SPORTS JOURNALISM IN THE 1920's: A STUDY OF THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF THE DAILY NEWSPAPER AND THE SPORTS HERO

Thesis for the Degree of M. A.
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
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1972

ABSTRACT

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By

Robert B. Kilborn, Jr.

Generally, there are two schools of thought on the subject of the hero in sports. One holds that athletes of the 1970's are the greatest in history because they are mechanically superior to any who have preceded them. The second school maintains that modern athletes hopelessly lack the color and personality of their predecessors.

On the premise that a skilled athlete will seem heroic in inverse proportion to the amount of exposure he receives in the communications media of his day, this study confined itself to the decade of the 1920's when daily newspapers enjoyed a virtual monopoly in the area of sports coverage. The study compared coverage of three famous sports figures--Babe Ruth of baseball, Red Grange of football, and Jack Dempsey of boxing--in an effort to determine why they were made to seem heroic. These men were selected because not only were they the leading figures in their respective sports but also because they tried the faith of

sportswriters to the degree that irreparable harm to their images might have resulted; yet it did not.

In order that the extremes of flamboyance and conservativeness might be represented in the study, the Detroit Times was selected as an example of the former and the New York Times as an example of the latter. Stories and columns on the sports pages of the two newspapers were studied for frequency, style, content, and approach, and with an eye toward the subjective judgments of the writers. The months August through December of the years 1923, 1925, and 1927 were decided upon both to account for fluctuations in the manner in which the activities of each man were reported and because they include the peaks as well as the low points of each athlete's career.

Results of the study indicate that journalists of the 1920's took the concept of heroism in sports seriously and generally manifested an unwillingness to tamper with heroic images once they were established. It also would seem that by preserving a certain distance between themselves and these athletes the writers declined to risk any disillusionment that might have resulted from closer personal contact. This technique would seem to have preserved for a time the mystique of highly organized forms of sport that is largely absent today because of ever-widening exposure through the media of mass communications.

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A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

School of Journalism

1972

Accepted by the faculty of the School of Journalism, College of Communication Arts, Michigan State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The friendship, support, and assistance of Dr. W. Cameron Meyers have increased the value and meaning of graduate study at Michigan State University. These contributions are acknowledged with appreciation.

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CHAPTER I

A corollary to the existence of spectator sports is that, inevitably, the public will regard its athletes as heroes--persons through whom one can share vicariously the thrill of competition, the victories, awards, and glory missing from one's personal experience. History records that heroism in sport is at least as old as the ancient Greek city-states, whose champion athletes were so admired that their every need was met at public expense.

All other things being equal, however, some athletes will always seem more heroic than others. At no time is a sports figure guaranteed lasting fame for his deeds; indeed, the annals of sport are top-heavy with stories of those whose fame disappeared almost as quickly as it was won. And those who do achieve the public's enduring admiration cannot claim to have done so without the assistance of one or more well-placed communicators who serve to keep their images before the public in a positive context.

The stories are legion of contemporary athletes who have capitalized on their fame to win lucrative professional contracts and private business opportunities, to earn large sums of money by lending their names to the commercial endorsement of manufactured products, and even to

win election to high political office. Yet, it will be argued in some circles that in the traditional sense the sports world no longer enjoys athletes of the same heroic mold that has characterized its past. A common complaint is that many of today's best-known athletes fail even to attempt to mask their indifference, arrogance, contempt, cynicism, and greed from the public.

Perhaps today's athlete can be forgiven a measure of his cynicism and greed on the grounds that they stem from a basic insecurity. More conscious and protective of his physical well-being than the average man--the loss of that well-being sharply reducing his ability to earn his living--he may be less sure of himself as the times grow more uncertain than are persons from other walks of life.

On the other hand, athletes always have been conscious of the need to avoid disabling physical problems, even when times were much less troubled than they are today. Or, perhaps theologian Reinhold Niebuhr struck very close to the truth when he wrote that:

> Heroes can thrive only where ignorance reduces history to mythology. They cannot survive the coldly critical temper of modern thought, when it is functioning normally, nor can they be worshipped by a generation which has every facility for detecting their foibles and analyzing their limitations.[1]

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[1]Reinhold Niebuhr, "Heroes and Hero Worship," Nation, Feb. 23, 1921, p. 293.

It does seem safe to say that today, more than at any previous time, athletes must endure the continuous criticism, probing, examination, and analysis of a formidable array of sports reporters representing television, radio, daily and weekly newspapers, and numerous weekly, monthly, and annual magazines. When even their private lives appear to be public property athletes may well command sympathy for adopting a contemptuous or cynical stance.

Yet, even when sports figures were better able to shield their private lives from the communications media and ultimately the public, it was impossible to hide altogether. Reporters of five decades ago delighted in focusing the spotlight on the private lives of some of the greatest athletes in history, and although their lives were in some cases anything but exemplary the athletes who lived them became and have remained heroes--heroes of the very mold that seems so absent today. For, perhaps more than those from any other era, the important athletes of the 1920's continue to rank with the greatest of America's sports heroes.

Why? Was the heroism of those men due to a lesser or greater impact of the media than is the case today, or were their deeds simply so overwhelming that no amount of adverse publicity could have cancelled them out? Or was their heroism accurately a function of times so untroubled

that reporters felt free to concentrate on building images so colorful that they survive, practically intact, to this day?

This study will undertake an examination of the sports journalism of the mid-1920's as it affected the careers of some American athletes who rose to greatness during that period. An effort will be made to test the thesis that the deeds of these men were of such magnitude that sportswriters were disinclined to dwell on the negative aspects of their lives because, having made heroes of them, the writers felt compelled to protect and propagate their images rather than risk the disillusionment of the athletes' publics. The assumption will be made that the public generally needed living heroes since the recent past, both in and outside the sports world, had been a series of economic, social, and moral crises that had caused divisions so deep that the New York Times, looking back upon it, was moved to ask editorially, "How have we managed to survive?"[2]

For the purposes of this study, three athletes seem particularly suited, since their lives included a measure of both unqualified success and disappointment during this period. George Herman "Babe" Ruth was chosen to represent

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[2]Editorial, "The Old and The New," New York Times, Jan. 1, 1920, p. 14.

baseball, Harold "Red" Grange to represent football, and William Harrison "Jack" Dempsey to represent boxing--these being the three spectator sports most popular with the sports public at the time. The active careers of all of these men transcended the 1920's, but each reached his competitive peak during the middle years of that decade. Further, each was the leading figure in his sport and continues to be remembered in a heroic context nearly half a century later.

The study was conducted within two sets of parameters, both of which imposed time limitations. The period studied included the years 1923, 1925, and 1927. Alternate years were chosen to account for fluctuations both in the continuity of each athlete's career and in the manner in which his exploits were reported to the public in the daily newspapers. It is important that 1923 serve as the starting point because, although Dempsey already was the reigning heavyweight boxing champion and Ruth the acknowledged leader among baseball's star players, Red Grange did not become a figure of national importance until that year. Similarly, 1927 is important as the terminal year because Dempsey and Grange were out of competition in 1928, and by 1929 the crash of the New York Stock Exchange may be said to have overshadowed any developments in the sports world.

Consecutive years also were decided against for other reasons, chief of which was that although he was champion Dempsey did not actively defend his title between 1923 and 1926. And, although Grange's greatest season was 1924 he was by then nationally famous. Selecting 1923 provided an opportunity to follow his development as a hero, a process which had already taken place in the cases of Dempsey and Ruth. Ruth had highly successful seasons both in 1924 and in 1926, but to have included them all would have been repetitive. Nearly all of Ruth's seasons during the 1920's were spectacular.

For purposes of expediency, less than half of each year was included in the study, specifically the period August 1 to December 31. This five-month time span at once included the decisive months of the major league baseball season and the complete football season each year. Jack Dempsey also fought what are considered to be his two greatest matches on days that fell within this period. An earlier starting point or a later terminal date would have tipped the balance in favor of Ruth, and possibly Dempsey, since baseball news tended to begin reaching the public regularly after February 1 and boxing news tended to be continuous throughout the year. Extending the terminal date to December 31 made possible the inclusion of material from "The Year in Review" columns, a favorite device of sports editors then as now.

Of the daily newspapers available on microfilm, two were selected with an eye toward representation of the extremes to which sports journalism was likely to have been carried--reserve and flamboyance. It was reasoned that the New York Times would probably best exemplify the first extreme, and that the Detroit Times would be representative of the second. Additionally, the two newspapers offered several important comparisons and contrasts. Both were important and influential in their respective cities. Both also experienced steady growth throughout the period. The New York Times increased in circulation from 341,174 copies daily and 544,820 on Sundays in 1923[3] to some 375,249 daily and 653,437 on Sundays in 1927. According to published figures, the Times was New York's fourth largest daily and third largest morning newspaper in 1927, behind the tabloids Daily News and Mirror.[4] The Detroit Times, a member paper of the controversial and colorful Hearst organization, enjoyed a circulation gain of from 176,756 copies daily and 192,534 on Sundays in 1923[5] to 249,183 and 326,875, respectively, in 1927.[6] William Randolph Hearst acquired the

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[3]N. W. Ayer & Son's American Newspaper Annual and Directory (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer & Son, 1924), p. 740.

[4]Editor & Publisher, July 16, 1927, p. 49.

[5]N. W. Ayer & Son's American Newspaper Annual and Directory, p. 476.

[6]Editor & Publisher, July 16, 1927, p. 47.

Times in 1921, and throughout this period it maintained its status as the city's second largest daily, behind the Detroit News.

Additionally, the pages of both newspapers offered the by-lines of men recognized then and still remembered as three of the giants among sports writers. John Kieran's columns appeared in the New York Times, and Damon Runyon, once described by his equally acclaimed colleague, Paul Gallico, as "the greatest of all" American sportswriters,[7] and Bill Corum both wrote stories and columns for the New York American, which were distributed by Hearst's wire services and appeared in the Detroit Times.

Finally, although neither newspaper may have been a threat to the circulation zones of the other, it is not without significance that they were printed at different times of the day--morning in New York and afternoon in Detroit--and thus were not likely to approach the same stories from the same angles.

Nor could the locations of the two papers be overlooked, since they undoubtedly influenced the manner in which sports news was covered. Both cities, historically, have been enthusiastic in their support of spectator sports. New Yorkers in the mid-1920's could choose from

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[7]Paul Gallico, The Golden People (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1965), p. 293.

among three major league baseball teams, two major professional football teams, a professional ice hockey team, a busy schedule of indoor and outdoor boxing matches, and horse racing at tracks such as Aqueduct and Belmont Park. Detroiters paid to see a major league baseball team, a major professional football team, an ice hockey team, boxing matches, and horse races. In addition, both cities actively supported college sports events, particularly football.

Both cities were appropriate for this study insofar as football is concerned because even a Red Grange had to prove himself unusually worthy of admiration there before it was granted. Local interest in University of Michigan football was high in Detroit, if only because the institution's Ann Arbor campus was a relatively short distance away and Michigan teams enjoyed considerable success in the Western, or "Big Ten," Conference. Grange played for the University of Illinois, a participating member of the conference, and helped promote a keen rivalry between his school and Michigan during his varsity years. In New York, on the other hand, fans of college football were slow to concede that the quality of play outside the East was even comparable to, much less better than, that of the schools in their own region. As recently as 1922 the Walter Camp All-America team listed seven players from eastern schools, leaving only four positions for players from the rest of

the country; and the late Stanley Woodward, himself a sports-writer of renown, wrote that in 1923, "Painfully and reluctantly . . . Eastern gridiron experts recognized that the ascendancy of the Atlantic seaboard was no longer the whole story."[8]

Since both New York and Detroit had successful baseball teams in the American League, fans in both cities could be expected to follow with interest the exploits of Babe Ruth. Ruth played for the New York Yankees at the time and led them to a first place finish in 1923, with the Detroit Tigers right behind in second place. In 1924 the Yankees finished second, the Tigers third. In 1927 the Yankees dominated the league, but Detroit finished a respectable fourth. Individually, there was a keen rivalry between Ruth and some of Detroit's best players for the league's batting awards. Harry Heilmann of the Tigers narrowly edged out Ruth for batting honors in 1923. A year later Ruth won, but Heilmann was a close fourth. In 1926 Henry Manush of Detroit won the championship, with Ruth second, and Heilmann and still another Tiger player, Bob Fothergill, tied for third. The rivalry was made increasingly interesting because Ruth and Heilmann were close personal friends.

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[8]Stanley Woodward, "The Football Panorama and Football in the East," in Sport's Golden Age, ed. by Allison Danzig and Peter Brandwein (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), p. 117.

In boxing, New York was the acknowledged center of that sport. Dempsey, although he was from an obscure Colorado mining town, was a regular visitor to the city and fought two of his championship matches there in the 1920's. Further, New York was the base of operations of George "Tex" Rickard, the most famous promoter in boxing history and the man who staged most of Dempsey's major matches. New York also was the home of Gene Tunney, to whom Dempsey lost his heavyweight championship in 1926.

Detroit, although less important in the national boxing picture at the time, also was keenly interested in the sport.

