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The Trial of O.J. Simpson

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The end of the trial of O.J. Simpson once again raises the question of whether or not this was a sports story. ESPN the all sports cable network covered the trial, had their own expert lawyer analyst, covered the verdict, and had a special on Tuesday night summarizing the case. ESPN Radio along with most other sports talk networks and stations were also on hand to cover the verdict.

In the United States where sport, entertainment, and celebrity have become nearly indistinguishable, the arrest and trial of one of the major stars of college and professional football would naturally attract this sort of attention. But still, is this a sports story? Is it not more properly characterized as a sensational news story which happens to involve a former sports celebrity and a current TV, movie, and commercial star?

Nonetheless one could regard this as a sports story, at least within a certain context. For the people of Buffalo and Southern California where Simpson was a hero of professional and college football, where people had invested a great deal emotionally in an admiration and adulation of Simpson, this was a sports story. The man they knew and worshipped for his football prowess and his seemingly fine off-field character suddenly fell from grace.

These and other football fans had taken O.J. Simpson and turned him into a hero. He was someone they had come to idolize because of his on-field abilities. The on-field adulation was then mistakenly transferred off the field, and this greatest fallacy of the modern sports culture was accepted. The people who were fans of O.J. Simpson assumed that on-field achievement was somehow a sign of off-field character.

This did not happen by accident, nor without considerable assistance from the media, public relations, and advertising industries. O.J. was first turned into a celebrity. He was taught how to stand in front of a camera and sound articulate. He was shown how one projects sincerity, warmth, and depth, without ever having to possess any of those qualities. He was taken to the right hair stylist, dressed in precisely the right clothes tailored to a perfect fit, down to the now famous designer gloves. He had the wonderful nickname, "O.J." and later was known simply as "The Juice."

The pernicious quality of this off-field image-making comes out of the fact that as he learned the role, he became the role. As

he became the role, he was no longer Orenthal James Simpson. He was "The Juice," a fascinating creation of the public relations personnel of some high powered firm of image makers. He was the nice, smiling, mild-mannered, charming, African-American turned into a middle class white man. He was a powerful non-threatening young African-American male, who had become so white that his violation of the strongest sexual taboo of race didn't even seem to matter.

Simpson amassed wealth through football, then through his product endorsement at levels never before achieved by an African-American sports celebrity although later surpassed by Michael. After his playing days he moved to television and the movies. For years ABC and NBC sought in vain to find a television broadcasting role that "The Juice" could handle, and for the most part the challenge was too much for him. Finally as a sideline interviewer or studio commentator he seemed to have found a role that did not require extended articulation, and a role in which his smile, good looks, and brief inane comments seemed to be just right.

Then it was on to the movies where more often than not he played "The Juice." No acting beyond this primarily role he had already learned was required. Style without substance was no detriment here either, and although no one would call him a great actor or even a movie star, he was able to continue to build his image as a major celebrity.

Throughout the creation and development of The Juice, the man inside the shell, Orenthal James Simpson, remained out of public view. But as we now know he was still there and was well-known to intimate friends. He could appear with disturbing and violent frequency. Two wives, two families, and who knows how many others were terrorized by Orenthal James Simpson. His pattern of domestic violence apparently triggered by fierce jealousy is now well documented. There can be no more excuses, no more claims that we didn't know about this other O.J. Simpson. We know and it should matter, but you can be sure that the PR people will try their best to resurrect "The Juice."

The Juice is dead. O.J. Simpson was found not guilty of two murders. But he still is Orenthal James Simpson, wife abuser and a man of uncontrolled violence. He might have been a football hero, but he should never have been, nor ever again should be, a hero off the field.

The price of illusion, is disillusion.

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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