

MICKEY MANTLE: AN AMERICAN LEGEND

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"There's a young boy at Yankee Stadium. He doesn't understand what Mickey Mantle meant to baseball, or to his father. But the boy loves baseball. And as his dad explains, Mantle was baseball."¹

The image is seared into the minds of those in his own generation and every generation since. A blond, muscular man, almost boyish in character, wearing the familiar baggy pinstripe uniform of the vaunted New York Yankees. He seemed to glide through the green pasture that was centerfield in Yankee Stadium. He hit homeruns that took on a life of their own, from the sound they made coming off his bat, to the distances they traveled. On August 13, 1995, when Mickey Mantle died at the age of 64, he took part of baseball with him.

In retrospect, his tremendous impact on so many people was almost inevitable. His destiny was sealed, it seems, the day he was discovered by a Yankee scout in Commerce, Oklahoma. He played the most glorious position for the most celebrated team in sports history.² The city and the ballpark in which he played have both been breeding grounds for legends. For "The Mick," as he became known to his legions of fans, the stars seemed to collide.

However, like the lives of so many who seem touched by the hands of fate, he was not only a legend, but a classic tragic hero as well. His tragic flaw was alcohol. He became known as much for his carousing personality as for his 536 career homeruns. Even in the 1950's and '60's, when the media still

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1. Joe Schad, *Mick's Legacy*, NEWSDAY, August 11, 1996, at B12.

2. The memory of Mickey Mantle was constantly evoked this past October as the New York Yankees marched to the world championship of baseball behind the bat and glove of another in a long line of great Yankee centerfielders, Bernie Williams. "No.7 still roams the outfield, in a special way. And Williams respects the legend. 'There's a lot of pressure in playing centerfield for the Yankees,' he said. 'It's an honor and a privilege to play in the same grass that Mantle played.'" *Id.*

allowed athletes a semblance of privacy in their personal lives, Mantle's drinking prowess and womanizing were common knowledge to any fan of the game.³ However, during his playing days his party-going did not overshadow his achievements on the field.

His career spanned 17 years, beginning with his rookie year in 1951, when he came to New York as a starry-eyed 19 year old country boy from Oklahoma. He was to take over in centerfield for another Yankee legend, the inimitable Joe DiMaggio. The "Yankee Clipper," as DiMaggio was known due to his grace and regality on and off the field, left behind shoes that were impossible to fill for a rookie farm boy, natural abilities notwithstanding. In his rookie year, when Mantle played in the same outfield as DiMaggio, there was a foreshadowing of the tragic yet honorable path his career was to take. While running hard from leftfield for a fly ball, he twisted awkwardly while catching his spikes on a drain pipe, in a desperate attempt to avoid colliding with his hero DiMaggio, still playing centerfield in the twilight of his playing days. The resulting knee injury began an array of physical problems that left Mantle constantly hobbled and more often than not taped from ankle to thigh for games.

Though Mantle missed hundreds of games due to these injuries, it did not keep him from putting up some of the most amazing statistics of any player in major league history. His 536 career homeruns places the first ballot Hall-of-Famer eighth on the all-time list. He is one of 12 players since 1900 to win baseball's Triple Crown, winning the American League version in 1956 with a .353 batting average, 52 homeruns, and 130 RBI.⁴ He also accomplished something that year that only four others have been able to achieve: the Major League Triple

3. One of the more entertaining stories regarding Mantle's party-going involved his life-long party associate, Billy Martin, the combative Yankee second baseman of the 1950's. While Martin was managing the Texas Rangers in 1974, he and Mantle went to play a round of golf at the exclusive Shady Oaks Country Club in Fort Worth. After spending some time in the club bar, they ended up running over a fellow golfer in their golf cart. The other golfer? Legendary golfer Ben Hogan. Mike Shropshire, *Take Me Out to the Boneyard; Until They Climbed Out of the Grave This Season, the Texas Rangers Had a History That Was Stranger Than Fiction*, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, September, 23, 1996, at 60.

4. *Crowning Achievement*, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, July 1, 1996, at the *Baseball* section.