The above conditions and limitations were intended to reduce the study to workable proportions. As might be imagined, an enormous volume of material was written about these three men, sometimes at the rate of three or four stories a day. In an effort to focus on material that would seem to influence the reader in either a positive or negative direction, stories of mere fact were weighted less heavily than were stories based on the personal opinions of the writer. This technique basically served to eliminate, or at least reduce, emphasis on material provided by various wire services although at the same time stressing stories and columns written by staff members of the newspapers themselves.

CHAPTER II

"Ballyhoo," a popular word in the 1920's, by dictionary definition means sensational propaganda. Thanks to ballyhoo, spectator sports were boosted to a level of popularity in the 1920's that they had never known before. Frederick Lewis Allen, a social historian, wrote that sport had become "an American obsession,"[1] and that:

> Promoters, chambers of commerce, newspaper-owners, sports writers, press agents, radio broadcasters, all found profit in exploiting the public's mania for sporting shows and its willingness to be persuaded that the great athletes of the day were supermen.[2]

Viewed from a perspective of fifty years, however, such mania seems faintly illogical. Past events had treated the American people roughly, sometimes cruelly. Had their responses to those stimuli been caution, suspicion, and doubt it is questionable that many historians would have been surprised.

The world had been at war from 1914 to late 1918, with the United States deeply involved in the final two years. Some 2,810,000 American males had been drafted for

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[1]Frederick L. Allen, Only Yesterday (New York: Perennial Library, Harper & Row, 1964), p. 66.

[2]Ibid., p. 172.

military duty, and those who lost their lives or who were reported missing in action numbered more than 100,000. The cost of the war in money was estimated at more than $32 billion. On the home front, however, the costs in hardship and heartache were equally staggering.

A climate of hatred and intolerance grew out of the war years that may not yet have dissipated. A powerful nativistic sentiment took hold of the national conscience and led to ugly reprisals against many eastern and southern Europeans who had emigrated to America before the war. Teaching of the German language was dropped from the curriculum of many public schools. German-Americans, even in high public positions, were victims of social discrimination. The Ku Klux Klan, an organization opposed to the civil rights and liberties of non-whites, non-Protestants, and the foreign born, surfaced in the southern states and spread rapidly across the nation.

A wave of bombings, strikes, and mass demonstrations against the government--called "Red scares" because their leaders in many cases were persons who embraced the communist political philosophy--alarmed much of the citizenry. Government law-enforcement agencies counterattacked and raids were carried out against aliens and suspected radicals. Arrests and deportations without benefit of public trials in a court of law followed. Riots between whites and persons of the Negro race shook twenty-six American

cities in the summer of 1919, and more riots followed in 1920. Labor strikes idled more than 4,000,000 workers in 1919 and shut down the vital coal and steel industries, among others. The economy was in a recession and, although it had rallied by 1920, prices of most retail goods had more than doubled since 1915.

And the national political picture was uncertain. Former President Theodore Roosevelt died in January, 1919, leaving the Republican Party temporarily leaderless. President Woodrow Wilson suffered a paralyzing stroke in October, 1919, leaving the nation for a time without the leadership that had seen it safely through the war. The Congress, if not the nation as a whole, was divided on the issue of ratification of the treaty specifying conditions for peace and over the means for insuring peace in the future.

Historians have recorded that the citizenry, anxious for relief from the anxieties and pressures of post-war America, turned its attention to sport. In some respects, however, sport must have seemed a tonic of dubious value. Boxing, for example, only began its advance toward respectability after the war. The state of New York had outlawed professional boxing in 1917 and, judging from a lukewarm endorsement by the New York Times of a bill introduced in 1920 in the state legislature to re-sanction the sport,

unpleasant memories still were fresh. The Times commented that:

> Few tears were shed when the old boxing law was repealed, as the public had become disgusted with numerous actions of unscrupulous persons connected with the sport.[3]

Elsewhere, the war had interfered with college football, taking many athletes from school into military service and drastically cutting back the varsity programs of dozens of teams. Many schools suspended football for one or more of the war years, among them the universities of North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Missouri, Washington, West Virginia, Cornell, and Yale. When most schools resumed the sport in earnest after the war many of the traditionally successful teams had trouble reestablishing their strength.

Of all sports, however, none found the times more trying than did major league baseball. Its recent past had been turbulent, with player unrest, strike threats, court fights, and internal dissension; but its darkest hour came in September, 1920, when it was revealed that the Chicago White Sox had been bribed to lose the previous year's World Series. Typical of newspaper reaction to the news of the scandal was this comment on the sports page of the New York Times:

> Baseball has been dealt a body blow, the effects of which will be apparent for a long time to come. A sport which has been held up for years as typifying

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[3]"Another Chance for Boxing," New York Times, Jan. 19, 1920, p. 10.

> everything that was honest and fair is suddenly unmasked and a condition is disclosed which has shocked the sport lovers of the nation as they were never shocked before . . . . . it is possible that it never again will enjoy the confidence which has been its portion up to this time.[4]

Eliot Asinof, a sportswriter whose book about the scandal was drawn largely from contemporary newspaper accounts, concluded that the unhappy news had been a "crushing blow at American pride," touching all strata of American life and causing the reputation of the so-called national game to hit rock bottom.[5]

Better and happier times were ahead, however. The decade of the 1920's came to be known as the "Golden Age of Sport" for the multitude of famous athletes it produced and the astounding records and performances for which they were responsible. An uncounted number of books, both fiction and non-fiction, magazine stories and articles, and even stage and screen plays have represented the decade as being the standard against which all others in sports are compared. Paul Gallico, who had been a sportswriter and sports editor of the New York Daily News during the period, wrote some thirty-five years later that:

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[4]"Comment on Current Events in Sport," ibid., Oct. 4, 1920, p. 10.

[5]Eliot Asinof, Eight Men Out: The Black Sox and the 1919 World Series (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), pp. 197-198.

> This remarkable ten years . . . saw the most fabulous set of champions arise in every game, amateur and professional, not only from the point of view of performance, but of character as well. . . . Each had a romance connected with him or her . . . for they were all success stories, the great American fairy tale, the rise from rags to riches . . . actually dramatized before our eyes.[6]

Gallico fancied himself a sort of custodian of the "Golden Age." He wrote of it often, even after he left sports journalism to write fiction. He was not alone, however, for several others who were sports reporters in the 1920's, and whose by-lines may have been as familiar as the athletes about whom they wrote, later felt compelled to publish their own memories of the period. Among them were Grantland Rice, Bill Corum, John Kieran, Stanley Woodward, and Tom Meany. Their books offer insights not only into the significance of spectator sports but also of the status of their profession.

A recurrent theme in their writings is that sports journalism came of age in the 1920's after the most humble of origins.

Grantland Rice wrote in his autobiography that his first job in sports, on the staff of the Nashville Daily News in 1901, paid five dollars a week. Since the managing editor considered sportswriting "akin to playing in the back-yard sand pile," Rice also was assigned to cover the

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[6]Gallico, The Golden People, pp. 25-26.

Tennessee legislature, the customs house, and the Nashville produce market.[7] When he advanced to the sports editorship of the Nashville Tennessean in 1907, at seventy dollars a week, he worked an average twelve-hour day with sole responsibility for two pages of sports, a daily column of verse for the editorial page, and the Nashville theater beat. On Sundays there were four pages of sports.[8]

John Kieran, popular sports columnist of the New York Times in the 1920's, recalled that when he joined the paper's sports staff in 1913 writers were paid a space rate of seven dollars a column. Because nothing he wrote was printed for the first three weeks he held the job he earned no pay.[9]

Gallico, although not personally affected by such difficult working conditions since his own career did not begin until 1921,[10] was particularly critical of them in his books. Sports journalism, he wrote, was ill-paid and sportswriters were considered "one grade above the office cat," eking out a meager existence and being required by

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[7]Grantland Rice, The Tumult and the Shouting (New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1954), p. 8.

[8]Ibid., p. 35.

[9]John Kieran, Not Under Oath (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1964), p. 18.

[10]Paul Gallico, Further Confessions of a Story Writer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1961), p. 11.

their publishers to double as publicists for local baseball franchises and boxing promoters. As a result, according to Gallico, many sportswriters were as much "lushes and tramps" as the people with whom they associated and about whom they wrote. It was not until after the World War that the status of sports journalism improved, sports pages became more plentiful, and a writer was able to acquire "a motorcar, a house in the country, and the admiration of his fellow citizens."[11]

There is evidence that the improvement in status cited by Gallico was jealously guarded. A report in 1927 in Editor & Publisher acknowledged that, "Today the sports section is a determining factor in the success or failure of any daily paper," and that "Present day opinion of . . . newspaper editors, psychologists, trade publication editors, advertising men, and journalism instructors is that sports on their present scale would be impossible without the sports section of the daily papers."[12]

In a meeting at the 1928 convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, one editor plaintively told his audience that:

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[11]Gallico, The Golden People, pp. 291-292.

[12]Lester Jordan, "Sports Reporting Was a Scholarly Occupation Fifty Years Ago," Editor & Publisher, July 2, 1927, p. 9.

> Sporting departments are making ever-increasing demands for space until distracted managing editors are wondering when the growth in this department of news will cease.

Citing responses to a recent survey of the growth of sports journalism, the same editor quoted an unidentified colleague as complaining that space in his newspaper no longer was as plentiful as it had been previously because "once the sports department gets it you can't take it away from them."[13]

Protective of their gains, newspaper sports departments churned out facts and figures at a near runaway pace, especially in the large cities, expanding their field in direct proportion to the expansion of spectator sports. That expansion bordered on the dramatic. In 1927, the Associated Press, an organization that supplied news stories from distant points to its affiliated newspapers, created an eight-man sports department, quickly determined that more men were needed, and added another four reporters. United Press, a similar organization, reported a three-fold increase in the volume of sports news carried on its wires between 1925 and 1928. The New York Herald-Tribune increased its sports coverage by six columns a day between 1924 and 1927, a greater increase than for any other department in the paper except financial news. By 1928, some 60 per cent

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[13]"Sports Dig Ever More Deeply into Newspaper's Editorial Space," ibid., April 28, 1928, pp. 44, 46.

of the local news in the paper was sports. And the New York Times gained almost two full pages of sports reading matter daily between 1924 and 1927.[14]

By 1923 it was apparent that the public had willingly and eagerly embraced spectator sports, despite some of the recent misfortunes and indiscretions of which those sports had been victims. Huge, permanent sports arenas opened in cities and on college campuses across the nation--including Yankee Stadium in New York, the Los Angeles Coliseum, and football stadiums at Columbia, Dartmouth, Nebraska, California, Illinois, and the Michigan Agricultural College--later Michigan State University--with others recently opened and still others under construction. A host of colorful and exciting athletes to fill these arenas already was on the scene or soon would make their debuts. The stage appeared set, too, for sports journalism to make its greatest strides. It was not long until critics were concluding, as a writer in Editor & Publisher did, that:

> Without the assistance of the newspapers, sports would never have attained their present popularity. Sports officials are among the first to admit the debt that baseball, football, boxing and other sports owe the papers.[15]

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[14] Ibid., p. 44.

[15] Lester Jordan, "Sports Reporting Was a Scholarly Occupation Fifty Years Ago," p. 9.

CHAPTER III

In 1923, when Yankee Stadium was opened to the public in New York it was nicknamed "The House That Ruth Built." No larger baseball stadium had ever been built. The new facility also had a tailor-made target for the lefthanded power hitter--a 296-foot right field fence, a distance substantially shorter than that of most other baseball parks. It stood to reason that Babe Ruth would find the short fence to his liking, yet his value to the Yankees, and to baseball in general, was questionable.

Ruth had had record-breaking seasons in 1919, 1920, and 1921. In 1922, however, he had suffered from an inflated sense of self-importance, violating the rules of his own team and of the American League with annoying frequency and performing well below his capacity during the regular season and particularly during the World Series. He had begun the 1922 season under a suspension imposed by the commissioner of baseball for playing in exhibition games around the nation without permission. Later, he was fined and stripped of his duties as captain of the Yankees after throwing dirt into the face of an umpire and climbing into the grandstand to fight with a heckler. Still later, he was suspended for three days after another row with an

umpire. Finally, another three-day suspension was imposed after Ruth used vulgar and threatening language to still another umpire whose decisions he disagreed with.

Ruth contritely promised to reform the following season, a promise that naturally attracted the careful scrutiny of baseball fans and officials, not to mention sportswriters and editors. Contrite or not, he could hardly be ignored; he was too important a personality for that. Thus, if the sports pages reflected a lack of sympathy or open suspicion of the player's intentions throughout the season, the morale of Ruth himself, of his teammates, and of the entire Yankee organization might suffer. So easily had the Yankees been defeated by their New York rivals, the Giants, in the 1921 and 1922 World Series, that Yankee morale might well have been fragile in 1923. In addition, Ruth was a tremendous gate attraction wherever he played, and a suspicious or hostile press might have undermined his popularity with fans and their confidence in him.

