

Sport Heroes in Cultural/ Historical Context: The Cases of Jackie Robinson (The Bonafied) and Joe Louis (The Bogus)

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Human progress, stimulated by both individual and collective endeavor, often evolves from the establishment of ideals and the subsequent process of striving towards them. Thus, ideals, themselves, become targets of excellence. And, embedded in the “striving process” is the type of action and reaction that results in human gain. Those individuals in history whose personal qualities are unfolded in such a way as to reflect the inherent ideals of any society, culture or civilization, become heroes. Heroes, then, have always existed and will continue to exist as models of excellence to be emulated by others. Thus it is that heroes are beacons of inspiration, ideals in themselves. Their value in the evolution of human progress is sometimes not fully appreciated by historians searching for and defining the character factors in civilization growth and development.

A central problem in studying sport heroism, especially in contemporary societies, is the all too evident fact that there is an almost indiscriminant propensity to anoint individuals as sport heroes, and therefore, targets of excellence. The indiscrimination observed is a function of assessing the demonstration of physical excellence alone as the sole criterion for awarding sport hero status. Such a narrow assessment serves only to erode and deteriorate the value of the sport hero as a bonafide model of excellence for the inspiration of youth and adults alike. If heroes do serve as inspirational models, it can be argued that their identification, assessment, and commemoration should be done in a thoughtful, careful and thorough manner, and through a process by which a framework of standards be applied in order to ensure that only the bonafide become hero models.

A consensus hero assessment value system drawn from analysis given the subject by Thomas Carlyle, Friedrich Nietzsche, Dixon Wexler, Sydney Hook, Orrin Klapp, Daniel Boorstin, and Marshall Fishwick support a “standards system” focussing on four distinct but somewhat interdependent areas of human endeavour: (1) the physical performance realm, (2) the social contribution realm, (3) the intellectual role-model realm, and (4) the moral role-model realm. In effect, universal excellence over time is critical to objective value judgement.

This study attempted to apply the model to two individuals in American sport history which common consensus has generally elevated to American sport hero ideal. In one case, Jackie Robinson, the model reveals a true sport hero. That is, Jackie Robinson demonstrated excellence in physical performance over time, including the last stages of his active career; challenged himself intellectually by pursuing and almost completing a college degree, as well as demonstrating excellent practical wisdom in conducting his life; gave of himself to further the cause of baseball and of human and civil rights in America; and emerged unscathed after a close analysis of the moral dimensions of his character and

personal practice. On the other hand, the model exposed the weakness of Joe Louis' case for true hero status. While Louis' physical performance for some years was beyond criticism, our last impressions of his active career are ones which do not reflect greatness. In both the theoretical and practical wisdom (intellectuality) realms Louis was deficient, allowing himself to be thoroughly manipulated throughout his life. He passes from our memory as a feeble minded, psychologically disturbed person. Further, Louis did little in an active and self motivated way to further the causes of human and civil rights in America at a time when he was certainly in a position to thus contribute. And lastly, Louis' moral life left much to be desired in hero model context. His honesty about his financial affairs can be called to question. He led a sordid moral life, one which was of great burden to his family and his image.

In historical context the heroic image of Joe Louis is far less worthy of respect than others. When compared with Jackie Robinson only three similarities appear. Each was black; each was a great athlete; and each died of a heart attack. Beyond that, their heroic similarities end.