

5-26-1993

Sporting Heroes as Role Models

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Sporting Heroes as Role Models" (1993). *On Sport and Society*. 232.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/232>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
May 26, 1993

Charles Barkley has been in our face now for several weeks with a commercial for one of those tiresome shoe companies in which he announces: "I am not a role model. I am not paid to be a role model... parents should be role models...I am paid to wreak havoc on a basketball court. Just because I can dunk a basketball doesn't mean I should raise your kids."

Thank you Sir Charles. I have been waiting to hear someone say that for a long time now.

But apparently others have not. Since this commercial first aired nearly a month ago, a debate has raged on talk radio, on TV, and in print about this message from Barkley. One report indicates that a number of inner-city youngsters in New York want Charles to come to their neighborhood and explain just what he means, because they do consider him a role model. A pastor of a local church wrote in The Orlando Sentinel that Charles and others in the public limelight have an obligation to those who make heroes of them, to be role models, and this is the reason that Nike pays Charles so much.

The pastor is right about why Nike pays Sir Charles, but he is dead wrong about Charles needing to be a role model. The problem is precisely that Nike finds Charles Barkley an exploitable commodity to sell its product. Nike came to that conclusion because Charles is a well-known celebrity basketball player who has been cast as a role model by society. This happened because there is some very twisted thinking out there about the connections between high moral character and the ability to bounce, hit, or throw a ball.

This notion that athletic skill and high morals are connected goes back to the 1850's when Thomas Hughes wrote Tom Brown's Schooldays describing the idyllic life at Rugby School, where headmaster Thomas Arnold taught the lessons of life on the playing field. This novel was immensely popular and influential in Britain and America and had a profound influence on American sporting life, making the term "Muscular Christianity" part of the American sporting vocabulary.

The notion that athletics and sport build character comes directly from this influence. These tendencies were re-enforced by two other British sources: the concept of amateurism, which is one of the most fraudulent concepts in sport, and the notion

that the British soldier was prepared for war on the playing fields of Eaton.

These concepts were Americanized by the writers of children's literature at the turn of the century, who created Frank Merriwell, Dink Stover, and Baseball Joe; and by advocates of sport, especially on the college campus, where sport was introduced with the rationale that it would toughen a generation of American young men who seemed to be going soft in the luxury of urban life. The claim was that sport would prepare young men for the increasingly competitive business environment and that it would redirect potentially destructive energies as well as sexual energy. It would, in short, build character.

And so these dangerous notions were imbedded into American culture in the form of a myth that being an athlete of great skill, a hero of the playing field, guaranteed that the person was also of high moral character; the kind of person you would seek to emulate, or that you would wish your children to emulate, the kind of person who would be a role model.

Those who swing a bat, bounce a ball, or run for a touchdown, have heroic qualities attributed to them, and unfortunately this attribution is unaccompanied by critical examination. Anyone who looks at the process long enough should realize that hitting a ball produces no moral imperatives, and that qualities of character are not shaped by the processes of broken-field running.

In the 20th century the sellers of commercial products have exploited this mythic connection for their own purposes, and this has reached a fever pitch in the last two decades. What the local pastor needs to do, and what all of us need to do, is heed the words of Charles Barkley. He is not a role model, he is not a hero, he is a basketball player.

Let us simply call Charles and other athletes what they are. They are people of extraordinary athletic skill who play our sports better than anyone else in the society. Let us admire them for that skill. It is awesome. It approaches the human desire to achieve perfection. There is a beauty to this skill because it reflects the outer edge of human possibilities. It is no more than that, but that is clearly enough, if only we would let it be.

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