On the other hand, if the press made a gift of its forgiveness and blithely overlooked Ruth's past indiscretions only to have him renege on his promise to behave, the consequences might be embarrassing. Not only were there credibility problems to think of, but, as Tom Meany, a former New York sportswriter, pointed out in his memoirs, the travel expenses of baseball writers in 1923 were paid

by the major league teams they covered, a situation many of the writers were sensitive about.[1] How the reading public might have reacted to news that its baseball writers actually were working for the teams they covered is a moot question, but it is at least doubtful that most sports journalists would have wanted their newly-acquired respectability placed in jeopardy.

Nor was it without some significance that many newspapers, among them the Detroit Times, carried Babe Ruth's syndicated, ghost-written[2] baseball columns regularly throughout the season--columns often dealing with playing tips and advice to youngsters--and were faced with the decision to continue them in 1923 or drop them on the grounds that Ruth's behavior hardly constituted a suitable example for readers to follow.

Happily, Ruth did reform in 1923. He improved his batting average from .315 in 1922 to .393, the highest of his career; and although he lost the American League batting championship to Harry Heilmann of Detroit, he overwhelmingly was voted the "Most Valuable Player" of the league, a great honor. Ruth also led the Yankees to

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[1]Tom Meany, There've Been Some Changes in the World of Sports (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1962), pp. 6-7.

[2]Tom Meany, Babe Ruth (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1947), p. 150n.

the league championship and to victory in the World Series against the Giants.

Both the New York Times and the Detroit Times appeared satisfied by August, 1923, that Ruth was sincere in his pledge to reform. Occasional references to his change in attitude appeared in both newspapers, but the subject of his behavior of the previous season was approached gently. The two newspapers appeared happy to be able to report good news rather than bad news about the Yankee star.

Only once did the New York Times question Ruth's attitude. In a game on August 1, Ruth had been given a base on balls twice in succession by an overly cautious pitcher and, in disgust, had thrown his bat through the air and into the Yankee dugout--a dangerous and careless stunt. A reporter for the Times--whose writers were not awarded by-lines in 1923--scolded Ruth for the incident, reminding that, "Such displays of temper were common last year, but this season the Bambino has been on his good behavior . . . the act created a ripple of comment in the stands."[3]

If the remark was intended to be a slap on the wrist of Ruth, however, it was more than tempered by the

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[3]"Caught at the Plate," New York Times, Aug. 2, 1923, p. 12.

manner in which the story of the game itself was written. The Yankees had lost the game to the Cleveland Indians, but Ruth had provided New York fans with some excitement when he hit his twenty-fifth home run of the season in the final inning. Ruth's home run, it was written, "turned the dirge of 12,000 fans into a paean of joy." The writer continued that:

> The Indians were leading by five runs to one and the fans were wondering if they hadn't just as well give it up and go home. Only the fact that Ruth was to have one more chance at the fast-breaking, left-hand curve of the venerable Sherry Smith kept the crowd from already belated dinners.
>
> In his four previous trips to the plate Babe had not done so well. A strikeout, a high fly and two bases on balls were already set off against his name for the afternoon, but the fans still clung to the belief that he would do better, and so he did. . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> There was that well-known crack which comes when Babe hits one on the nose, and the triumphant procession of the bases was under way. By the time Babe had reached second the ball had come to rest far up in the bleachers and the crowd was at liberty to turn its undivided attention to Ruth and welcome him in a fitting manner. This it did . . . .[4]

For the remainder of the season there was little question that the New York Times was solidly in Ruth's camp. After a spectacular performance in a game on August 30, a Times reporter wrote that:

> Anybody who thinks that the Babe isn't the best player in present day baseball would get a stiff argument from 12,000 [crowd] of yesterday. What Ruth didn't do in hitting he did on the base lines where his daring . . . running completely upset the Senators in the sixth.

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[4]"Ruth Hits His 25th, But Yanks Lose, 5-3," ibid., Aug. 2, 1923, p. 12.

> Fielding chances were few . . . but it might be observed . . . that when Joe Judge singled to right in the sixth and tried to take an extra base he found Ruth's perfect throw waiting for him.[5]

Later in the season, with the start of the World Series imminent, the New York Times commented that Ruth could play no better role than to climax his fine season by shaking off his reputation for mediocrity in the post-season tournament. A Times reporter wrote that:

> For two years the Bambino has been the subject of most of the pre-series speculation . . . and it has been predicted that as the Babe goes so the Yanks will go. But for two years also Ruth has been what the trade calls a "bust," and, last year particularly, instead of being a towering figure he was a towering failure. Yet the old prophesy cannot be avoided, and so it is set down that more interest will concentrate on Ruth, more people around the country will watch Ruth's every move, than will be the case with any other player on either team.
>
> For one thing, he has "come back," got into condition, steadied down and made himself undoubtedly the greatest player in the game. . . . Ruth has been an emphatic success, and people will watch to see if the underdog of 1922 can be the star of 1923.[6]

Ruth hit two home runs in one of the early games of the 1923 series, prompting a Times reporter to write that he finally had showed that the Giants were not invincible and that:

> Ruth was a tonic for a jaded group of athletes who, if they had lost yesterday, almost certainly would have skidded downward to the depths that they reached in 1922.

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[5]"Ruth Gets 3 Hits As Yanks Win, 4-3," ibid., Aug. 31, 1923, p. 11.

[6]"Baseball's Classic Begins Wednesday," ibid., Oct. 7, 1923, sec. 1, part 2, pp. 1, 4.

The same reporter took particular delight in describing the first of the two home runs, finishing his account in a manner calculated to endear the Yankee player to baseball fans everywhere:

> It was a real home run. It went high in the air, cleared the ledge of the grand stand, cleared the roof and fell far away in Manhattan Field, which adjoins the Polo Grounds [Giants' home park]. When the ball lighted, a policeman picked it up, stuck it into his pocket and probably took it home to his children, to let them treasure it as the ball with which Babe Ruth made baseball history. . . .
> . . . . . .
> As he circled the bases he wore a grin from ear to ear, and when he reached the plate and touched it he lifted his cap and waved it as a boy would wave it at the thousands who were shouting, screaming and clapping in enthusiasm.[7]

Strangely, the Times stepped out of character once during the World Series in a story that may have been written by a reporter not usually assigned to cover the Yankees. In the final game of the series, won by the Yankees for their first so-called "world championship," Ruth had failed to drive home the winning run in a crucial situation for his team. A teammate succeeded where Ruth had failed, and the reporter felt compelled to point out the significance of that moment: "Babe Ruth came up to face his greatest opportunity of the series," he wrote

> The 34,172 rose in their seats and pleaded for a home run, a triple, even a single--and then the Babe struck out!

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[7]"Ruth's Two Homers Win for Yanks, 4-2, And Tie The Series," ibid., Oct. 12, 1923, pp. 1, 3.

> It didn't check the Yankees, but it did make Ruth again the big failure of the series. With all his home runs, and his fielding and his batting . . . Ruth failed pitifully in the biggest crisis of all. Of all the Yankee players, he figured the slightest in the final victory that brought the title.[8]

On the whole, however, the New York Times found Ruth as irresistible in 1923 as the writers of sports publications today find him.

Insofar as the city of Detroit was concerned, Ruth was a particularly attractive figure in 1923. His exciting batting race with Heilmann of the Tigers was not decided until the late stages of the season. He also was guest of honor at the banquet of a local youth organization to which he had contributed.

The Detroit Times was kind to Ruth, remembering occasionally that he had been a "bad boy" the previous season but indicating a willingness to believe in him as a man of basic goodness. Writers for the Detroit paper went out of their way to picture Ruth in a favorable light, considering that their own man, Heilmann, was bidding for his first batting championship and obviously would finish the season with a spectacular batting average, win or lose. Not that Heilmann suffered from lack of

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[8]"Yanks Win Title; 6-4 Victory Ends $1,063,815 Series," ibid., Oct. 16, 1923, pp. 1, 16.

sports page exposure, but Ruth enjoyed such endorsements as one in early August that declared:

> Ruth's average being .389 indicates how the Yankee slugger has gradually forged to the top. That it was in him, most observers believed, but they did not think that Babe would forego his swing in order to get a high average.
>
> Reports of every game indicate that Ruth is playing the greatest ball of his career, both offensively and defensively. With Heilmann slipping as he is, there seems to be no good reason why Ruth should not take command at the top.[9]

Another endorsement came in late September, on the occasion of the 1923 Most Valuable Player announcement. The news should not have come as a surprise in any sports-conscious section of the nation, but Detroiters may be presumed to have been hoping the honor would go to Heilmann. The story reporting the news said, in part:

> Babe Ruth has earned his reward. Yesterday he was voted the most valuable player to his team in the American League. . . .
>
> Babe earned the honor after one of the most surprising reversals in form in the history of baseball. Last year he did not receive a single vote . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Last year he was suspended at the beginning of the season and drew one or two more suspensions during the season for temperamental outbursts. The result was that he was somewhat of a "dud."
>
> This year it has been different. He has played for the good of the team, forgetting self-glory in his ambition to help the Yankees as much as possible.[10]

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[9]"Famous New York Slugger Proving Worth by Sport," Detroit Times, Aug. 5, 1923, sec. 3, p. 6.

[10]"Ruth Named Most Valuable Player," ibid., Sept. 22, 1923, p. 12.

Two other specifics of Detroit Times coverage of Ruth and his exploits need to be mentioned. The first is that H. C. "Bert" Walker, a Times baseball writer, appeared to have a special fondness for Ruth as a man that may have outweighed his admiration for Ruth as an athlete. The second is that the Times relied heavily on the nationally distributed sports columns of Damon Runyon and Davis J. Walsh, sports editor of the Hearst-owned International News Service. Both men, based in New York, wrote with a sophistication not always found in the stories of local reporters, and a certain cynicism characterized many of their columns. Ruth's image fared less well at their hands.

Walker took pleasure in humanizing the Ruthian image. When the Yankee player appeared with Heilmann at a banquet of the Detroit chapter of the Young Men's Order in August, 1923, Walker covered the event and filed a lengthy and flattering story that said, in part:

> He [Ruth] paid a high tribute to his friend and rival, as well as extolling the virtues of the Y. M. O., which . . . gave the banquet in honor of Heilmann and Ruth, both of whom are members of the order. Ruth made a tremendous impression . . . He complimented the Y. M. O. in having the nerve to start and carry to a successful conclusion an order the watchword of which was the improvement of young men.
>
> Ruth and Heilmann sat side by side in fine companionship, forgetful of the fact that they are deadly rivals on the field. Their presence together impressed the young men who make up the membership of the organization as being a fine exemplification of the true ideal of splendid sportsmanship . . . .[11]

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[11]Bert Walker, "Ruth's Best Player, Says Heilmann," ibid., Aug. 24, 1923, p. 25.

In a column shortly after the 1923 World Series, Walker related a story from the Yankee locker room after the game in which Ruth hit the two home runs. Walker did not say so in his column, but his account suggests that he may have witnessed what happened.

One of Ruth's two home runs had been retrieved by a small boy who, said Walker, "idolized the Babe" and returned the ball to him, thinking Ruth might want it as a souvenir. Ruth gave the boy a five-dollar bill and took back the ball. Later, a representative of the Detroit Young Men's Organization, whose guest Ruth had been earlier in the season, approached the Yankee player to ask if Ruth might donate some personal item to a fund-raising auction the organization was planning in order that its services might be expanded. Ruth gave the man the baseball he had just paid $5 to re-acquire and the bat with which he had hit it, and then autographed both items.

Walker quoted Ruth as saying, "I wouldn't give them to anybody else, but the Detroit Y. M. O. and the boys they are trying to help make a hit with me." A curiosity seeker, Walker wrote, had offered Ruth $1,000 for the ball and bat an hour earlier.[12]

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[12]Bert Walker, "Sportology," ibid., Oct. 24, 1923, p. 24.

It would be difficult to prove that Runyon or Walsh were determined to discount Ruth as an important element in the 1923 World Series; however, neither was carried away with his potential for stardom. Ruth was given his due, but Runyon, particularly, had to retreat from the position he had staked out in advance of the series.

Walsh wrote in a pre-series report that:

> One year ago . . . Ruth was the sap. Will history repeat itself at the expense of the new Ruth?
> . . . . . .
> Ruth was recognized as a vast success in 1921, and somewhat less so in 1922, what with suspensions and indiscreet training. . . . He was at the crest of his popularity and ability on each occasion, yet in two short series he was made to look the part of the veriest busher.[13]

Runyon was somewhat more definite in his pre-series speculation than was Walsh. It was his prediction that Ruth would fail again, and he wrote, in part:

> The writer does not attach as much importance to Babe Ruth as others, including [Miller] Huggins, manager of the Yankees.
> Huggins is quoted as saying, "It is all up to Ruth." He is one man among nine. Unless the other eight men do their full share, Ruth's efforts will amount to little.
> The writer is inclined to think that the responsibility placed on Ruth, and the fact that he has failed in the preceding series, may have an effect on Ruth's playing.
> It may make him over anxious. He will be trying so hard that it may be too hard. They are starting Ruth off with a considerable handicap.[14]

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[13]Davis J. Walsh, "Babe Now Scientific and Exact with Bat," ibid., Oct. 7, 1923, sec. 3, p. 3.

[14]Damon Runyon, "'Dope' Not Always Trustworthy," ibid., Oct. 10, 1923, p. 19.

