?

The path traveled by Alex Rodriguez has been a long and twisting one. From early stardom in Seattle to the first mega-contract in Texas his relationship with the fans fractured. Whose fault was it that the Texas owner threw massive amounts of money at this young man? Although the owner was ridiculed for outbidding himself, the brunt of negative reaction seems to have dropped on A-Rod. Discussion of his salary replaced any discussion of the player. Without perfection he would be judged a failure, because no level of performance could justify his obscene salary.

In addition he didn't handle the acclaim and the criticism all that well. He wasn't the clean proper middle class athlete who adorns a Wheaties box and shares breakfast time with America's future athletes. He was a Latino hero and from Miami, a place of too many immigrants in a middle class white world. His style didn't fit the world

envisioned by sportswriters and many baseball fans. He lacked the social graces expected of our heroes.

Then he was off to New York where he was again judged for carrying too big a salary and wearing no World Series rings. He was by all accounts the best shortstop in the major leagues and a threat to Derick Jeter the darling of Yankeedom, who had all the social graces. So it was A-Rod who announced he would move to third-base, and the petulant Jeter who refused to even consider such a thing. How could anyone even think about replacing Jeter with the best shortstop in baseball? So A-Rod simply became one of the best third-basemen in baseball, and the resentment only mounted. When he continued his poor performances in big games the discontent mounted.

The one positive about A-Rod seemed to be that he could save baseball from the horrible fate of Barry Bonds becoming the all-time home run leader. Then it turned out that A-Rod himself was using PED's and could save us from no one. The PED saga and the way in which A-Rod conducted his spate of denials and admissions further damaged his public image. And when it finally came to the one season suspension there was relief that he was gone, with the high likelihood he would never return.

But he did return.

A-Rod's home run totals have reached milestones; he reached the coveted 3,000 hit level, and at age 40 the home runs, hits, and rbi's just keep on coming. He is now carrying his team on his back. He passed Willie Mays and is now fourth on the all-time home run list. Questions have been raised about the legitimacy of these statistics but they are hard numbers to ignore.

It is probably justifiable to discount the home run total due to the PED use. But how much? Does anyone really know how many home runs are added by PEDs? Should it be a ten percent discount? Or perhaps fifteen percent? Or maybe only one or two percent? If some of A-Rod's home runs were hit off pitchers using PEDs are these then legitimate home runs? It is a murky swamp of statistics with no clear standards of measurement in a sport driven by numbers.

And what about the 3000 hits? Can PEDs help you make contact with the ball which then results in a hit? Again

who knows? Even if the answer is yes, again the issue will be how much should be discounted from the 3000?

What we are now seeing is a baseball player at an advanced age absent from the major leagues for a year returning to perform near the top of the expectations for a 40 year old star. We are seeing the result of a year of very hard work to stay sharp and stay in shape, thereby defying the experts. We are watching a transformed Alex Rodriguez. Is this a Redemption scenario similar to the kind of public redemption that Babe Ruth did twice in the 1920s? Ruth was praised as a repentant sinner purified by contact with nature on his New England farm by the myth-making press.

So what are we talking about when we're talking about A-Rod? Redemption has usually been welcomed in our culture. The reformed sinner is a staple of our heroic tales. Does A-Rod fit this description?

Perhaps this is about the ambivalence we have about drugs, cheating, and their relationship to achievement and records. Or it may have something to do with the ambivalence about sport and the excessive wealth in our celebrity sports culture. It could be all of these, some of these, or none of them.

I suspect that some of the conversation about A-Rod, both positive and negative, turns on ethnicity. Whatever it is, we are still talking about A-Rod and that alone no doubt pleases him.

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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