

MYTHS AND METAPHORS

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Yearning for Yesteryear: Cal Ripken Jr., The Streak, and the Politics of Nostalgia

On September 6, 1995, when Cal Ripken Jr. of the Baltimore Orioles played in his 2,131st consecutive game to break Lou Gehrig's 56-year-old record, most of the sports world paid its respects and cheered. Ripken—then 35 years-old, a veteran of thirteen major-league seasons, and a perennial all-star shortstop—was catapulted into the national limelight and hailed as an exemplar of all that was right in, yet conspicuously absent from, professional sport. He was frequently portrayed as a “throwback” ballplayer who evoked an earlier era of baseball history. He was described as “a walking synonym for durability, a human symbol of reliability, a man who smashed a record for invincibility that no one thought was remotely approachable.” More than two years later, The Streak still alive at 2,478 games, Ripken continues to carry the Iron Man mantle as he strides through baseball history.

In this paper we examine some of the ways in which Ripken and The Streak were (and continue to be) constructed and understood by a variety of onlookers. More specifically, we interrogate how The Streak elicited historical parallels and analogies, and how it was used as an occasion to retell a particularly nostalgic (and politically conservative) version of the past.

Coming on the heels of the worst strike in professional sports history, The Streak was often portrayed as an antidote to baseball's blues. Ripken took on larger-than-life, even Ruthian dimensions. That is, somewhat like Babe Ruth after the Black Sox scandal of 1919, Ripken was cast as the game's savior. He was thrust (seemingly reluctantly) into the role of the national pastime's redeemer and messiah. In addition, because he undeniably represented a specific kind of idealized (and hegemonic) masculinity—self-reliant, hard-working, responsible, stoic, humble, family-oriented, middle-class and (perhaps most importantly) white—Ripken was hailed as someone who could symbolically revitalize baseball, and by extension, the nation.

Our paper examines how the media constructed The Streak. It also critiques the summoning of a specific, highly romanticized version of history that was deployed in order to transform an event into a narrative, and to reinforce dominant ideologies and social relations. We are not interested in Ripken's achievements *per se*, but rather in linking the Ripken phenomenon to wider cultural, historical, and political concerns. Pursuing interconnected themes and employing an interdisciplinary method, we try to make sense

of Ripken as a popular icon at a particular historical and cultural moment. We explore the reasons why Ripken's public *persona* struck the chord it did with many mainstream Americans and we examine some of the historical and ideological implications of the ways in which Ripken was represented immediately before, during, and after he played in his 2,131st game. In short, our paper uses Ripken and The Streak to engage the politics of nostalgia.