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Ripkin Catches and Passes Gehrig

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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On Tuesday, the day Cal Ripken tied Lou Gehrig's record at 2130 games, I opened my mail to find the latest copy of Aethlon: The Journal of Sport Literature. On page 55 was a short story titled "Streaks" by David Zang. It is a very funny story of a Baltimore fan who takes it upon himself to end Cal's streak and it involves the O's mascot.

That night as I came out of class and got into my car I heard that the game in Baltimore was now official, and Ripken had tied Gehrig. Zang's tale was indeed fiction. Life had not imitated art. Cal had gone 3 for 5 with a home run, and tied the Iron Horse in style.

On Wednesday night it was more of the same. Another homer in the fourth inning and Camden Yards erupted. Then in the middle of the fifth with the Orioles leading the new record had been set. For the next 22 minutes and change the crowd roared its approval, Ripken took curtain call after curtain call, and then in one of the moments that will enter baseball lore, Cal took a lap around the field shaking hands with fans, security guards, his teammates in the bullpen, and the entire California bench.

In the stands his wife and children looked on, as did his brother Billy who once played alongside him at second base. The President and Vice-President of the United States were there with their children. Bill Clinton said he was at the game as a fan, but also as the President of the United States because he felt it was an event worthy of the presence of the President.

Clinton also talked about the significance of the event. It was a night to honor Ripken, but also a night for all those who go to work every day, who live quiet and ordinary lives, who are consistent and dependable. It was a night in which baseball, so racked by division and greed over the previous couple of years once again focused on the game and focused on the history of the game.

Indeed this event points out one of the great charms of baseball with all of its statistical obsessions. Here was one man being measured against another man whom he had never met, but whose accomplishment lived through the record, and now that record was being challenged and broken. Across time Cal Ripken had surpassed one of the greatest accomplishments of Lou Gehrig. Players from two different eras were suddenly competing one with the other.

There are any number of similarities between these two players from different times and different places. They both played for their home team, something that has always been a rarity in professional sport. Gehrig grew up in New York, went to Columbia for a year, and then to the Yankees. Ripken grew up in the Baltimore area and around the ball club as his father coached and briefly managed the O's.

Both Ripken and Gehrig were quiet and colorless players. Strong, reliable, and drab personalities they were hardly noticed as they went about their business day by day. In Gehrig's case, although he put up spectacular numbers he seldom received much press. He was almost always in the shadow of Ruth. During his best World Series at the bat, Gehrig was taken out of the headlines by Babe Ruth's "called shot." That same year, 1932, Gehrig had a game in which he hit four home runs, but it went virtually unnoticed in New York. It was the same day that longtime Giants manager and beloved New Yorker John McGraw died.

It is in fact instructive that this excellent ball player who put up tremendous numbers at the plate, is best known for his farewell speech, for that poignant scene at Yankee Stadium in 1939 when he stood before the crowd a dying man and told the fans that he was the luckiest man on the face of the earth.

As for Cal Ripken he too was never much noticed nor fully appreciated by those outside of Baltimore. There were always others in Baltimore more spectacular. The great pitching staffs with Boddiker, MacGregor, Flanagan, Martinez; the great hitting of Eddie Murray; the color of Dempsey and Lowenstein; and always Earl Weaver- Uncle Earl kicking dirt on umpires.

Only in the past few years, as the streak has been noticed, has Cal received his due as a player. He like Gehrig has put up excellent numbers, and he has been consistently one of the best fielding shortstops in the game--an all-star repeatedly. Now he has surpassed Gehrig's mark which no one thought could be touched, and he has done it at shortstop, and done it while playing more than 99% of all the innings over the time of the streak.

It was a great moment and one can hope that the emotions let loose by Cal Ripken in Camden Yards Wednesday night before a national radio and television audience and a full stadium can help to heal baseball's self-inflicted wounds.

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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