After the game in which Ruth hit his two home runs, however, Runyon was less disposed to doubt his ability to play well under pressure. "Ruth was Ruth, mammoth, majestic," Runyon wrote after the game, adding:

> That is the curious thing about Ruth's home run hitting--his home runs always seem more terrific than any other home runs, though they may be hit no farther or harder.
>
> It would be just as easy to pick Aaron Ward's home run as the one that won the game for the Yanks . . . but Ruth's two home runs will be remembered long after Ward's one has been forgotten.
>
> That is another thing about Ruth's home runs--they are always the ones that seem to count the most.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> A heavy handicap was placed on the big hitter when it was said before the series started that it was "all up to Ruth."
>
> He met his handicap today and overcame it grandly.[15]

It is, of course, not fair to judge any writer or any newspaper on the strength of two, isolated columns. Anyone, even writers who put themselves on record, is entitled to an occasional misjudgment, and the aforementioned columns may not have been typical of all that Walsh and Runyon wrote about Ruth. Nor, for that matter, were all newspapers necessarily as respectful of Babe Ruth after his disappointing year in 1922 as were the New York Times and the Detroit Times. The Yankee star, after all, was earning an income of $52,000 a year;[16] and it is conceivable

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[15]Damon Runyon, "Brute Force Beats Master Mind," ibid., Oct. 12, 1923, p. 31.

[16]"Babe Ruth Signs for Three Years at Toss of a Coin," New York Times, March 6, 1922, p. 1.

that some thought a measure of responsibility, even from a Babe Ruth, was inherent in so high a salary.

Ruth, however, did mend his ways in 1923 and it seems safe to say that, in varying degrees of strength, he had the backing of the two newspapers and of the men whose stories and columns appeared in them. Even the most conservative audit would have to conclude that Ruth finished the 1923 season with his heroic image substantially undamaged.

Only two years later, however, Ruth put the baseball world and the sportswriters to another test, in many respects a far more serious one than that of 1923.

Prior to the start of the 1925 season he became gravely ill, collapsing in public on two occasions, and spending many weeks in North Carolina and New York hospitals. He did not play his first game of the season until early June, almost two months after the season had begun; and even when he did return to action it was apparent he would not have a successful year; nor did he.

Ruth failed to play well for days at a time; his batting and fielding both were below par. By late August, however, there were positive signs of improvement. Then, suddenly, the news was made public that Ruth had been

fined $5,000 and suspended indefinitely for misconduct on and off the field. The fine still stands as one of the largest in baseball history.

Every indication is that the sports public was taken completely by surprise by the news. Again, newspaper sports departments were faced with a dilemma, further complicated by the fact that Ruth was then thirty years old, an age at which most men are presumed mature enough to avoid the types of pitfalls that were commonplace with Ruth.

By virtue of the fact that Ruth played for a New York team, the Times of that city, in the weeks leading to his suspension, was interesting reading. A careful reading was not required to detect the disenchantment of James R. Harrison, the Times reporter who covered the Yankees, with Ruth. Harrison's descriptions of Ruth's twelfth and thirteenth home runs of the season are indicative of his attitude. Of the twelfth, Harrison wrote:

> Babe Ruth annoyed the small . . . audience of 5,000 by hitting his twelfth homer of the season. "Annoyed" is the proper word. The fans hooted George every time he came to bat and were so chagrined when he pasted the ball for the full circuit that they forgot to cheer him.
> . . . . . .
> For Ruth it is a long time between drinks at the home run fountain. Today's was his first in about three weeks.[17]

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[17]James R. Harrison, "Ruth's Home Run Revives Yankees," ibid., Aug. 19, 1925, p. 15.

Of his thirteenth, Harrison filed this description:

> Ruth's home run was his thirteenth of the season. This time a year ago he had swatted about three times thirteen, but why dwell on the glories of a dead past?[18]

To construe such obviously unenthusiastic accounts as anything but one man's disenchantment, however, is to find significance where there was none. The Times took no editorial stand against Ruth's substandard play. Nor was there an apparent anti-Ruth climate in other newspapers of the day. The Times morning rival in New York, the Herald-Tribune, betrayed no overt attempt to discredit the Yankee player. The celebrated sports columnists, Grantland Rice and W. O. McGeehan of the Herald-Tribune, in fact, already were looking ahead to another Ruth comeback in 1926. Rice, citing Ruth's infamous weight problem, wrote that, "There are many who believe the Babe is about through, but there is no reason for any such belief, if he has learned his lesson . . . he may still return to the throne which he had to surrender this spring and summer."[19] McGeehan acknowledged that Ruth was having a bad season but added that, "It is not the end of Ruth . . . He has many more years to go . . . There is another comeback in him.

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[18]James R. Harrison, "Yankees Set Back Third Time in Row," ibid., Aug. 23, 1925, sec. 9, p. 1.

[19]Grantland Rice, "The Sportlight," New York Herald-Tribune, Aug. 14, 1925, p. 12.

He will continue to be an asset to the Yankees for several years to come."[20]

Harrison, of the New York Times, in fact, appears to have been pulled off the story of Ruth's fine and suspension when the news was announced on August 30. The Yankees were in St. Louis, at the conclusion of a road trip, when the story broke. Ruth left the team immediately after some well-aimed verbal blasts at the Yankees manager, Miller Huggins, and announced he would go to Chicago to appeal to the commissioner of baseball, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, and then to New York to plead his case before the owner of the team. Reporter Harrison, meanwhile, if he followed the usual procedure for baseball writers, probably accompanied the Yankee team by train back to New York. In any event, he did not earn another by-line for a story concerning Ruth until September 8, the day after Ruth had been permitted to return to the Yankee lineup.

As might be imagined, an enormous volume of stories, columns, and editorials appeared in the New York papers when the story broke and continued for weeks afterward; a tribute, if nothing else, to Ruth's popularity and to his importance to the sports world.

The New York Times strived hard to remain objective. On August 30 an Associated Press story from St. Louis

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[20]W. O. McGeehan, "Down the Line," ibid., Aug. 18, 1925, p. 15.

announced only the bare details of the fine and suspension, but the paper localized the story almost as though it were printing Ruth's obituary. After pointing out that the fine was a baseball record and that the portion of the salary he forfeited under the terms of the suspension was more than many other players received for an entire season's play, the Times story recalled Ruth's troubled childhood years in a Baltimore orphanage, his sale to the Yankees by the Boston Red Sox, and his amazing home run records of previous years.[21]

On August 31 the Times editorialized, on the sports page, that while it was true that Ruth had customarily "snapped his fingers at discipline" both he and the Yankees had a new season to look forward to and that "the process of rejuvination will have to include a strict adherence to training rules."[22]

It was characteristic of the Times approach to the story that when it determined that a point or points needed to be raised about the disciplinary action or Ruth's baseball future, or both, those points were made to seem to have come from baseball men "on the inside."

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[21]"Ruth Fined $5,000; Costly Star Banned for Acts Off Field," New York Times, Aug. 30, 1925, pp. 1, 3.

[22]"This Week in Sports," ibid., Aug. 31, 1925, p. 12.

One such point was that there must have been some justification for the harsh penalty or the Yankee manager, Huggins, wouldn't have inflicted it.[23] There were, after all, Ruth's many fans to consider; they should understand that he was far from perfect; that he was more than capable of serious indiscretions. Then, too, the Yankee team still was en route to New York from St. Louis and all the facts were not yet in. In the meantime, manager Huggins deserved the benefit of the doubt.

Another point was that, in the long run, the most realistic solution to the situation would be for Ruth to take his medicine and apologize.[24] He was still bound to the Yankees by a lucrative, three-year contract and his selling or trading price to another team defied contemplation. He could, of course, retire from baseball, but where else could he command such a salary?

Still another point, and perhaps the crucial one, was whether Ruth really could make his peace with the Yankees.[25] He had accused Huggins of incompetency and the accusation had reached print. And he had attempted to go over Huggins' head to have the penalties rescinded by the

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[23]"Ruth Will Quit if Huggins Remains Manager; To Put Case Before Landis," ibid., Aug. 31, 1925, p. 11.

[24]"Ruppert Declares Huggins Will Stay," ibid., Sept. 1, 1925, p. 15.

[25]Ibid., p. 15.

owner of the team, without success. Moreover, there were the attitudes of Ruth's teammates to be considered. They had been witnesses to his actions and they would have to play beside him again if and when he was reinstated.

By seeking out "informed baseball men" on these points, the Times demonstrated a number of effective and intelligent judgments. First, it avoided unnecessarily taking sides in a difficult issue where more was involved than the principle of who was right and who was wrong. Ruth was at the peak of his career; his retirement might have done irreparable harm to the game of baseball, not to mention the Yankees' future championship hopes. The Times was, after all, a New York newspaper and probably not without some hopes of its own for a Yankee championship. Successful teams, as a rule, are more interesting to cover than are unsuccessful teams. Second, a certain editorial dignity and integrity were maintained. A series of well-meaning and astute, but perhaps over-zealous, little editorial comments, on the sports page or elsewhere, might have cheapened or at least inflamed the entire issue. Third, even if the Times had correctly guessed that Ruth eventually would capitulate, which he did, it would have been unseemly to suggest it in print. Ruth might have changed his mind at the last minute out of spite, or the Yankees might have decided to sell or trade him for the same reason. And, fourth, the dignity of both sides of

the issue was preserved, even if the Times objective may have been a selfish one. Regardless of the outcome of the matter, the Times still would need free access to the Yankee clubhouse and executive offices in the months and years ahead. Ruth, if he did apologize and eventually return to action, one day would be worthy of individual attention of a more positive nature. Cordial relations at a trying time such as this undoubtedly would have a positive influence on future cooperation between him and Times representatives.

Only after Ruth had been reinstated and was playing again did the Times resume identifying reporter Harrison as the author of stories about the controversial player. Harrison was not so quick to forgive and forget, although in view of the fact that he traveled with the Yankee team and had the opportunity to witness Ruth's behavior first-hand his reaction was both understandable and predictable. Not that Harrison was vindictive, but his stories made it plain that he thought at least one watchful eye ought to be kept on the Yankee player to be sure he appeared properly contrite. A story from Boston, for example, pictured Ruth's return to the lineup in fair, if unflattering, terms. Harrison wrote:

> there was no fatted calf for the prodigal son. No gala celebration, no scenes of triumph. As the wanderer came back to the fold, the Yanks' four-game winning streak shriveled up and died.

> Miller Huggins and George Herman shook hands before the game but only for the cameras.
> Whatever else one may say about Ruth, he likes his baseball. He was the first man in uniform this afternoon, and the first on the field by several minutes.[26]

Two days later, after Ruth committed a fielding error in the final inning of another game in Boston to lose the game for the Yankees, Harrison was critical of the play and made it the main point of his story, but his words probably were no more harsh than they would have been had Ruth not recently been in trouble. "By the grace of Babe Ruth, the Red Sox won the last game of the New York series today," Harrison wrote. "To err is human and nobody ever charged George with not being human. He dozed at the wrong time and the Sox swarmed past him for a victory."[27]

And when Ruth finally played his first game in New York after the suspension, Harrison wrote that his reception was unenthusiastic, if cordial. "First of all, only 10,000 were sufficiently interested in Ruth's return from Siberia to hike to the Yankee Stadium," the story said:

> New York refused to get all worked up over a revolt against the august authority of Miller Huggins . . . . Still it was a positive reception. No hoots, no groans, no pungent remarks.[28]

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[26]James R. Harrison, "Ruth Back in Fold, But Yanks Lose, 5-1," ibid., Sept. 8, 1925, p. 24.

[27]James R. Harrison, "Red Sox Get Last As Babe Takes Nap," ibid., Sept. 10, 1925, p. 20.

[28]James R. Harrison, "Yanks Weakly Box to Red Sox Hurler," ibid., Sept. 14, 1925, p. 23.

On the whole, the New York Times manifested a responsible attitude toward Babe Ruth and treated him with more understanding than he may have deserved in 1925. Ruth's behavior and performance were not those of a hero, but the Times managed to preserve for him a generous share of the dignity a hero ought to command.

The flamboyance that had been expected of the Detroit Times came to the surface in the case of Babe Ruth's 1925 suspension and fine, yet the newspaper's approach to the story was curiously ambivalent. Its own participation in an annual Babe Ruth All-American Baseball team contest unquestionably restricted the latitude to which the sports department could go in emphasizing the misconduct story.

Throughout most of his active career, Ruth's name appeared above a baseball column syndicated by the Christy Walsh enterprises. Walsh doubled as Ruth's financial adviser. Ruth did not actually write the column; it was ghost-written for him by a number of different newspapermen, as was the case with many other famous athletes. Paul Gallico referred to the phenomenon of the "literary athlete who, even before he had rinsed the sweat from his body in the showers, was supposed to have rushed to his typewriter and indited an intimate, inside, personal account of just how he had done it."[29] In connection with the Ruth column,

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[29]Gallico, The Golden People, p. 28.

those newspapers in which it was printed were supposed to conduct an annual contest for their readers. Readers were to submit their guesses for an All-America baseball team of active players--the guesses to be compared with Babe Ruth's own selections. All active players were eligible to be picked, with the exception of Ruth himself. In 1925, the contest was due to close the day after Ruth's fine and suspension were announced and $500 in local prize money was at stake.

