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Dwight Gooden

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In New York everything is the biggest and the best. The highs are higher and the lows are lower. It is of course the center of the American universe. Just ask anyone from New York and they will be more than happy to tell you.

This was driven home once again this past week when Dwight Gooden pitched a no-hitter for the Yankees, and the baseball universe stopped. Because it was Gooden it had special meaning. The destruction of "Doc" Gooden of the New York Mets by drugs was a well-documented, indeed over-documented story. It was to be sure a human tragedy of the Greek variety. The young talented teenager had come to New York, conquered the city with his talent, charmed the city with his personality, and then let the corruption of this city drag him into the depths. Gooden's Achilles heel turned out to be drugs and an immaturity that left him ill-equipped to handle the fame and fortune showered down upon him.

When he fell the Greek chorus of the New York and national media lamented his downfall to the point of wallowing in it. They denounced the fallen hero for his weakness and portrayed him as one who betrayed his public, his teammates, and the kiddies of the nation. The failed attempts at rehabilitation only added to the volume of the chorus. Dwight Gooden had become the object lesson of all that was wrong with the young ungrateful millionaires who had been godded by the press and indulged with privilege by the corrupt system of celebrity sport.

Now a couple of years later that same press is proclaiming Gooden as the greatest example of a comeback in human history. Endless columns of newsprint and miles of videotape have been expended in this process. The prodigal son has returned and the celebration has been deafening.

Make no mistake about it, Dwight Gooden has come a long way over the past two years since he hit his personal bottom and was finally moved to join Alcoholics Anonymous. He has been out of baseball nearly two seasons, and a year ago he was playing outfield on a semi-pro team in Tampa.

When he was signed by George Steinbrenner and the Yankees it looked like one more of George's attempts to pick up damaged goods for publicity purposes and then hope for a miracle. George got his miracle. In spring training most of those who watched

Gooden were confident of the error of Steinbrenner's decision. Seemingly the only ones not to hold that view were Yankee GM Bob Watson and Manager Joe Torre.

After his first few starts it seemed the doubters and skeptics had been right, and the Yankees moved Gooden to the bullpen. Then David Cone went down and the decision was made to bring Gooden back from the edge of oblivion. A week after being hammered by the Minnesota Twins in the Metrodome, he pitched six shutout innings against the same team in New York. This was the beginning. Three starts later came the no-hitter against Seattle. The resurrection was dramatic and the fact that it was underlined by a no-hitter made it even moreso.

There is no denying that this is a great story, the kind of story that you want to read about and that you want kids to hear about. It is one of those role model things. But this is a story that is not over and everyone, especially Dwight Gooden, should remember that. Dwight Gooden's struggle with drugs and alcohol is not over because he threw a no-hitter. It will never be over.

In the parlance of Baseball's Injury reports Dwight Gooden is day to day and always will be. Some days are easier than others, but at any moment he can slip again and this is why AA has him paired with a sponsor who he can call on at any time of need day or night, and who he calls each day to report his condition and discuss his progress.

So a caution to those who would celebrate too loudly, who might assume that the battle is over, that somehow the Dwight Gooden story has ended in triumph. What has happened to Gooden is that he has made it past several more days without slipping back into his drug and alcohol dependency. Each of those days is cause for joy as well as a call to further struggle.

In his baseball life he has also come across what is truly an amazing distance. At this stage it might be easy to forget that you are only as good as your last start, and you can lose it without warning, as the Steve Blass story illustrated so well.

So in celebrating Gooden's no-hitter of last week it would be wise to celebrate the moment because he is pitching well, but it is more important to quietly celebrate with him each day that he can continue to triumph over his dependency. Remember also that he is one of hundreds of thousands of Americans who are in the same struggle each and every day of their lives. One hopes that Gooden both inspires, and is inspired, by them.

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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