

7-5-2002

Death of Ted Williams: A Tribute

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Death of Ted Williams: A Tribute" (2002). *On Sport and Society*. 574.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/574>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
July 5, 2002

Ted Williams is dead at 83.

A simple sentence that most American sports fans have seen or heard in the past twelve hours. What follows for each person will vary by age and background. For me it is one of those moments when you are aware that something that has been a constant throughout your life is no more.

In the summer of my birth Ted Williams was in the middle of his most famous and remarkable season. He would end the year hitting .406 and no one since has been able to achieve a .400 season. By that feat alone he was worthy of the title that he earned over a lifetime in baseball embodied in the words he wanted spoken by people when he walked down the street: "There goes the greatest hitter of all time."

That however is not enough to serve as his epithet. Numbers and talk of baseball are only one part of the greatness of Ted Williams.

He was a perfectionist and his hitting achievements were one part of that perfectionism. He was a fisherman and fly-fishing was his passion. He was the best fisherman ever, according to those experts in the field who knew him, and he designed and tied his own flies with the best of them. To those who served in the Marines with Ted he was the best fighter pilot they had known. To those who worked with him on the Jimmy Fund raising money for cancer research for children he was the best fundraiser they had known.

His eyesight was said to be something slightly better than perfect. This served him well in fishing, in hunting, while flying and crash-landing fighter jets, and of course in hitting. There are any number of stories of his ability to read the lettering on baseballs as they came spinning at him at over ninety miles an hour. His eyesight and his knowledge of the strike zone intimidated umpires. Some claimed that on the rare occasion that he took a called strike, umpires would apologize to him. Others claim that umpires just assumed any pitch that Ted did not offer at was a ball.

I grew up in awe of Ted Williams. I knew from an early age that he was my father's baseball hero and that my father

wanted to name me Theodore William. Had my father not cared about the longevity of his marriage he would have done so.

Williams played minor league baseball for the Minneapolis Millers for a brief time and my father thought he was the greatest player he had ever seen. When Willie Mays came to Minneapolis for a short stay on his way to the Giants there was some hesitation in my father's assessment, but it was short-lived. No one ever replaced Ted.

As a child I watched Ted Williams on film and later on TV every chance I had. I studied his photographs when they appeared in the newspaper or magazines. Like Ted I hit left and threw right. That ended any resemblance between the Splendid Splinter and myself. I tried to emulate his look at the plate but couldn't. I fancied I had his great eye for the strike zone, but didn't. I turned out to be his perfect negative in baseball skills. Alas I would never be Ted's teammate or successor.

I religiously followed his remarkable career. I vaguely remember when he was called back to serve in Korea. It seemed truly amazing to me that such a thing could happen. It may have amazed him as well, but he never let on if it did, and he served with distinction. I have a friend who was there the day Williams crash-landed the jet fighter that was trailing flames. He told me it was the most remarkable thing he had ever seen.

Like many of the great players of his generation he lost some of his best years to war, but unlike most players who served in World War II he also served in Korea and lost more of the prime years of his career. All of which makes his career numbers even more remarkable.

I recall when he came back from the service in August of 1953 and resumed his amazing baseball career for another seven seasons. He would repeatedly add to the legend that he had already built. In 1956 there was the famous spitting incident when he let the fans know what he thought of their booing him. In 1959 at age 39 he hit .388 and won a batting title.

Finally there was the last at bat of his career in late September of 1960 when he hit a towering homer at Fenway Park, the 521st of his career, and refused to take a curtain call for the chanting crowd. John Updike immortalized the

moment with one of the most quoted baseball lines ever written: "God's do not answer letters."

In retirement he seemed to be more relaxed and self-confident, certain of his legacy and sure of greatness. He knew, and was not shy about telling others, that he was truly the greatest hitter of all time. He could also tell you why. He knew all there was to know about hitting and then some, and he could explain it with the simplicity of a born teacher. He could do the same with fly-fishing. He exuded a joy for baseball and for life.

There were just a little over 10,000 people at Fenway Park that final day of Ted's playing career. I would guess that there are at least 100,000 people across the country today who can recall being there and seeing Ted Williams make that final trip around the bases.

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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