

Babe Ruth or Lou Gehrig: A United States Dilemma

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A hero has been defined as “a man of distinguished courage or ability admired for his brave deeds and noble qualities,” whereas a culture hero is explained as “a mythical historical figure who embodies the aspirations or ideals of a society.” If we seek to name a United States sport hero and place him or her in cultural perspective in the first half of the 20th century, a great many people would immediately name Babe Ruth as a culture hero in the post-World War I era. In this paper I have argued that Lou Gehrig, the Babe’s teammate, is actually the person who should have been so named - and that this recognition should have carried through to the present. Crepeau in writing about the “tensions of the twenties” viewed this decade” as an important watershed in the development of the United States.” In commenting about George Herman Ruth, he stated that “Ruth is the essence of the rugged individual playing the national game of the cow pasture in an urban stadium before the cheering masses of the machine age.” Building on this statement that seems to epitomize the early 20th century growth of the world’s largest and most powerful capitalistic democracy, it becomes understandable why a number of philosophers and other critics have argued that the United States has had “an idealistic superstructure and a materialistic base!” If this be true, it is probably nowhere more evident than in the way that Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, two of the more important “elements” who made up the “Pride of the Yankees,” have been looked upon by average citizens then and down to the present. “The Babe” has become a culture hero of the greatest magnitude despite the very obvious, serious flaws in his character, while “Larrupin’ Lou,” Ruth’s teammate, is only remembered fondly by some baseball aficionados as an excellent durable athlete with many fine personality traits. What we have here, I maintain, is a situation where history has given a much higher rating to an outstanding professional athlete who possessed a disproportionate amount of arrogance and flair for the dramatic, traits that were coupled with other character flaws that flaunted the avowed values of the nation, whereas it (history) rates much lower - to a most significant degree - another outstanding professional athlete on the same team who contributed **at least equally** to the Yankees’ success in those glory years, but who did it in a quiet, unassuming, gentlemanly, and sportsmanlike manner. If this assessment of the situation is correct, what does it tell us about athletes and sport in our culture? Also, what

does it tell us about the United States and its people? If this is what happens in competitive sport, we might ask if highly competitive sport was indeed a “socially useful servant” then, and if it still can be regarded as such today? If it weren’t regarded as such then, and it still isn’t today, what good is it anyhow? Or is it possible that we condone certain actions in sport and athletics at any level, and turn right around and condemn similar behavior in everyday life? I believe that this a highly important matter about which intelligent, influential people must become very concerned in the near future. Competitive sport is becoming an increasingly important social force in the world - almost too great an influence if this is possible. Further, culture heroes are truly hard to come by these days. If we really want the United States to be the finest of nations in **all** regards, and if we really feel that sport has an important contribution to make to the development of such a society, I believe it is time to give the highest degree of athletic ability **and** the finest of personality and character traits. If we were functioning according to such a criterion, it would be Gehrig who is the folk hero today, and Ruth who is remembered as the “home run king” with the flawed character. Frankly, I don’t believe that this position is clear in the minds of most citizens, young or old. Scott Silvers, of Kansas City, Missouri, in a letter to **Sports Illustrated** (Oct. 29, 1984) about Walter Payton’s new rushing record in professional football, stated; “I’m sure that many of your readers will be nominating him for Sportsman of the Year. Nobody deserves it more . . . The term ‘Sportsman’ implies traits that go beyond athleticism: humility, kindness, generosity. A true sportsman is someone who combines these personal attributes with athletic ability . . .” (p. 110). I believe that Lou Gehrig fulfilled these criteria superbly. I rest my case.



Earle Zeigler and Bob Barney participated in the session on Sport Heroes.