Mark McGwire Leaves the Game: His Legacy

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Mark McGwire has retired. He will be best remembered as the man who broke Roger Maris' single season home run record. He will be remembered in tandem with Sammy Sosa for that wonderful season of 1998 when the two of them chased Roger Maris across the sands of time and then both caught him. He will be remembered for the wonderful scene as he broke Maris' record. He will be remembered as one of the "Bash Brothers" who, along with Jose Canseco, redefined the term "long ball" and became a "murderer's row" of two.

If you add it all up Mark McGwire will be remembered for the many positive qualities and characteristics he brought to the game of baseball. He will be remembered for the great achievements and the big numbers. The are only two negatives, one minor and one major. He displayed a tendency to brood about the "insignificance of his own achievements" in light of larger cosmic issues. He also gave a boost to the "nutrition supplement" business among the young boys who idolized him.

In his first full year in the majors McGwire led the American League in home runs with 49. He burst upon the scene and upstaged his compatriot Jose Canseco, although it is probably incorrect to say that anyone "upstaged" the colorful and powerful Canseco. Together these two men in the heart of the Oakland A's lineup terrorized American League pitchers. From 1987 through 1991 they combined for home run totals of 80, 74, 50, 76, and 66. McGwire led the league in homers in 1987 and Canseco in '88 and '91.

This part of McGwire's career was highlighted by three World Series appearances including one World Championship in 1989. The Bash Brothers even had their own trademark celebration resembling a forearm high five. The tandem was broken up a little over halfway through the 1992 season when Canseco was traded to Texas.

In '93 and '94 McGwire played sparingly as injuries, primarily back problems, slowed him. However in 1996 he rebounded to form with 52 home runs, 113 RBI's and a .312 batting average. Once again McGwire was a valuable commodity but the A's decided that they could not afford to keep him. In 1997 he was traded to the Cardinals following Tony LaRussa to what many people consider the best baseball city in America. McGwire himself would come to hold this opinion of his new home.
In St. Louis McGwire became the centerpiece of a team that was near the edge of greatness, while he himself achieved a level of greatness which surpassed all previous expectations. Nearly half of his hits as a Cardinal were home runs, a fact that some view as less than admirable. St. Louis fans embraced him in a way he had never been embraced before. Oakland had never developed the fervor present in St. Louis; never gave total commitment to the home team.

In St. Louis McGwire chased the Maris record and attracted national attention. It was here that "Big Mac" created baseball hysteria driving out the demons that still haunted the game in the aftermath of the cancelled World Series. It was here that McGwire captured not only the hearts of Cardinal fans but also the hearts of baseball fans across the land as he pursued, caught, and then shattered the thirty-seven year old home run record of Roger Maris.

It was here too that McGwire nearly went down the troubled road traveled by Maris in 1961 when Roger lost his hair and shattered his nerves pursuing the Babe. McGwire was uncomfortable, even surly at times, as the press focused on the record. It was only when Sosa joined the chase and helped McGwire relax and enjoy the moment that things changed. The Cub-Cardinal rivalry was covered over by the fade of a Sosa-McGwire home run race that turned into a celebration of baseball and a time of joy for both men.

At the time I wrote this:

"The historic moment itself captured in microcosm what is so appealing about this game, what keeps it at the center of the fabric of American life. When Mark McGwire crossed home plate on Monday and Tuesday he was met by his son. He lifted him into the air, hugged him and kissed him. At the same time McGwire's father and mother were in the stands and when number sixty-one went out it was a birthday present for McGwire's father who turned sixty-one that day. Three generations of McGwires shared the moment.

"In addition the Maris family was there to share the moment as well. Roger's wife was in the hospital in St. Louis, but his sons and daughters and their spouses and children were there to participate in the historic moment. Fathers, sons, mothers, daughters, families all participating in history together. Donald Hall's essay title, "Father's Playing Catch With Sons,"
captured something at the center of the national love affair with baseball, and during these celebrations in St. Louis this characteristic seemed to be recapitulated any number of times."

The only major flaw in McGwire's career was his use of the supplement androstenedione, know popularly as "andro," a banned substance in the Olympics and within many other sports. It was a flaw because it raised some questions about the role andro played in producing McGwire's power, but it was more troublesome for the message it sent to young aspiring athlete's who could see in McGwire yet another reason to turn to drugs to enhance performance.

In any final evaluation I suspect this flaw will be conveniently overlooked. What will be remembered more than anything will be the excitement created by the Great Home Run Race of 1998 and how, at least for the moment, it seemed to help "save" baseball from the greed of owners, agents, and players.

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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