Crown.⁵ Only Mantle and fellow baseball immortals Ty Cobb '09, Rogers Hornsby '25, Lou Gehrig '34, and Ted Williams '42 have led both the American and National Leagues in the three power statistics in one season.⁶ He was the American League Most Valuable Player three times, in part because of his ability to come through in the clutch. He led the Yankees to seven World Series Championships and seemed to hit best when it mattered most. His 18 homeruns, 42 runs scored and 42 RBI still stand as World Series records.

Mantle's never before seen combination of power from both sides of the plate and speed in the outfield and on the base paths left fans and players alike to watch in wonder. "The players would gather around the cage in batting practice to watch him hit the ball . . ." said Bill Guilfoile, the Yankee public relations director from 1960-69, and now the vice president of the Baseball Hall of Fame.⁷ In 1953, he hit a ball clear out of Griffith Stadium in Washington, D.C. The shot was estimated to have landed 565 feet away from home plate, and thus the "tape-measure homerun" became a part of baseball vernacular.⁸ On May 22, 1963, Mantle came within six feet of being the first and only player ever to hit a ball out of Yankee Stadium. It was estimated the ball would have traveled 620 feet had it not hit the wall. Mantle was once timed at 3.1 seconds in a sprint from home to first. His throwing arm was lethal.⁹ When Mickey Mantle stepped out of the dugout and onto the diamond, it was apparent that he was born to play baseball.

The Mick's life after baseball seemed to mirror his playing career. Even more so after he retired, he became a man who inspired many while undergoing personal tragedy. His drinking destroyed both his health and his family life. When Mantle's health began to fail in 1994 due to liver cancer, he went public with the realization that he had wasted so much of his

5. Both the American and National Leagues award the Triple Crown to any player who leads his league in batting average, RBI, and homeruns. The Major League Triple Crown is awarded to any player who not only leads his respective league in these three statistics, but the other league as well.

6. Letter to the Editor from George Patterson, *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*, July 29, 1996, at 20.

7. Schad, *supra* note 2.

8. *Player of the Half-Century: Special 50th Anniversary Issue*, *SPORT*, September, 1996, at 19.

9. *Id.*

life with drink, and that this same addiction would end his life early. "My view of the world," he said "was not much wider than the strike zone."¹⁰ However, his words and deeds in the last months of his life inspired just as many people as his homeruns. The Mickey Mantle Foundation made millions aware of the organ donor programs which it sponsored, as did the publicity surrounding Mantle's wait for a liver donor.¹¹ His regrets serve as lessons to today's youth. "I never fulfilled what my dad wanted," Mantle said in his last days, speaking of his beloved father Mutt. "God gave me a great body to play with, and I didn't take care of it. And I blame a lot of it on alcohol."¹²

Through it all, Mickey Mantle remains an American icon. Perhaps it is because he overcame his faults and addictions to achieve greatness. Perhaps it was the timing of playing on so many great Yankee teams at the height of the golden age of baseball. More likely it was a combination of the two. What cannot be questioned is the impact of one man on so many. He was the symbol of post-war America in the 1950's. We were a nation full of ourselves, reveling in our prosperity, and Mantle gradually became the personification of those heady times. Because of this, Mantle formed a special bond with all those who saw him play, a bond that has only grown stronger since his death. As sportscaster Bob Costas said in his eulogy at the funeral of his childhood hero, "We didn't just root for him. We felt for him."¹³ Indeed, Mickey Mantle was baseball.

10. *A Hero All His Life, A Mantle Family Memoir*, Merlyn Mantle et. al., Book Review, PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, September 1, 1996.

11. Dr. Goran Klintmalm of the Baylor University Medical Center said that organ donor card signings had increased 11 percent in the months after Mantle said his last wish was to increase awareness of the procedure. Mantle also suggested the formation of the Mickey Mantle Foundation, which has distributed millions of Mantle-signed organ donation baseball cards. Schad, *supra* note 2.

12. Nelba Chavez, Mantle, Garcia Leave Behind a Painful Lesson, THE CHICAGO SUN-TIMES, September 16, 1995, at 16.

13. Monica Yant, The Natural, THE ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, July 16, 1996, at 1D.