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The death of Kirby Puckett

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The death of Kirby Puckett
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What to say when a friend dies? It is always a difficult moment for the living. For anyone who was a fan of the Minnesota Twins and of baseball that moment is here again because Kirby Puckett, a great friend to all Twins fans, died yesterday, just a day after suffering a stroke. He was 45. To fans like me he was the archetypal baseball player, and although I never met him, he was the friendly round man in centerfield who did so much for the struggling baseball franchise in Minnesota. He was a friend to anyone who ever saw him play.

What to say about Kirby Puckett is complicated. His life took several strange and unpleasant turns over the past half-dozen years, when the man who was king of Minnesota suddenly appeared to have feet of clay. By then he was enshrined in the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, due notice of his accomplishments in the game he loved.

He played baseball with great intensity. He moved his improbable frame around the centerfields of the American League like a gazelle. He was a team leader. He inspired those around him to play above their abilities, as he himself did, and his abilities were considerable. He lifted the Twins in both 1987 and 1991 to World Championships as they hosted both series and won all their home games to claim those championships. He became the face of the franchise successor to Killebrew and Carew from previous decades.

His personality and his play dominated the 1991 World Series with timely hitting and brilliant play in centerfield. In Game 6 he told his teammates he would carry them on his back to Game 7. Living up to his word, he robbed Ron Gant of an extra base hit in the third inning and saved two runs. In the fifth inning he tied the game with a sacrifice fly. Then in the eleventh inning he ended the game with a home run, only the ninth walk-off home run in World Series history. It was Kirby's second home run of the series and sent the Twins on to the greatest game seven in World Series history and the championship. It is often forgotten that in the ALCS that year Kirby Puckett was a major contributor to the Twins victory over Toronto. He hit two home runs in that series, drove in six runs, and hit .429 in five games.

Puckett's greatness was on display both on and off the field, as he worked hard to serve the community in which he came to play and stayed to make his home. He raised money for pediatric heart research, worked in an anti-drug program, and bought tickets to Twins games for poor children. He never forgot his roots and did his best to help those who faced the same difficulties he had faced growing up in a housing project on Chicago's south side.

He did everything that one could expect from a sports hero, and then some. In 1996 his reputation rose from excellent to some higher plane when his career was cut short by damage to his retina. Unable to see out of one eye his baseball playing days ended abruptly. At his final press conference in a Twins uniform he told the public not to worry, that he would be fine. He told his teammates to play every game with pride and integrity adding: "Just don't take it for granted because you never know. Tomorrow's not promised to any of us."

Kirby's tomorrows seemed destined to be filled with happiness and joy. A sellout crowd bid him farewell at the Metrodome in September. He took a position as Twins VP. Then in 2001 he was voted into the Baseball Hall of Fame on the first ballot. He was now officially a baseball hero for the ages.

Within six months of his induction into the Hall, Kirby Puckett's life and reputation began to unravel. In December of 2001, his wife filed a complaint with police following a phone call in which Kirby threatened to kill her. She said that there had been a history of domestic violence. Within a few months she filed for divorce.

In October 2002, Puckett was charged with false imprisonment, criminal sexual conduct, and assault after a woman accused him of forcing her into a men's room at a restaurant and groping her. Although found not guilty, Puckett's reputation was in ashes. The wonderful smile which Twins fans remembered so well was now seldom seen.

In the past few years he gained weight, raising concerns about his health. He moved to Arizona, disappearing from public life in the state that had loved him so much just a few short years before.

So which Kirby Puckett do we remember today? Which Kirby Puckett was the real Kirby Puckett? Probably both and we should remember both today.

Kirby Puckett is a reminder that the human condition is not a predictable one. He is a reminder that "hero" is a term that we should not apply simply on the basis of sporting talents and achievements. He is a reminder that some heroes have more than one face, as do so many who are passing through this life.

So let us praise the Kirby Puckett we loved and remember the cautionary tale told to us by the Kirby Puckett we didn't know.

Life is a strange business.

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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