

11-27-2005

George Best dies

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "George Best dies" (2005). *On Sport and Society*. 677.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/677>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE

George Best dies
NOVEMBER 27, 2005

George Best died on Friday in London. For most Americans this simple fact of death has little meaning. For soccer fans across the globe it is a fact that is neither simple nor without meaning.

Being among that group of Americans for whom the name George Best has little resonance, I am hesitant to launch into this piece. Having read a great deal about him in the last forty-eight hours and having some faint recollection of Best from his stint in the North American Soccer League (1976-81), I decided to venture forth with this reflection on sports glory, heroes, and the price of fame.

George Best was fifty-nine years old and died from complications of too much living. In 2002 he had a liver transplant which gave him a new lease on life, but a few days ago at the end of a month in intensive care, George Best died having destroyed a second liver with alcohol.

George Best arrived on the English soccer scene from Belfast public housing in 1961 as an apprentice on the Manchester United Club. Two years later he made his debut with United and rocketed to stardom, leading his team to English championships in 1964-5 and 1966-7. Also at age seventeen he played his first international for Northern Ireland. He led Manchester United to the European Cup in 1968, the same year in which he was named British Footballer of the Year and European Player of the Year. In 1974, at age 27, George Best walked away from Manchester United having scored 137 goals in 361 games.

His skills on the field were dazzling and his attitude was equally so. Best was said to possess balance, vision, and speed in abundance and could control the ball as few others ever have. He played the game for the fun of the game and understood that it was above all else, play. He often taunted opponents and by one account he "needled a Chelsea defender by taking off his red Manchester United jersey and, foot on ball, waved the shirt in the defender's face like a bullfighter."

He was a star made for the Sixties. Sometimes referred to as the fifth Beatle, Best was famous for his wardrobe, his hair styles,

and his free spending on all manner of pleasures and possessions. Women adored him, mobbed him, and he was seldom seen in public without a woman on at least one arm. In the end, however, it was alcohol that remained his constant companion.

Had he simply concentrated on soccer rather than his lifestyle, it is difficult to know how great a player he could have been. Then again he might not have been great at all. He once said that if he had not been so good looking, no one would have ever heard of Pele. On the other hand he also said that the rigors of training drove him crazy, and that he only could remain sane by remembering that Sunday, Monday and Tuesday were party time.

In the end fame and glory and the life that he led brought him down. In the early 1980s, while playing in California, he left the team and finally admitted that he was an alcoholic. Rehabilitation never really took hold and for the remainder of his life George Best was in and out of the newspapers for alcohol induced events. Violence in his marriages, drunkenness in full public view of both the TV and photo cameras, as well as his semi-public drinking at his favorite watering holes, all invited a continuing public fascination with the king of the soccer pitch. The public never tired of him, nor could they get enough of him.

He was in many ways the quintessential hero of modern sport. It is difficult to think of a precise North American equivalent although there are obvious parallels between Best and Babe Ruth, or Best and "Broadway" Joe Namath. Like all heroes he showed a society what they wanted to see, what they wanted to emulate, and what they aspired to above all else. Like many heroes he had a certain transnational appeal, a global following that brought 10,000 letters a week to his mailbox. He also had an ethnic and trans-religious appeal as he became a great hero for all of Northern Ireland, Protestant and Catholic, at a time near the high point of the Troubles.

A few weeks ago, in a brilliant essay on George Best, Mary Riddell in the Observer made several points about his appeal and about the role of the hero in modern societies. She recounted the commentaries by those reflecting on Best's life noting how prominently dissipation, womanizing, and violence were mentioned in these tributes. She also noted that virtually all these commentaries were written by men. Then she reflected on the fact that: "What is missing is any real explanation of Britain's long love affair with a man who loathed himself."

This indeed is a curious phenomenon but not an unfathomable one, although one that is too often overlooked by those who write about heroes and role models and the niceties of moral lessons for youth. Everyone, of course, knows there is a dark side to our sporting heroes. The daily press offers a litany of crimes and misdemeanors from the athletic world.

Mary Riddell explains the curious phenomenon in this way: "Best will be lionized by some and viewed by others as an unlamented wreck who abused lovers, friendships and the secondhand liver that might have saved a better life than his. Neither version sounds right. All he has done, besides the football, is to amplify the fixations of the society in which he lives. What else are heroes for?"

What else, indeed, but "to amplify the fixations" of society?

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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