With the contest deadline imminent, the Detroit Times preferred to use the story of the suspension on page one. First announcement of the penalty was played as the lead story, and the story remained on the front page for four days. On August 31 the lead story, under an eight-column banner headline, with a New York dateline, and the by-line of one James Whittaker, declared that:

> A pitiful, homeless vagabond, unwilling to return here, "Boob" Ruth faced today exposure of withheld truths about the riotous life course which has reduced him in five years from king of baseball to a discredited pretender to the envied title.

The story, sensational and irresponsible on its face, implicated Ruth not only with a lengthy past history of willful disregard for discipline, but also with alleged adulterous behavior with women in a number of southern cities, and with an attempt to assault Yankee manager Huggins in public in a Savannah, Georgia, railroad station. A divorce action by Mrs. Ruth was hinted, and, the story continued, the

staff of the New York hotel in which the Ruths lived "was not surprised by the St. Louis news."[30]

The logical conclusion would seem to be that the story was not the product of a sportswriter. A responsible sportswriter presumably would have realized Ruth's value to the sports world and thus would not have subjected him to the disclosure of events in his personal life, at least not in print. It is difficult to rationalize the use of the story by the Times on any other grounds than that sensational news concerning well-known figures from many other walks of life was highly prized by its editors.

The damage done by Whittaker's story, however, may have been negligible. Historically, it would seem that Ruth always did himself more harm than was done by stories written about him. Just two days later, as it developed, a story from New York by the fast-rising sportswriter Bill Corum doubtless eased the minds of Detroit readers. Ruth had reached New York and had apologized to the Yankee management for his conduct. He had not yet been forgiven for his sins and Corum was off base with his prediction that Ruth would be back in the lineup within three days, but the impact of the story was nonetheless positive. Corum wrote that:

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[30]James Whittaker, "Babe Ruth, Ousted, Faces Divorce," Detroit Times, Aug. 31, 1925, pp. 1-2.

> The Monarch of Swat bent the knee. Babe Ruth was hanging around the Yankee Stadium this morning waiting for a signal from Miller Huggins to jump into a uniform again.
> . . . . . .
> Ruth not only repented, he broke all existing records repenting.
> . . . . . .
> Thus, the little act is nearing its final curtain. . . . It will finish another chapter in the romantic life story of Babe Ruth.
> You can't get away from Ruth. Suspended or playing, sick or well, hitting or missing, he remains the great single figure in the sporting life of this country.[31]

There was further reassurance from Corum the following day in a story that read, in part:

> The verdict will be handed down Saturday afternoon before an interested gathering of Yankee players and newspapermen. At that time Huggins no doubt will demand a formal and semi-public apology from the Babe, to follow one that has already been made in private.
> If the apology is satisfactory, as it is reasonably sure to be, Ruth will be allowed to put on his uniform and play. . . . The $5,000 is expected to stand, temporarily at least, as a guarantee that Ruth keeps the profuse promises he has made since he saw the light and hit the sawdust trail to baseball redemption.[32]

For all practical purposes, the Detroit Times lost interest in the Ruth story at that point, and its local writers never did see a need to lend their own opinions in the matter. Besides, their minds were elsewhere. Their own team, the Tigers, was playing far better baseball at the time than were the Yankees, and the Tigers' star

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[31]M. W. Corum, "Ruth May Play on Saturday," ibid., Sept. 2, 1925, pp. 1, 2.

[32]M. W. Corum, "Ruth Verdict on Saturday," ibid., Sept. 3, 1925, p. 24.

player, Heilmann, was well on his way to another league batting championship. Moreover, the city of Detroit had chosen the same date Ruth's suspension was announced to officially honor the legendary Ty Cobb, long a brilliant player, for his twenty years of service to the Tigers. The image of Babe Ruth may have suffered in Detroit as a result, but only in comparison.

Simply put, the story of Babe Ruth in 1927 is told by a two-digit statistic--sixty home runs. He and the Yankees were virtually invincible in 1927. The team often has been referred to as the best in baseball history.

Ruth had hit fifty-nine home runs in 1921 and many, if not most, baseball observers went on record with the prediction that the record would stand forever. When he hit his sixtieth in 1927 it is safe to say that he charmed the sports world, if not the entire nation.

In those days, unlike the present, only ten cities were represented in both major leagues of baseball, and all were located in the area bounded by St. Louis on the west, Washington, D. C., on the south, and Boston on the north. Furthermore, almost half of the cities were represented by weak teams, so that there was an even narrower concentration of the vital dynamics of the game. Such a

narrow frame of reference was made to order for a player of Ruth's stature. If the public in most sections of the country couldn't watch the Yankee player in action, at least it could share in his achievements from a distance, unrestricted by loyalties to teams in their own areas. As Ruth came ever nearer to his record it probably is safe to say that a majority of Americans counted themselves among his well-wishers. He was a winner and one of the oldest cliches in sports is that everybody loves a winner.

In short, Babe Ruth was fun to think about, and, for sportswriters, fun to write about. The challenge lay not in creating an identity for the man--he already was a hero and his stock in trade, the home run, was easily identifiable by millions of people--but in embellishing it. New superlatives were necessary because the old ones no longer were adequate. Writers of the New York Times met the challenge with enthusiasm.

The New York Times began to monitor Ruth's progress after the games of September 6 and 7, in which he hit a combined five home-runs to raise his total for the season to forty-nine. At that point the Yankee star needed eleven home runs in twenty-two days to set another record, and he still was locked with teammate Lou Gehrig in a two-man race for the home-run leadership of the American League.

Coverage of Yankee games was the responsibility of one John Drebinger who filed flowery and involved stories.

After a game in Boston in which Ruth had hit three home runs, Drebinger wrote that:

> The reign of a great monarch was being seriously threatened here this afternoon when the king himself rose in his wrath, struck three mighty blows in his own behalf . . . and removed all doubt . . . that for the moment at least the master home-run swatter of the age still is George Herman Ruth, called the Babe.[33]

The following day, after Ruth hit two more, Drebinger's story said, in part, "The king was still running rampant here today . . . Serious thought is even now being given to the possibility of Ruth surpassing his world's record of fifty-nine."[34]

With three games left in the regular season Ruth still needed three home runs to break the record, and Drebinger wrote that

> Babe Ruth is set, ready, and on edge for a last supreme effort that he confidently hopes will send him blazing to a new home run record before the final bell sounds on the American League campaign.
> . . . . . .
> There is no denying that the Babe has his heart set on a new record and wants it badly. Back in 1921 . . . experts were free in predicting that the record, unless surpassed at once in the year or two to follow by Ruth himself, doubtless would stand for many years. As season after season rolled by with the Babe, as well as all others, failing to approach the mark the critics were convinced that the high-water mark in home run hitting had been reached.
> But today, six years later, finds the Babe standing on the threshold of topping that great record. It has

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[33]John Drebinger, "Yanks Break Even; Ruth Hits 3, Gehrig 1," New York Times, Sept. 7, 1927, p. 23.

[34]John Drebinger, "Ruth Hits 48th, 49th As Yanks Sweep On," ibid., Sept. 8, 1927, p. 30.

> been an arduous campaign and Ruth himself realizes quite fully that the breaks of the game may never afford him another opportunity of getting that close to the mark again. Hence the zeal with which the Babe will be taking his cuts at the ball in this final three-game series.[35]

When Ruth tied his own record Drebinger was challenged to new heights of description. His story said, in part:

> Then the fifty-ninth! That, countrymen, was a wallop! . . .
>
> The ball landed halfway up the right field bleachers and though there were scarcely 7,500 eyewitnesses present the roar they sent up could hardly have been drowned out had the spacious stands been packed to capacity. The crowd fairly rent the air with shrieks and whistles as the bulky monarch jogged majestically around the bases . . . .[36]

The story was embellished with an eight-column banner headline, a two-column, ten-inch-deep picture of Ruth, and a chart illustrating how his 1927 record compared with that of 1921.

That, however, was as excited as the New York Times felt compelled to be. When Ruth hit his sixtieth the story was short, less than a full column, and no by-line was awarded, although the style was unmistakably Drebinger's. At a glance, the uninitiated would not have guessed that one of the most significant events in the history of sport

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[35]John Drebinger, "Ruth's Heart Set on New Homer Mark," ibid., Sept. 29, 1927, p. 20.

[36]John Drebinger, "Ruth Hits 2, Equals 1921 Homer Record," ibid., Sept. 30, 1927, p. 18.

had taken place, so anti-climatic did the Times presentation seem. The story did indicate that, "Babe Ruth scaled the hitherto unattained heights yesterday," and that "Home run 60 [was] a terrific smash," but the writer almost seemed to have taken his cue from the fact that a relatively small crowd--10,000 persons for a Friday afternoon game--was on hand for the event, rather below what might have been logically expected. There was apparently no attempt made to ask Ruth what emotion or sensation he experienced once he realized the hit was a home run, a practice that is almost a ritual in sports journalism circles today. Instead, as was common in both the New York Times and in the Detroit Times, the reporting seemed flavored with an air of distance and an aloofness that sportswriters wished could have been otherwise. Ruth was described as having "jogged around slowly" and having "punctuated his kingly strides with a succession of snappy military salutes" while hats were tossed into the air, papers were torn up, handkerchiefs were waved, and a carnival spirit prevailed. Otherwise, according to the story, "There was not much else to the game."[37]

It was left to the Times sports columnist, John Kieran, to place the event in its proper perspective the

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[37]"Ruth Crashes 60th to Set New Record," ibid., Oct. 1, 1927, p. 12.

following day. Unlike the story of the game, Kieran's column was the stuff of which heroes and legends were made. He wrote that:

> What this big, good-natured, uproarious lad has done is little short of a miracle of sport. . . .
>
> Supposedly "over the hill," slipping down the steps of Time, stumbling toward the discard, six years past his peak, Babe Ruth stepped out and hung up a new home run record at which all the sport world may stand and wonder. . . .
>
> Put it in the book in letters of gold. It will be a long time before anyone else betters that home run mark, and a still longer time before any aging athlete makes such a gallant comeback and glorious charge over the comeback trail.[38]

Kieran was not with the New York Times in 1925 when Ruth was fined and suspended, and one wonders how he might have approached the story if he had been. Like Bert Walker of Detroit before him, Kieran seemed to value Ruth the man more highly than Ruth the athlete. This was particularly evident in columns that were printed after the 1927 baseball season. Kieran did not begin his "Sports of the Times" column until January 1, 1927, to combat the highly popular two-column format--Grantland Rice and W. O. McGeehan--of the rival New York Herald-Tribune.[39] Although Ruth by then had long been recognized as a star of no ordinary magnitude, Kieran seemed bent on clarifying and burnishing his image. He once wrote of an occasion on which Ruth had passed up a party that had been organized for the purpose of listening

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[38]John Kieran, "Sports of the Times," ibid., Oct. 2, 1927, sec. 10, p. 2.

[39]Kieran, Not Under Oath, p. 38.

to the Jack Dempsey-Gene Tunney boxing championship match on radio to attend a small charity bazaar sponsored by a local church. Ruth "autographed and auctioned half a dozen baseballs" and "spent his money generously at all the booths," Kieran wrote, and by the time he reached the party the fight was over.[40]

Kieran thought that Ruth was a hero because "he approximates what the public thinks a ball player should be." The public, he wrote

> . . . thinks that Babe Ruth is just about perfect. "here," they say, "is a real guy. . . . He spends too much and eats too much and gets into trouble every so often, but we like him."[41]

An axiom of long standing in sports is that a great athlete who performs for a New York team is destined to become known as a superstar while a great athlete who performs anywhere else will remain merely a great athlete. The examples are virtually countless; three of recent vintage are Joe DiMaggio and Mickey Mantle of baseball and Joe Namath of professional football. The implication is obvious; New York teams have the benefit of the sophisticated, influential, and powerful communications media behind them. A clue to the origin of the axiom might well have been the decision of the New York Times in 1927 to

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[40]John Kieran, "Sports of the Times," New York Times, Oct. 26, 1927, p. 35.

[41]Ibid., Dec. 8, 1927, p. 39.

begin a sports column to compete with those of a rival newspaper, the Herald-Tribune, some 85,575 copies[42] less widely read than itself. With their images in the hands of competing columnists such as Kieran and Rice, who once wrote that, "pure, warm, unadulterated friendship with no holds barred . . . is the key to the Babe Ruth I most treasure."[43] Babe Ruth and those outstanding New York athletes who followed him could rest easily.

In Detroit, on the other hand, the only real stake in baseball in 1927 was to see how close the Tigers could stay behind the dominant Yankees and to take pride in the fact that if Harry Heilmann couldn't hit as many home runs as Babe Ruth could at least Ruth couldn't bat for as high an average as Heilmann could. The Tigers finished the season in fourth place, well below the Yankees but better than four other teams in the league. Heilmann won the batting championship again and Ruth, for all his home runs, was a distant sixth in that category. Thus did Detroiters relate to Babe Ruth and the Yankees.

