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## The Year of Mark McGwire

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It is over. There is a new single season home run king of all the major leagues. The records of Maris and Ruth and Wilson have fallen and Mark McGwire is at the top of list in both leagues. He has in fact demolished the record with home runs of, shall we say it, "Ruthian proportions."

Home run sixty-two which came Tuesday night was McGwire's shortest of the season, but if those watching happened to blink they probably missed it as it was one of the hardest hit balls you will ever see. The one that tied Maris on Monday afternoon was considerably longer, as was the one that tied Ruth.

It has been a wonderful baseball season and certainly it has been so in large part because of the achievements of Mark McGwire, although there are many other stories out there which have added to the luster of the game that still is in many ways the National Pastime.

McGwire's year has been a long one, and in many ways a difficult one. Until a few weeks ago it seemed as if the Cardinal first baseman was not enjoying the attention gravitating to him. Indeed questions about Maris and the record early in the season were silly at best. Until McGwire went shooting past fifty home runs it looked as if he might be repeating the agony of Roger Maris.

I don't know if somehow getting to fifty so early took some of the pressure off, or if it was the comradery that developed between Sammy Sosa and Mark McGwire that changed things. Perhaps it was something else in the personal life of the slugger. Whatever it was, it was clear that McGwire was ready to ride the wave, enjoy the ride, and that he began to feel the joy that a nation was feeling in his accomplishments.

Indeed the fact that nearly the entire nation was cheering him on, and was cheering on Sammy Sosa, may have been the single most important thing that happened. When Maris chased Ruth, Maris was seen as a man about to desecrate a sacred shrine and many opening cheered against him. The baseball establishment wavered between aloofness and hostility to Maris, while McGwire was embraced by a city and a nation, and the baseball establishment recognized the value of Big Mac as a regenerating force for the game.

The historic moment itself captured in microcosm what is so appealing about this game, what keeps it at the center of the

fabric of American life. When Mark McGwire crossed home plate on Monday and Tuesday he was met by his son. He lifted him into the air, hugged him and kissed him. At the same time McGwire's father and mother were in the stands and when number sixty-one went out it was a birthday present for McGwire's father who turned sixty-one that day. Three generations of McGwires shared the moment.

In addition the Maris family was there to share the moment as well. Roger's wife was in the hospital in St. Louis, but his sons and daughters and their spouses and children were there to participate in the historic moment. Fathers, sons, mothers, daughters, families all participating in history together. Donald Hall's essay title, "Father's Playing Catch With Sons," captured something at the center of the national love affair with baseball, and during these celebrations in St. Louis this characteristic seemed to be recapitulated any number of times.

In addition it seemed to me that there was something especially touching about the participation of the Maris family as it gave to Roger Maris a national spotlight in an atmosphere of joy that he never fully enjoyed in his lifetime.

Even in the radio and television coverage the intergenerational theme was played with Joe and Jack Buck of the Cardinals, and Chip Carey, grandson of the great Cardinal announcer Harry Carey, all in the house describing the game and the moment. The Cardinal family too was represented with Stan "the Man" Musial, Red Schoendienst, and Lou Brock all in attendance.

To have Sammy Sosa there and part of the celebration was another plus for the game. Sosa has endeared himself to a nation over the past months, and it seems to me he has helped McGwire through his ordeal. He has also reminded everyone what a significant contribution the Latin players make to the National Pastime.

Something needs to be said about the baseball fans who participated in a very big way throughout this event. For weeks and months now we have heard about how much the ball will be worth, how much the collectors would pay, how the vultures would pounce at the historic moment. Down the stretch as the historic balls were hit -56, 57, 60, 61 -the fan who got the ball came forward to present it to Mark McGwire. There were no sales, no greed, no extortion. Just fans bringing forward each home run ball and wanting to meet their hero and get a souvenir and a memory.

Of course when sixty-two went out it did not reach the stands and the fans. Given what had happened over the previous week or so,

and given the many fans who were interviewed and vowed to give the ball to McGwire, we can choose to think that the much anticipated greed would not appear. Just because modern sport is full of greed doesn't mean that the fans are greedy. Indeed the limited evidence here would indicate they are not. There is light in a dark world, or at least I will choose to think it.

Finally baseball is a game that transcends time and has a long and distinguished history. The names of Babe Ruth, Hack Wilson, and Roger Maris whose careers span nearly eight decades of baseball history were everywhere during the past several weeks and months. These home runs by McGwire also brought to mind recall all those other historic and electric home runs of the past. The mind plays them back even as they are recalled on tape and film and in stills on television. The memories flood in, moments of ones life rush forward, simple joys with family and friends are recalled. This is part of the essence of this game, and why the greed of owners, players, agents, collectors, or anyone else can not destroy it.

Baseball remains a worthy National Pastime.

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