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## In Memoriam Joe DiMaggio

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I met a man today who claims he once saw Joe DiMaggio drop a fly ball. In a game. I didn't know whether to believe him or not. Then he told me that Joe hit a 10th inning home run to win the game. This gave the story a modicum of credibility. Yes, I suppose it could have happened.

At age eighty-four Joe D's championship spirit gave out after several weeks of struggle. The epitome of the Yankee Dynasty in the middle period of the 20th century, Joe DiMaggio is truly one of those people for whom the word "icon" is appropriate. There remains a quasi-religious reverence surrounding any discussion of the Yankee Clipper with members of his baseball generation.

My own memories of the baseball DiMaggio are on the fringes of my mind. He retired after the 1951 season when I was ten, only a year or two after television entered my world. Of course I have since seen the film clips and read and heard the recollections of others, but in fact my own memory has little direct evidence of DiMaggio the player.

DiMaggio the legend is of course very much a part of my life: His marriage to Marilyn Monroe, the hero and the sex symbol, was glamorous, short-lived and left a air of the tragic surrounding DiMaggio. His evocation in the popular culture especially in the Paul Simon song from the quintessential film of the Sixties, "The Graduate," added to his mythic qualities. Then there is the DiMaggio of recent years with all those appearances in Yankee Stadium as The Legend. He would be there each opening day to throw out the first ball, and he would be the last one introduced on Old Timer's Day by that unmistakable voice from the Yankee press box. The name echoed through the stadium and through the hearts and minds of all who were there in person or via TV.

DiMaggio's legend grew for me as I worked on book on baseball in the Twenties and Thirties. From the stories in The Sporting News published the year before he burst upon Yankee Stadium through the record breaking season of 1941 I read every line written about the Yankee Clipper in the Bible of Baseball. Before I finished the research I felt like I knew the players of those two decades as well as many who lived through the period. The word pictures of DiMaggio left a powerful impression on me.

The records achieved by this great player will be recounted over and over in the next few days and there is no need to mention all of them here. The most famous of course was the fifty-six game hitting streak in 1941. Two things strike me about that streak that are not always noted. One is that after the streak was broken in game fifty-seven, he went on to hit safely in the next sixteen games. The other is that in 1935 with the AAA San Francisco Seals DiMaggio had a sixty-one game hitting streak.

More impressive is DiMaggio the icon, the legend, the symbol. When he came to Yankees in 1936 he was immediately dubbed the successor to Babe Ruth. For many rookies this may have been the kiss of death, a burden too great carry. To Joe DiMaggio it seemed to be more like a natural designation.

Quickly he assumed another burden, that of representative of the Italian community, and to some degree the American immigrant community. In 1939 Life found him doing well in that department, able to speak English without an accent and well adapted to U.S. mores. "Instead of olive oil or smelly bear grease he keeps his hair slick with water. He never reeks of garlic and prefers chicken chow mein to spaghetti."

He became the most American of heroes: Les Brown's band recording "Joltin' Joe DiMaggio; Hemingway's Old Man invoking his spirit; Paul Simon asking where he had gone; the sailors singing his name in "South Pacific." His name could be referenced most anywhere and it carried the power of both recognition and respect. Perhaps as remarkable as anything was the fact that he was able to make commercials for a bank and coffee machine and not lose his dignity.

Like Charles Lindbergh he became a "celebrity recluse" able to maintain his privacy while holding the attention of everyone whenever and wherever he wanted. His death came almost as he might have planned it, too late for the morning papers.

Yankee Manager Joe McCarthy felt that DiMaggio was never fully appreciated. His catches were never spectacular because he knew exactly where the ball was going, and got there before it did. He didn't need to make the diving catch at his shoe tops, or the catch with his body outstretched parallel to the ground. He was simply that good.

In the end his memory will be most potent patrolling the vastness of centerfield at Yankee Stadium where he displayed beauty, grace, style and certitude. His attractiveness lay in

the flawless perfection of his movement in the field and the mechanical precision with which he swung his bat.

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

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