The Detroit Times, perhaps mirroring its community, evinced no great surprise or admiration for Ruth's

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[42]According to Editor & Publisher, July 16, 1927, p. 49, the circulation of the New York Herald-Tribune was 289,674 and that of the Times was 375,249. The difference is 85,575.

[43]Rice, The Tumult and the Shouting, p. 114.

achievement. His progress toward the sixtieth home run, if not exactly ignored, at least went uncharted until the fifty-second had been hit. On that occasion, the Times ran an enormous picture of Ruth in the midst of a mighty swing with his bat. The picture appeared on the first sports page of a Friday edition, covered eight columns, was twelve inches deep, and was captioned only "Ruth" and "8 More to Beat 1921 Record."

When the old record of fifty-nine was equalled the Times turned to a New York reporter, Robert A. Hereford of Hearst's Universal Service, for a from-the-scene account of the story. Hereford wrote colorfully. His story of the tieing home runs said, in part:

> With two of these wind-splitting swings which represent all that is most spectacular in baseball, Babe lifted two more home runs into history.
> . . . . . .
> A stage director could not have prepared a better setting for the fifty-ninth big blow. There were three men on base. Young Paul Hopkins, former college star, on the mound for the Senators, set his teeth and with youthful determination strove to gain fame with a strike-out over baseball's greatest hitter.
> The count was three balls and two strikes. Zam--and Babe Ruth was back![44]

Of the sixtieth, however, a practicing poet might not have written more eloquently. Hereford wrote that:

> A sculptor seeking to immortalize the spirit of baseball would have found an ideal model at the Yankee Stadium.

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[44]Robert A. Hereford, "Babe Ruth Equals Record," Detroit Times, Sept. 30, 1927, p. 19.

> A barrel-torsoed giant of a man, bat on shoulders, balanced on legs as delicately turned as those of a thoroughbred race horse, and poised for the blow that was to blaze new baseball trails. . . .
>
> That was Babe Ruth . . . the instant before he lifted his sixtieth home run of the season into the bleachers and record books . . .
>
> That sweeping, rhythmic swing, a sharp crack like a pistol shot and a tiny white sphere outlined for the moment against the darkness of the bleachers. And as if the balooning ball had released a hidden spring, the roar from the stands like the thundering of Niagara.[45]

But for one further, inexplicable story long after the baseball season ended, the Detroit Times was basically silent on the subject of Babe Ruth, excepting routine reports of his performances in the World Series. On December 10, however, in a notable, but strange story that could have been designed to do little but assure readers that Ruth had found that discipline and success do mix, the Times printed the following:

> The secret is out at last: George Herman Ruth, former "Bad Boy of Baseball," has got all the badness out of his system. . . . Maybe it's the underlying reason for the Babe's smashing of his own world record for home runs.
>
> Anyway, the "Big Bam" has the "goods" to prove the truth of the revelations. The "goods" in this case are represented by a bank account of $50,000 and paid-up life insurance which cost the Babe $20,000 more. . . .
>
> What's more, Babe will tell you that he got more real "kick" out of life last year than he ever did before, in the days when it was "easy come, easy go," when he used to toss away $100 and $1,000 bills on the ponies or at poker, and sometimes tossed down drinks that would have made Andy Volstead shiver.
>
> No more of that for Babe. He'll tell you that he awakened to see his own folly. He thinks more of that

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[45]Robert A. Hereford, "Babe Ruth Sets New Home Run Record," ibid., Oct. 1, 1927, pp. 9-10.

> bank account than he does of the 60 four-baggers that established his new record. Babe has emerged from the stage when he always was referred to as an "over-grown kid."[46]

Not well-written by critical standards, the story was unattributed and was accompanied by four grotesque cartoons depicting Ruth squandering money on horse races, playing cards, being mobbed by a group of young boys, and depositing money at a bank window.

One's temptation is to conclude that the Detroit Times simply betrayed a shortage of imagination out of character with its overall fascination with the dramatic and the spectacular. None of its writers paid tribute to the Yankee star, although there were potentially many tributes that could have been written. After all, some of those sixty home runs had been hit against the Tigers.

Perhaps it was inevitable that Ruth would succeed in setting the new record; in his long career there were not many situations in which he failed under pressure. Certainly, there was no other player active in 1927 who was more likely to hit sixty home runs than he, and of all the baseball stories of 1927 no other may be said to have been significantly more important; not even the Yankees' total domination of the World Series in four

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[46]"The Old Babe and the New Babe," ibid., Dec. 10, 1927, p. 9.

games against the Pittsburgh Pirates, champions of National League. Given the logic of these observations, it may be that the very forces that placed Ruth in position to establish a record of such magnitude also deprived him of systematic recognition of the achievement. In this analysis, the approach of the Detroit Times was uncharacteristically provincial.

CHAPTER IV

By his own admission, Red Grange was almost too small to play varsity football at a major university. As a freshman he weighed 166 pounds[1] and even as a senior his physical dimensions--5 feet 11 inches in height and 175 pounds--were significantly below the standards generally considered acceptable by today's college coaches. In three varsity seasons at the University of Illinois, however, Grange gained an astounding 4,280 yards running and passing and scored 31 touchdowns, or 186 points. The statistics are the more compelling because he did not contribute to four of twenty-four games played by Illinois while he was a player. In tribute to his excellent play Grange was honored with All-America recognition in each of his three seasons.

As a sophomore, in 1923, Grange showed in his first varsity game that he had superior ability. Against the University of Nebraska he scored three touchdowns and gained 202 yards running with the football, totals whose significance is underscored by the fact that he played only

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[1]Harold E. Grange, The Red Grange Story, as told to Ira Morton (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1953), p. 31.

thirty-nine minutes--slightly more than half the game. Later in the season, against Northwestern University, he again scored three touchdowns while playing nineteen minutes. In all, Grange scored twelve touchdowns in 1923 and gained 1,260 yards, although he did not play in one game because he was not needed.[2]

Mitigating in Grange's favor was a newly-awakened interest in football outside the East as cited earlier by Stanley Woodward. By 1923, at least some of the credit they deserved finally was being realized by colleges and universities in the Midwest, and while Grange was not instantly recognized as a sensation by newspaper sports departments, it is safe to say that by the end of the season football followers throughout the United States were familiar with his name.

As might have been expected, however, the New York Times made no extraordinary effort to spread Grange's fame. Yale and Cornell universities, institutions much closer to the allegiance of New York readers, both enjoyed undefeated seasons in 1923 and received the larger part of the newspaper's recognition. Coverage of Illinois games was restricted to brief, if occasionally colorful, anonymous or wire service accounts. The story of the 10-0 victory of Illinois over

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[2]Ibid., pp. 179-180.

the University of Wisconsin was typical of the reports Times readers saw. The story said, in part:

> Harold "Red" Grange, the twenty-year-old flash of the Illinois eleven, added further glory to his gridiron fame by crashing over for a touchdown in the first period after a thrilling 28-yard run around left end.
>
> Grange, as a result of his performance today, retains the lead as the leading scorer in the West. He has crashed over opponents' goal lines for eleven touchdowns in six games, a total of 66 points. . . .
>
> After Illinois had piled up its lead in the first half, Grange was replaced by Mauer, and the Illinois backfield seemed unable to make first down consistently in the final half.[3]

No account, however, was more colorful than the one that described the 7-0 victory by Illinois over the University of Chicago, the occasion on which the new Memorial Stadium at the University of Illinois was opened at the Champaign-Urbana campus. A huge crowd attended the game, many of the fans coming down from Chicago by train as much to watch Grange play as to follow the Chicago team or help open the stadium. Grange did not disappoint them; his touchdown was the only score of the game. The unsigned story of the game reported in part that

> Grange fulfilled the expectations of the alumni, many of whom came miles to see him, by running 60 yards through almost the entire Chicago team and by intercepting a pass and tearing off a 42-yard run in the first quarter and adding a spectacular 30-yard run in the second quarter. The Chicago defense was unable to solve his twisting advances and he frequently shook off five men or more before being stopped.

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[3]Associated Press, "Grange Again Star as Illinois Wins," New York Times, Nov. 11, 1923, sec. 1, part 2, p. 3.

> He also pierced the line several times for good gains and it was his slicing drive at centre that won the game for Illinois.[4]

Generally speaking, however, the fame of Red Grange was not the concern of the New York Times in 1923; nor are the reasons why hard to understand. Beside the fact that the Times was slower to yield to the temptation to glorify talented athletes than were some of its competitors, Grange still was only a sophomore and sophomore athletes historically have been slow to attract widespread attention. True, Grange's statistical totals were impressive, but his university was an unknown quantity in the East. Although Illinois enjoyed an undefeated season and shared the Big Ten Conference championship with the University of Michigan, the two schools did not meet in competition. And Illinois was not scheduled to play an eastern school until 1925. If the Times sports department decided upon a wait-and-see approach that decision could be forgiven. On the other hand, when Grange was named to the prestigious Walter Camp All-America team Times' readers could not claim they had not been prepared for the news. The facts all were there; they merely lacked an enthusiastic presentation.

Sophomore or not, however, Red Grange was a product of the Midwest, and the Detroit Times saw an obligation to

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[4]"61,319 See Illinois Defeat Chicago, 7-0," ibid., Nov. 4, 1923, sec. 1, part 2, p. 1.

keep his name before the public, fueling the public's curiosity with colorful and prominently displayed accounts of Grange's performances. To Detroiters, and especially to University of Michigan football followers, however, Grange was more than a curiosity, he was an unseen enemy.

But for Grange, Michigan could have enjoyed exclusive claim to the championship of the Big Ten. Of the other members in the conference only Illinois could even hope to tie for that honor. That, however, is what Illinois did, and the largest share of the credit obviously belonged to Grange. In four games against Big Ten opponents he scored Illinois' only touchdowns as his team won narrow victories.

Although Michigan and Illinois did not play each other they did meet some common opponents, and because the two institutions achieved their successes in different ways they invited comparisons. Such comparisons, inevitable because sports reduce regional pride and loyalty to their lowest common denominators, must nonetheless remain inconclusive so long as there is no direct competition between two teams. Readers of the Detroit Times, then, could only examine the accounts of Red Grange's performances and form mind pictures of the Illinois athlete against which the strengths and weaknesses of their local team might be measured.

The picture that emerged from those accounts indicated that Grange had all the prerequisites for heroism. In the Northwestern game, for example, "The speedy Illini halfback was practically the entire offensive during the half, despite the mud that was supposed to have a slowing effect upon his brilliant playing."[5] In the Chicago game, speed--"three times he traveled so far and so fast it looked as if none would ever stop him"--and defensive ability--"he intercepted a forward pass by Captain Pyott of the Maroons and dashed . . . for 55 yards, being stopped on the Chicago 23 yard line"[6]--were his most remarkable contributions. Against Wisconsin his chief quality was indispensibility because "Illinois did not display the same strength it showed against Chicago . . . Its offense failed, outside of Grange . . . ."[7] And against Ohio State he "practically cinched an All-America berth by the peculiar twists which he exhibited in his runs. The one which went for a touchdown [thirty-four yards] started out to be an end run, but he reversed the field and went through center."[8]

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[5]"Purple's Fight Unable to Stem Attack of Zuppke Clan," Detroit Times, Oct. 28, 1923, sec. 3, p. 3.

[6]"Grange Is Enough to Beat Stagg," ibid., Nov. 4, 1923, sec. 3, p. 1.

[7]"Wisconsin Beaten by Illini, 10 to 0," ibid., Nov. 11, 1923, sec. 3, p. 1.

[8]"Illini's Last Period Rush Beats Ohio," ibid., Nov. 25, 1923, sec. 3, p. 1.

To the careful reader and football enthusiast, it was apparent that Grange ran with more speed and elusiveness than power, that without him in the game Illinois was less of a threat to score, that he was at least as proficient on defense as he was when Illinois had the ball, and that he could play as effectively on a muddy field as on a dry one. It may not have been an accident that, although Illinois and Michigan had not originally planned to play each other in 1924, a game was arranged after sensational newspaper accounts of Grange's play.

It is doubtful that the Detroit Times perceived for itself any role other than that of a medium of communication in the case of Red Grange. Times readers presumably were interested in developments elsewhere in the Big Ten Conference, as well as at the University of Michigan, and Grange was of interest to them for that reason alone. He had not yet emerged from the shadow of his own university; that did not occur until 1924. The Detroit Times thus took no pains to build for the Illinois sophomore a superman image, only one of a talented and promising young player. Had Grange chosen to attend a Western or a Southern school, or even another Midwestern school not included in the Big Ten, it is conceivable that he would have attracted more

attention in the New York Times than he did in the Detroit paper.

By 1925, Red Grange's fame was recognized, if not always respected, in every section of the nation. His junior year had been even more spectacular than was his sophomore year, and was climaxed by a sensational performance--five touchdowns and 402 yards rushing--against the University of Michigan.

Prior to his senior season, however, observers quickly determined that Grange would have to be almost a one-man team if the University of Illinois was to win football games. The majority of the teammates who had played supporting roles to his great performances in past seasons were no longer in school in 1925, and most of the remaining players were inexperienced. As a result, opposing teams were able to concentrate on holding Grange in check, and Illinois was defeated in three of its first four games.

