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Pee Wee Reese and Stefi Graf and Us

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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One of those inevitabilities of human existence struck twice over the past few days in the world of sport, reminding us that the ultimate failure of the human body remains the fate of us all. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why we put such a high value on sport, representing as it does the transcendence of the body over reality, often driven by the mind and heart.

On Saturday came word that Pee Wee Reese was dead of cancer at age 81. The day before Steffi Graf had announced her retirement from tennis at age 30. These two athletes also are a reminder that we love sport because it embodies beauty, grace and the heroic.

There are the heroes on the field who often do not match their heroism off. Harold "Pee Wee" Reese was one of those whose actions beyond the diamond more than matched his high level of athletic performance. As shortstop and captain of the Brooklyn Dodgers in the 40s and 50s Reese was a key figure in the drama of Baseball's Great Experiment. He was a team leader and a southerner raised in a world of racial segregation. Teammates, opponents, and fans all respected him and many would take their cues on the Robinson matter from Pee Wee.

When a petition circulated against Robinson among the Dodger players Reese refused to sign. When he was razzed by his navy shipmates about the Dodgers signing a Negro shortstop he did not take the bait. As Jules Tygiel points out what was most important in Reese's reaction was that he treated Robinson no differently than his other teammates. Robinson appreciated this more than anything else Reese did.

And he did do more. On an off day Reese was golfing with a foursome of other players and reporters. Behind them Jackie Robinson and a black reporter were playing together. Seeing this Reese stopped play and invited the two black men to join their teammates and colleagues and enjoy the remainder of the round together. Early in Jackie's second season Reese was being hounded by Boston players for playing beside a "nigger." Reese said nothing. Instead he walked over to Robinson and put his arm around Jackie's shoulder.

There are a couple of things to note about Reese and his actions. First, these actions were testimony given by a decent human being. He knew the meaning of the word "teammate" and knew

it applied to all members of the team. Second, it is important to remind ourselves that Reese was a southerner: Not because this made his actions extraordinary, but because it made his actions ordinary.

For all of us Yankees who like to scoff at the evocation of the "Southern gentlemanly ideal," Reese is a reminder that such an ideal existed and for those raised in it and who took it to heart, it was an ideal that had consequences in human conduct.

So in the death of Reese one must praise him not as a Hall of Famer, but as a human being, who lived by a set of ideals that accentuated his humanity.

Steffi Graf's departure is of course of a different sort. She now passes not out of this world, but only out of the world of sport, having made her mark as an outstanding tennis player.

In Graf's case too her conduct off the field of play matched her extraordinary skill on the tennis court. She dominated her sport for twelve years winning 107 WTA titles, 22 Grand Slam events, and had a career winning percentage of .887. Her speed, footwork, and power took tennis to a new level. Her forehand is the best ever seen on the circuit. She was a perfectionist and her inability to continue seeking, and occasionally achieving, perfection led to her decision to walk away from the game.

She loved tennis, but as her body began to betray her, she was no longer able to experience the joy she took from playing the game.

Graf should be remembered as well for the ordeals that she endured from off the court. Her father and first coach were in many ways her greatest burden. His problems with marital fidelity, alcohol, and the management of Steffi's money must have weighed heavily upon her. He spent two years in jail for a failure to pay the proper taxes on Steffi's earnings. As her money manager he was responsible and he did the time. How much guilt Steffi carried from that will likely never be known. He was that difficult combination of good father and major embarrassment.

The fact that Monica Seles had come on the scene to challenge Graf's reign on the courts promised the world of tennis a great rivalry. When a crazed fan of Graf stabbed Seles, the rivalry and Seles' career were both victims. The affect on Graf had to be significant. The effect on tennis certainly was.

Through all of this Steffi Graf remained the quiet and shy young woman who at age 13 turned professional. She was not a whiner nor complainer, just a great tennis player.

Reese and Graf are two reasons we love the games. They embodied the very best 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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