Puckett and Winfield Enter HOF - Heat Claims Viking Player (Heat and Football)

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Recommended Citation
https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/167
This weekend would have been a time of great celebration for Minnesota sports fans, but instead it will be bitter sweet. Two of Minnesota's favorite athletes are being inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. Kirby Puckett and Dave Winfield are much admired and both are richly deserving of the honor.

One of the most popular players in the history of the Minnesota Twins, Kirby Puckett was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame by virtue of excellent career numbers, although his popularity goes well beyond mere numbers.

When Kirby Puckett announced his retirement due to eye problems he was hailed as one of the great people to ever put on a baseball uniform. His leadership qualities are not measurable in numbers, the sight of his squat body made him look like an improbable athlete, and in the end he was one of the greatest players to ever wear a Minnesota Twins uniform.

Number "34" jumping high over the glass in centerfield to rob opposing players of home runs was a marvelous sight, and also one of the most memorable sights of the 1991 World Series. Puckett led the Twins to two World Series championships, single handedly winning game six of the '91 Series.

P.A. Announcer Bob Casey's introductions of Kirby at the Metrodome became both a trademark and a call to watch greatness in action. Kirby running the bases was worth the price of admission. He played every minute of every game with an enthusiasm that was contagious, and his smile could light up the darkest corners of any stadium. His teammates and many other players in the American League wore number "34" on their hats and uniforms in the season of his premature retirement.

As Kirby left the game he reminded his teammates how proud he was to have worn one uniform throughout his career, and could have told them he was able to do so because he took less money to stay in Minnesota. He told them not to worry because Kirby Puckett would be all right. He asked them to play with pride and integrity. And then added: "Don't take anything for granted, because tomorrow is not promised to any of us." Now tomorrow will bring him into the Baseball Hall of Fame.
Accompanying Kirby Puckett on this trip into Baseball immortality will be Dave Winfield, a Minnesota native who was one of the great all-around athletes to come out of the state. He starred in baseball and basketball at the University of Minnesota and was drafted by professional teams in baseball, basketball and football. He chose baseball and became a major star in San Diego and then with the New York Yankees. Winfield had brief stops in Toronto and in Minnesota where he got his 3,000th hit in a Twins uniform. Like Puckett, Winfield's numbers mark him as a deserving member of the Hall, and like Puckett his many other qualities of character are admired in many quarters.

On Sunday the lives and careers of both will be celebrated by Minnesota sports fans, but the celebrations will be muted by the events at the Minnesota Vikings training camp this past week.

Early Wednesday morning Korey Stringer, the popular offensive lineman of the Minnesota Vikings, died from complications of heat stroke at age 27. Late Tuesday following the Viking practice in Mankato, Minnesota, Stringer, after two days of grueling practices in conditions of high heat and humidity, fell into unconsciousness and was rushed to a local hospital. With a body temperature of 108 degrees he never regained consciousness as his bodily functions shut down. His heart gave in at 1:50 a.m. local time on Wednesday.

The legendary two-a-day drills marking the beginning of practices for NFL teams frequently send players to the edge of their physical limits. Indeed the drills are designed to do just that. Players are challenged to show their toughness, to show that they belong, to show that they can take it. What is remarkable is how few players pay the ultimate price in these drills.

This is the second death from heat stroke during a football workout within a week. At the University of Florida a player taking part in "voluntary" workouts collapsed and after several days in a coma, died. According to a University of North Carolina study eighteen high school and college players have died of heat stroke during football practice across the United States over the past six years.

So this weekend will be one of sorrow in the Stringer family, among the Vikings and their fans, across the NFL and across the State of Minnesota. Questions will be asked, blame may be placed, mistakes will be analyzed. Baltimore head coach Brian Billick was asked this week who is responsible to stop the
action when it is too hot or when a player is clearly in trouble. Billick dodged the question, and I suspect he did so because there is no answer.

In the end this tragic event is not likely to result in significant change. The mentality of players and coaches in football is such that excessive physical exertion has become a standard part of the football culture. From the Pop Warner leagues on up through the NFL, definitions of manhood have demanded excesses of effort for generations. To show any sign of weakness is to risk one’s place on the team and raise questions about one’s toughness and one’s masculinity.

So the joy that comes in recalling the careers of Winfield and Puckett, will be tempered by the sadness of Stringer’s death. It that sense Sunday will be a day not unlike many others in our lives mixed with all those emotions that make us human. It will be a weekend of mourning and celebration with sport offering us, as it often does, a glimpse of human perfection and a reminder of the fragility of existence.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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