Grange continued to play well, despite this disadvantage, and when he led Illinois to a stunning 24-2 upset of the powerful University of Pennsylvania team his fame became secure even in the East.

By virtue of its impact, however, the fame of Red Grange also became a divisive force in some quarters. In

his day it was expected that respectable football players would retire their talents at the conclusion of their senior seasons and return in earnest to their studies, the better to prepare for careers in the professions. Professional football was not considered a suitable means of earning one's living. It was, as Arthur Daley, a sports columnist of the New York Times, once wrote, "a puny, rag-tail, tatterdemalion object of dubious respectability . . . unwept, unhonored, and unsung--and unattended."[9]

Grange, however, shunned convention and signed a contract to play for the Chicago Bears of the National Professional Football League after his final college game. The contract called for him to make his debut immediately and to appear in eleven exhibition games in a seventeen-day period, a staggering assignment. In return, he was to earn sizeable sums of money, based on a percentage of the gate receipts of each game. A howl of protest and denunciation went up from college administrators, coaches, and faculty members across the nation, and it was not lessened when Grange suffered a serious injury midway through the exhibition schedule and was unable to continue.

For sportswriters assigned to report Grange's activities, 1925 opened on a strange note and closed on an

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[9]Arthur Daley, "Professional Football," in Sport's Golden Age, p. 171.

even stranger one. Their first task became one of assuring the public that despite a weak supporting cast Grange had lost none of his superior playing ability. After his decision to turn professional, however, many of them had to reconcile their admiration for Grange as a man and an athlete with their disapproval of the professional game. And after he was injured they had to decide whether to come to his defense and blame bad management for arranging such a taxing schedule or whether he was mature enough to accept the consequences of his own decision to play for pay.

The New York Times sports editors apparently decided prior to the 1925 season that, as a football hero, Grange was a genuine article. Thus the Times felt compelled to explain to readers that Grange might need time to assert the individual brilliance as a senior that had characterized his two previous years. This was particularly true after Illinois lost its opening game to the University of Nebraska and Grange effectively was contained each time his team had the ball. Commentary in the Times acknowledged that, "Red Grange was turned back in his 1925 bow. He crashed into a Nebraska stone wall," but added:

> But football followers have no reason to feel that Grange has gone back. Nebraska was intimate with the Grange attack, but the question is, will the other teams on the Illinois schedule be able to contain the flashy backfield star?[10]

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[10]"The Week in Sports," New York Times, Oct. 5, 1925, p. 19.

Not until the Pennsylvania game--Illinois' first appearance in the East--however, did the New York Times send a reporter to verify that Grange was the superman his reputation made him out to be. The reporter, Harry Cross, filed two stories designed to erase the last doubts of any reader. Prior to the game he reported that:

> No football hero has ever come here heralded as Grange has been . . . . Everyone at the station . . . and at the hotel where the Illinois team had lunch, was anxious to get a peek at Grange. Everyone expresses sorrow that the snow may prevent him from doing his best. They want to see Grange tear loose. They are for him.
> . . . . . .
> The city is all excited about it. Nothing else is talked of in the crowded hotel lobbies tonight except Red Grange and Penn's chances of stopping him.[11]

Cross's story of the game itself turned on the theme that Grange was the greatest football player in the land. The Illinois star almost singlehandedly defeated Pennsylvania, scoring three touchdowns and gaining 363 yards rushing. Cross wrote, in part:

> The East has heard of the great achievements of this football player and has taken them with a grain of salt. They did not believe that he could be as great as the Middle West said he was. But he is. That is the strange part about it. Red Grange is human. He is not a myth. He dashes and dodges . . . with a speed of foot and an alertness of mind which set him high up on a pedestal among this generation of football players.[12]

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[11]Harry Cross, "Its Eyes on Grange, Penn Awaits Today," ibid., Oct. 31, 1925, p. 13.

[12]Cross, "Grange Beats Penn for Illinois, 24-2," ibid., Nov. 1, 1925, sec. 10, pp. 1, 3.

The following day, a New York Times review of the weekend's football games reported that

> Red Grange's Eastern debut . . . was one of the greatest triumphs of football. He faced one of the most powerful defensive teams of the year, yet there was no stopping him and . . . there was no doubt about his place in football's hall of fame. When he left the field . . . the crowd stood as one . . . and cheered him lustily until his mud-coated form had passed out of sight. It was a wonderful tribute to a modest, brilliant hero of the gridiron.[13]

The Illinois-Pennsylvania game seemed to have stirred in the New York Times a love affair with Grange that intensified as the college season progressed until, after his final game, against Ohio State, a reporter was moved to write:

> The most famous, the most talked-of and written about, most photographed and most picturesque player that the game has ever produced has completed his intercollegiate gridiron career.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Never again will the man for whom hundreds of writers have searched in vain for adequate adjectives, whose superhuman feats thousands have witnessed . . . about whom millions have read, who has done more to popularize the game of football than any other ten men, or any other ten teams, send shivers of October and November thrills up and down the spines of college crowds.
>
> The one and only Red has come--and gone.[14]

Perhaps because of the intensity of its admiration for Grange's greatness as an amateur, the New York Times

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[13]"The Week in Sports," ibid., Nov. 2, 1925, p. 30.

[14]William D. Richardson, "Grange Turns Pro; Illinois Wins, 14-9," ibid., Nov. 22, 1925, sec. 10, pp. 1, 5.

was one of a number of newspapers that could not bring itself to applaud his decision to turn professional. In a signed opinion, a Times reporter commented:

> Red Grange finally deserted the amateur ranks. The Illinois star did not lose any time in making the announcement public. Grange had his plans well developed and the moment the final whistle sounded at Columbus his statement was ready for publication.
>
> The fact that Grange has cast his lot with professional football already has stirred up unfavorable comment . . . but Grange doubtless has discovered that professional football is too profitable to dismiss without a trial.[15]

A week later, the New York Times muted its skepticism, but only slightly. Grange already had begun his professional tour and had attracted unusually large numbers of patrons to his games. Since success, at least in the short run, seemed assured, it needed to be acknowledged, but not without one more note of caution:

> The coming of Red Grange to the professional . . . game has awakened new interest in the pro section. The college seasons have closed, but Grange continues to perform.
>
> Grange, as a professional, is likely to play as many games this season as he did while wearing the colors of Illinois. And Grange, the professional, will reap a fortune . . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Whether his course was wise the future will decide. But the present has told plainly that at least it was profitable.[16]

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[15]James S. Carolan, "The Week in Sports," ibid., Nov. 23, 1925, p. 28.

[16]Carolan, "The Week in Sports," ibid., Nov. 30, 1925, p. 14.

Soon afterward, Grange's team reached New York for a game and drew a crowd of some 70,000 persons, the largest in the history of professional football. The Times decided that the obvious could no longer be ignored--if only because of Grange, professional football suddenly had become respectable. A reporter for the newspaper wrote of the game:

> Had the Chicago Bears played the New York Giants without Red Grange . . . it would have been just another professional football game. But with the redhead to be seen in action it was a spectacle that attracted spectators from almost every walk of life.[17]

And a sidebar to the game story noted that

> It is the great college game, so they say. It was the great game of America yesterday, calling to those who never saw a college campus as well as to those who have. And it was Red Grange who made it so.
>
> From every station in life they came . . . . To one and all there was the same appeal. All of them were victims in common of . . . hero worship . . . . They were attracted to Red Grange because he is the living symbol of the power and the glory that all aspire to . . . and which only the chosen few attain.[18]

One might think it strange that when Red Grange was severely injured--his team was scheduled to play an average of almost a game a day, while professional teams today play no more than two games every seven days--the New York Times failed to express an editorial opinion on the subject. If it was true, as the newspaper announced, that Grange was

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[17]Richards Vidmer, "70,000 See Grange in Pro Debut Here," ibid., Dec. 7, 1925, p. 26.

[18]Allison Danzig, "Hero Worship Urge Brings Out Throng," ibid., p. 26.

averaging $16,000 a game in salary as a professional, the editors of the Times may have taken the attitude that Grange easily could afford such an inconvenience. After all, the injury was only to one arm and only the most serious of complications could have threatened more than an enforced rest period until the arm healed. Writers of the newspaper, however, professed to be smitten with Grange's modesty and his gentlemanly qualities, and he had made a positive impression in his visit to New York.

All accounts of the injury and the inhumane management that led to it, however, were left to the facilities of the Associated Press, whose only pointed remark on the matter was that:

> C. C. Pyle, Grange's manager, is the man upon whose head the Bears are heaping all of their abuse. He is the man who scheduled them for five games in six days. . . . Pyle isn't with the team. He has left for California.[19]

Writers for the Detroit Times, meanwhile, evinced a preoccupation with the 1925 rematch between Illinois and the University of Michigan that superceded any concern over Grange's inability to match his form of previous seasons. If Grange was experiencing difficulties that factor made the prospect of revenge increasingly sweeter. Grange's stunning performance in the previous season's

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[19]Associated Press, "Grange Not to Face Giants Team Today," ibid., Dec. 13, 1925, sec. 11, pp. 1, 2.

game had been a bitter pill for Michigan enthusiasts to swallow, and revenge did seem a realistic objective.

Weeks in advance, writers for the newspaper began drawing the battle lines for the game. One story predicted "a game of 'Red' and ten men against the Michigan eleven."[20] Another pointed out that "Illinois hasn't shown much outside of Grange" and alleged that in the 1924 game only he "was the difference between the two teams."[21] Once the game was over and Michigan had avenged the defeat--albeit by the narrowest of margins, 3-0--the Detroit Times no longer had an axe to grind and thereafter rose to his defense against those who would doubt his greatness. The story of the grudge-game acknowledged that:

> Grange played a whale of a game . . . .
> . . . . . .
> the great Red Head was wonderful in defeat. He never stopped trying. He fought his losing battle like the champion of halfbacks he is.[22]

And Herbert Reed, a Universal Service correspondent whose specialty was covering Midwestern teams, wrote that:

> Red Grange, so they say, was "stopped" by Michigan . . . It seems, however, that he was not stopped so badly

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[20]E. R. Gomberg, "Michigan Battles Illinois," Detroit Times, Oct. 18, 1925, sec. 3, p. 5.

[21]Frank MacDonnell, "Who Will Be Stopped, Grange or Friedman?" ibid., Oct. 24, 1925, p. 18.

[22]MacDonnell, "Yostmen Victors by Kick," ibid., Oct. 25, 1925, sec. 3, p. 1.

> that his team did not make a great showing against one of the strongest elevens in the country.[23]

Much has been made of the idea that Grange had to prove to the eastern sportswriting fraternity that he was as good as his publicity from the Midwest said he was. On the whole, however, that notion would not seem to be grounded in fact. Writers of the New York Times, as has been indicated, proved enthusiastic about the Illinois star even before his test at the University of Pennsylvania. The same proved to be true of the eastern writers whose bylines appeared in the Detroit Times. Prior to the Pennsylvania game, for example, Davis J. Walsh, sports editor of the International News Service, filed a story that read, in part:

> "This is Red Grange Day." This is the day when Red Grange, greatest ball runner in captivity, will try his tricks against the Pennsylvania defense. This is the day on which Harold Grange will attempt to buck and wing the Illinois attack into a victory over Pennsylvania in the greatest intersectional game of the season.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Grange was due to do more than human foot could accomplish. It was his chance to call signal, pass the ball, receive passes . . . and protect the defense. If the man lives who can get away with this, Grange is the individual.[24]

And Damon Runyon, in the story of the game, so flattered Grange with his descriptions that the former football hero

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[23]Herbert Reed, "To Date, Ends Are Big Noise, Says Reed," ibid., Oct. 29, 1925, p. 35.

[24]Davis J. Walsh, "Eastern Gridders to Look Over Grange," ibid., Oct. 31, 1925, p. 13.

expressed his thanks twenty-seven years later in his autobiography.[25] Runyon's story of the game, since reprinted in numerous sports anthologies, is regarded as a sports-writing classic. Runyon wrote, in part:

> This man Red Grange, of Illinois, is three or four men and a horse rolled into one for football purposes.
>
> He is Jack Dempsey, Babe Ruth, Al Jolson, Paavo Nurmi and Man-o'-War. Put them all together, they spell Grange.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> He slipped past some of the most alert men on the Penn team today, seeming a silent, shadowy figure, the mud dripping from his uniform and flying from his cleats . . . . They saw him coming--they must have seen him coming--but when they lunged for him, he wasn't there.
>
> What a football player, this man Red Grange! Say it again.
>
> He is melody and symphony on the football field. He is crashing sound. He is poetry. He is brute force. He is the doggondest football player the East has seen in many years, and you can say that again, too.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The sun struggled through the gray clouds overhead and lighted up the field, seeming to center its brilliance on the last remaining spot of orange on Grange's helmet as he stood upright in the backfield, a gallant figure of a man, and the mightiest football player the East has seen in many a year.[26]

A writer for the Detroit Times, however, could not resist an opportunity to register a gibe at those who would downgrade the quality of football in the Midwest. He wrote that:

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[25]Grange, The Red Grange Story, p. 76.

[26]Damon Runyon, "'Red' Grange Runs Quakers Ragged, 24-2," ibid., Nov. 1, 1925, sec. 3, p. 1.

