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## Mickey Mantle

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
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It has been a long time since there was so much talk of heroes around the sports scene. Two weeks ago this talk was precipitated by the news that Mickey Mantle was paying the price for his alcoholism and would undergo a liver transplant. Of interest to me was the fact that virtually no one suggested that Mantle was any less a great American hero in the face of his well documented alcoholism.

Indeed it sounded on some of the talk shows that Mickey was a saint of the church now threatened with martyrdom. He was eulogized and blubbered over by baseball fans who grew up idolizing the Mick. They did not want to see him die, see him suffer, or even see him as anything other than a perfect human being.

Robert Lipsyte in The New York Times recalled that Mantle was a hero to those white male fans who came to sports consciousness in the fifties. Lipsyte believes that Mantle perfectly played out the myth of the cold war icon, the shy westerner who played through pain. He also was the player who embodied the cool of the fifties, so cool in fact that he was offended by the style of Pete Rose. It was Mantle who hung the term "Charlie Hustle" on Pete, and it was not meant to be a compliment.

Mickey Mantle was a name that had a special meaning for my generation of baseball fans first as a hero, and then as a fallen hero who came to represent the hypocrisy of the fifties when flawed human beings were turned into flawless gods for young boys to emulate.

When Jim Bouton unloaded in his now classic book Ball Four, Mantle was revealed as a drunk, a womanizer, and a very unpleasant human being who could be extremely cruel to teammates and fans. Mickey Mantle banging bus doors on the hands of small boys, or rudely and crudely refusing to sign autographs, was not the Mantle of the sportspages of the fifties. And Bouton's book was one more of those revelations during the sixties which stripped away the facade of a perfect America, to reveal the dark underside of even a Mickey Mantle in this decade of shattered dreams.

So a year ago when Mantle entered the Betty Ford clinic it was no big surprise, and last week when his liver gave up under the pressures of abuse, it was no surprise either. The only real surprise is that so many people were still clinging to the Mick

as hero. Would you really want your children to emulate this pathetic character? Are we so desperate for heroes that we must still cling to this broken icon of the past?

In the midst of mulling these questions over I came upon an obituary of one of my favorite Minnesota Twins of the early sixties. Certainly he was not a hero of the status of Mantle, but he was a very good baseball player who got the most out of his limited talents, and enough to be voted MVP in the American League in 1965. He was the first Latin American player to be so honored, as he helped lead the Twins to their first American league pennant.

I'm talking of course about Zoilo Versalles who died last week at age 55 in Bloomington, Minnesota, the southern suburb of Minneapolis where he enjoyed so much success at shortstop in Metropolitan Stadium. Born in Havana he was signed to a baseball contract by the Washington Senators who signed so many other great Cuban players over the years. In 1961 he arrived in Minneapolis with the Senators who had taken on the identity of the Minnesota Twins.

Certainly there are many baseball fans in the Orlando area who remember the slightly built Cuban star who took his spring training here. Zoilo was an all-star in 1963 and again in 1965 when he led the league in doubles, triples, runs scored, and hit 19 home runs, drove in 77 runs as a leadoff man, and hit .273. He was also one of the few Twins who carried their big bats into the 1965 World Series.

After 1965 Versalles' career went into quick decline, a swift and cruel slide to oblivion. In 1968 he was no longer a Twin and was out of the majors by 1971. A year in Japan ended his career. Returning to the Twin Cities he found that life was very difficult. He had never learned to read or write English, and a back injury added to his difficulties in finding a job.

Eventually Zoilo hit bottom having to sell his MVP trophy, his all-star rings, and his gold glove. Added to this were two heart attacks, stomach surgery, the collapse of his marriage, and a foreclosure on his home. It was a difficult end for the 1965 MVP who played so well for a short and glorious period, but who finally collapsed in the face of a very harsh reality.

How different are the stories of Mickey and Zoilo? And what do those differences tell us about our life and times.

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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