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Kobe Bryant

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - KOBE BRYANT
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The first reaction was disbelief, then shock, then sorrow. Kobe Bryant and his 13 year-old daughter Gianna, and seven others were killed in a helicopter crash. Then more news tumbles out and it gets worse. Later, when the photos of Kobe and his daughter appeared in the media it is heartbreaking.

On Sunday people across the world shared the same emotions when the news spread of the death of Kobe Bryant. I am only a bit surprised by the scale of public reaction. Without a doubt, Bryant was one of the best players in the history of the NBA. The outpouring of grief can be described as massive, global, and trans-generational. Wherever the NBA is known, and it is known on almost every continent, there has been a public display of shock and sorrow.

At the Australian Open, tennis players from across the world talked of Kobe Bryant and what he meant to them. In football stadiums in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America there were tributes from players and fans. Kobe's jersey numbers, 8 and 24, were displayed. Laker jerseys of the familiar gold and purple dotted the stands of sporting events. Lights of those colors were used to illuminate public buildings in major cities worldwide.

In Italy, where Kobe Bryant spent part of his youth and where he was known and loved, the football stadium in Milan was full of fans of all ages wearing Laker Jerseys or carrying signs bearing Kobe's name or numbers and others offered tributes to Gianna.

Over the past decades players have come to the NBA from Cameroon and China. The NBA has captured a strong following across the globe since the days of Michael Jordon and the Dream Team. Yao Ming had helped to raise the popularity of the NBA in China, and Kobe made several trips there for promotional tours and basketball camps.

French, German, Spanish, Greek, Italian, British, and players from the Baltic States, Russia, and other European countries all contributed to the growth of the NBA globally. It was natural

that Kobe, a European to some degree in temperament, would be loved on the continent.

The NBA has been a significant part of global sport since the 1990s. In that decade I spent time in Russia, and, in the mid-90s, made a trip back to Ethiopia. In both locations I came face to face with the reality of the global presence of the NBA and its stars.

In Ethiopia, where we visited friends, the children and teenagers were most impressed that we were from Orlando. You might think that was because of Disney World. It was not. The most important thing was that we were from the home of the Orlando Magic and Shaq.

In Russia, I was often asked about the Magic and the NBA. The best known and most adulated player was Michael Jordan. When puzzled over what to take as a gift to a very wealthy Russian who was sponsoring several academic conferences I was attending, it was suggested by a friend that I take a Michael Jordan Chicago Bulls Jersey. The gift was appreciated more than I ever would have guessed. It was pure gold. In addition, everyone present was impressed that I had actually seen Jordan and Bulls play in person.

These experiences drove home to me a sense of just how popular the NBA had become, and how large a following it now had among the basketball fans in both countries. The more I traveled the more I saw the NBA presence, and over time saw how it had grown dramatically well beyond Russia and Ethiopia.

The other aspect of the reaction to Kobe's death that surprised me was the reaction of young players here in the U.S., some of whom did not see him play or saw him only when they were quite young. For example, the University of Florida basketball team had trouble trying to practice following the news of the death of Kobe. The news left them shaken and overwhelmed with sadness. High school and college athletes across many sports were grieving over the loss. Kobe had been a strong influence on them perhaps in ways they did not know.

Across the country small memorials were set up where people came and left flowers and various basketball mementos. The outpouring was beyond anything I would have expected. Clearly there was something at work here other than simply basketball. It would be

easy to dismiss this as a function of public relations or the Nike impact.

It is certainly true that selling shoes and apparel has put athletes like Kobe Bryant in the public eye. However, that cannot be sustained by commercial advertising alone. Surely there was something singular in Kobe Bryant's extraordinary appeal. Was he a hero? Difficult to say, but clearly he was a model for basketball players and other athletes on how to approach their sport. Many sought to emulate him on the court and in fashion off the court. He was all business, and, that surely, is not a bad thing.

Kobe was not perfect. The accusations of rape and the details of that episode in Colorado are particularly ugly. The way it was handled at the time brought out some of the worst in Bryant's fans, not to mention himself. In any overall evaluation of Kobe Bryant, this will be a part of the record, and one that will make it difficult to allow the label of hero to stick.

Many now argue that Bryant has spent the last several years seeking to change his image, and, to some extent, he has done so. Part of this remake has come from his strong support for women's sport, and part has come from his increasingly public role as a father. He has been a strong supporter of worthy public causes, and there is much to admire particularly in the last decade of his life. How this adds up in any final assessment remains to be seen.

In dealing with our sports idols, the case of Kobe Bryant is an important object lesson. Athletic acclaim and celebrity are due to athletic skill and achievement, while character and heroism is of an entirely different nature. The latter does not follow automatically from the former.

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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