> The effete East, always willing and sometimes anxious to belittle football . . . in the West, now realizes that Grange is everything that has been said about him and more.
>
> It was Grange's biggest test . . . he had to demonstrate that he is a superman in order to be recognized this year as of All-American caliber.[27]

Unlike the New York Times, the Detroit newspaper harbored no reservations about a professional career for Red Grange, although this stance may have been motivated less by a real interest in Grange's future than by the interests of consistency. The city of Detroit already had a professional football team to which the Detroit Times had made a generous publicity commitment. To have questioned the wisdom of Grange's decision to become a professional would have been hypocrisy. Consequently, even before he signed his contract, Grange had the following endorsement from a columnist of the Detroit Times:

> What a terrible lot of excitement is being kicked up over Red Grange. . . . One would think that he would be guilty of treason if he elected to make his living at the game he plays so well and at which he is so well qualified to make his living.
>
> On the other hand, doesn't it seem as if Red had paid any debt he owed the college by his wonderful work of the past three years?[28]

Another of the newspaper's columnists somewhat later professed disgust at the storm of criticism being

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[27]Frank MacDonnell, "Startling Upsets in Grid Battles," ibid., Nov. 2, 1925, p. 20.

[28]Bert Walker, "Sportology," ibid., Nov. 20, 1925, p. 37.

directed at Grange by college faculty personnel and by newspapermen. He wrote that

> Professional coaches, professional professors and professional writers on amateur sports are . . . panning Harold Grange for turning professional. . . . I guess the amateur bosses are liberal only toward themselves. They are satisfied only when they are getting theirs.
>
> Grange has a perfect right to use his grid talents as he sees fit. He is smart enough to know that the best time to get the big money is at the present.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The Illinois shadow will take down close to a half million dollars before he completes his tour with the Bears.
>
> No wonder the professional hypocrites are jealous.[29]

The Detroit Times was one of those newspapers that decided that Grange needed its assistance after the announcement that he had been injured and would need a lengthy rest. Strangely, since it was at Detroit that he first had to sit on the sidelines because of his injury, the Times deferred to its wire service rather than use its own reporter for an account of the situation. The following story was filed by Ford Frick, then an International News Service staff correspondent and later the commissioner of organized baseball:

> Has C. C. Pyle's greed for immediate gold . . . ruined the career of Harold "Red" Grange, most famous player of the age?
>
> Detroit is asking that question and so are thousands of others who have seen the red head fail of his objective in the last three games he has played.
>
> Members of the Chicago Bears say Pyle has done just that--by scheduling eight games in 10 days and mapping out for Grange a programme which no human being could carry through to successful conclusions. Grange is

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[29]Frank MacDonnell, "Sarno Gives Up Ghost," ibid., Dec. 9, 1925, p. 27.

> definitely out of the game, his left arm in splints, the muscles so badly bruised and lacerated and torn that he cannot lift the arm from his side . . . .
> . . . . . .
> The fact is that the red head has been over-exploited. Pyle knows nothing about football or its demand. He went ahead and arranged the . . . strenuous schedule, despite the protests of advisers who realized what it might mean. He refused to acknowledge that there was a possibility of Grange being injured or of his inability to carry on.
> Now he is paying the penalty--or rather Grange is paying it for him.[30]

The attitude of the Detroit Times toward Red Grange would seem to have been almost political, as though he were a vehicle particularly well suited to a number of causes the newspaper sought to endorse. When he became involved in situations whose outcome was somehow relevant to the newspaper's own goals or philosophies, his importance increased proportionately. Almost it seemed as though the Detroit Times needed Red Grange more than he needed the Detroit Times.

As compared with the fame and glory he had experienced two years earlier, Red Grange fell to virtual obscurity in 1927. He remained in professional football, but moved to New York and the leadership of a team known

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[30]Ford Frick, "Has Harold Grange Been Over-Exploited?" ibid., Dec. 13, 1925, sec. 3, p. 4.

as the Yankees in an attempt to tap the city's huge potential market for sports entertainment. New injuries, however, plagued him and sapped his skills. Early in the season his right knee was severely injured in a game at Chicago and, while he courageously attempted to play in most of the remaining games, it was apparent that he had become a shadow of his former self. Nor was he helped by the fact that professional football still had not achieved the growth its sponsors had hoped for. Grange still was a drawing card, but his novelty long since had faded and although he once commanded banner headlines and multiple columns of type on the sports pages, by 1927 readers had to search carefully for news of his exploits.

Grange's team played only one game in Detroit, against a team from Cleveland--the Detroit franchise had been disbanded the year before--and enjoyed some brief exposure in the Detroit Times on that occasion. The Cleveland team, however, included one Benny Friedman, a recent All-America quarterback at the University of Michigan, and the pre-game publicity may have been prompted as much by Friedman's appearance as by Grange's.

One promotional story recalled Grange's sensational performances against Michigan in 1924 and against Pennsylvania in 1925 and referred to them as "football history's brightest spots."[31] Another story said, in part:

[31]Ken Hall, "Bennie, Red Collide Here This Sunday," ibid., Oct. 9, 1927, sec. 2, p. 7.

> Grange . . . is down to within two pounds of the weight he carried during his hectic college career . . . . He weighs 177 pounds and appears as fleet of foot as ever.
> . . . . . .
> Grange says he is "in the pink" and looks it. He does not carry that haggard look he did when here two years ago following the strenuous campaign he made under C. C. Pyle after the college career was ended.[32]

One almost can picture the strain of the Detroit Times reporter for positive details about which to write, however. Red Grange voluntarily had placed himself in a kind of limbo as far as the press was concerned. No longer was it easy to identify him with college football; new faces had appeared in the college ranks across the nation. The professional game, in the meantime, was struggling to consolidate its recent gains and to push ahead slowly to new ones, but Detroit no longer had its own professional team and thus had no real cause for enthusiasm. It is not surprising that when the game was over and the teams had left the city so did most of the news about Red Grange.

The New York Times, on the other hand, displayed a kind of compulsion to report news of professional football. The city now had two major teams and each had developed a hard core of followers as enthusiastic as they were modest in numbers. Furthermore, the teams had the use of the city's finest stadiums, another factor not to be taken lightly. In addition, the player ranks of

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[32]"'Red' Juggles Cement Blocks," ibid., Oct. 27, 1927, p. 36.

teams in the National Football League gradually were being brightened by the additions of other widely-known former college athletes, many of whom had followed Grange's lead. No longer was Grange the only man of real stature in the professional game.

Then, too, Grange's valiant effort to play despite his obvious handicap had taken on a dramatic quality; he had evolved into the role of a tragic hero. The severity of his knee injury notwithstanding, he made frequent appearances on the field and usually displayed some of the brilliance that had made him a college star. Such performances offered the hope that he would eventually be able to play regularly again and with his old skill.

Grange's family lived in Wheaton, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago--as a college athlete he was known as the "Wheaton Iceman" because he worked summers as a deliveryman for a local ice distributor--and his popularity in that area still was considerable when he brought his New York Yankee team to play an early season game against the Chicago Bears. A report of the game in the New York Times said "Thirty thousand people jammed Wrigley Field today . . . to cheer Grange, football's greatest drawing card, and he played one of the best games of his pro career."[33]

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[33]"Grange Badly Hurt as Yankees Lose," New York Times, Oct. 17, 1927, p. 27.

Grange was injured late in the game, however, and had to be carried from the field for medical attention. He did not play again for almost a month. His reappearance on the field came in New York and led to a victory over the same Chicago team. A writer for the Times filed the following account of the game:

> Grange failed to start the game, but he romped out on the gridiron shortly after the second quarter opened amid tumultuous applause which lasted for fully three minutes. Grange played out the period and his appearance in the back field worked an immediate improvement in the working of the ball carriers.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Although Red's ball-carrying charges were few, he played a sterling defensive game, showing particular skill in knocking down Chicago aerials.[34]

A few days later, however, the condition of Grange's injured knee worsened, and when he attempted to play before another New York crowd, an atmosphere of nervousness was created, according to this report in the Times:

> But a ghost of his former self, Red Grange, the galloping ghost did no galloping yesterday at the Yankee Stadium.
>
> It was no place for ghosts, particularly injured ones, and most of the 10,000 persons in the stands felt nervous for the limping Grange while he was in the game.
>
> It was a gallant effort by the former Illinois flash and it was roundly applauded. However, Grange could not limp fast enough to cover passes and could not back up the line with efficiency. He did carry the ball and he did catch a pass and also threw others. But each time there were a lot of people holding their breath lest that very obviously bandaged leg give way.[35]

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[34]"Grange Leads Team to a 26-6 Victory," ibid., Nov. 9, 1927, p. 31.

[35]Bryan Field, "Tryon-Baker Hurt as Yanks Win, 20-6," ibid., Nov. 14, 1927, p. 17.

Twice more that season Grange forced himself to play, although his team had no hope of winning the championship of the league. His efforts were courageous, however, and were so recognized by the New York Times, one of whose accounts said, in part:

> Red Grange, with a crippled right leg that was practically useless, led his Yankees into battle with the Giants . . . but although the former Illinois star flashed brilliantly at times his fight was in vain . . . .
> . . . . . .
> Grange, although severely handicapped, played the entire game and he carried more than his share of the burden. He led the team, directed the aerial offensive, and his work of running back punts was reminiscent of his flashy work at Illinois, which won national prominence for him. Red flashed here and there, but his legs refused to stand up, and hence there was a lack of consistency in his many attempts. He showed no indication to save himself and when not carrying the ball he generally took out his man and cared for any other assignment that fell to the lot of the interfering back.[36]

The word "healthy," in the sense that it suggests freedom from injury, is a favorite among sportswriters. The healthy athlete is free to run, jump, or throw with all the skill he can master; but by virtue of his freedom from injury he seems more an object than a man. Injured athletes, on the other hand, often seem more human than their uninjured counterparts, both because their physical skills suddenly appear no more remarkable than those of the non-athlete and because they no longer tax the

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[36]"Grange's Yankees Lose to Giants, 14-0," ibid., Dec. 5, 1927, p. 32.

descriptive powers of sportswriters. Faced with an athlete who no longer can perform at his former level, sportswriters invariably, it seems, picture him more as an ordinary man than as an object. Writers for the New York Times would appear to have been no exception in the case of Red Grange.

Grange was a legitimate hero, if an injured one, and he seemed driven by some inner compulsion to continue playing in the hope that he might somehow 'personally' influence the outcome of each game. The Times sportswriters were quick to sense the dramatic implications of Grange's struggle and, in view of the still relatively low status of professional football at the time, to use them to pay him high tribute.

CHAPTER V

It was characteristic of Jack Dempsey's boxing career that when he seemed at his physical peak before a match he could be thankful afterward that his head still was firmly attached to his shoulders.

Sportswriters delighted in describing to readers the remarkable physical attributes that made Dempsey a powerful prize fighter--the strength of his body, speed of his fists, and the aggressiveness of his character. Dempsey's name was a household word in the 1920's, and yet the more invincible he seemed the more erratic he became in the ring. The measure of Dempsey's greatness as a champion was not the way he systematically and efficiently cut down his opponents; but rather it was his ability to court disaster and then snatch victory from the proverbial jaws of defeat.

No such test of Dempsey's ability was greater than his fight with Luis Angel Firpo of Argentina in September, 1923, at New York. Earlier in the year Dempsey narrowly had defeated one Tommy Gibbons, a smooth and experienced boxer, but the victory came by decision and the boxing public had hoped for a knockout. Against Firpo, however, no such difficulty seemed possible. Firpo, befitting his

nickname, "Wild Bull of the Pampas," was big and strong but also slow, crude, and relatively inexperienced in the ring. Firpo's only hope for victory seemed to depend on Dempsey momentarily letting down his guard so that a one-punch knockout might be scored. Barring that possibility, there seemed to be no way Dempsey could lose the fight.

Dempsey did relax his guard, however, and was hit so hard by Firpo that he fell through the ropes enclosing the ring and into the press row immediately outside. Reporters shoved him back into the ring in an all but unconscious state, and instinct alone prevented him from losing by a knockout until the bell sounded, ending the round. Less than two minutes later, Dempsey knocked Firpo down and out, ending the fight and retaining his heavyweight championship. The dramatic impact of the event was heightened by the fact that a crowd estimated at 90,000 fans witnessed it.

Virtually all of Dempsey's prize fights, beginning with the one in which he won the heavyweight championship in 1919, were grounded in controversy. When he defeated Jess Willard to win the championship he was accused of having used boxing gloves stuffed with plaster of paris. When he faced Georges Carpentier, a Frenchman and a legitimate hero of the World War, most of the pre-fight publicity was favorable to Carpentier because Dempsey had chosen to avoid military service by spending the war years working

in a shipyard. In 1927, when he faced Jack Sharkey, he was accused of using dirty tactics to win--punching the other man below the belt and then, when Sharkey turned to the referee to complain, landing a well-aimed knockout punch on the exposed jaw. Later in 1927, when he attempted to regain his heavyweight championship from Gene Tunney, it appeared he had knocked out Tunney in the seventh round, but Dempsey refused the referee's instructions to retire to a neutral corner. When finally he did go to the directed corner Tunney had sufficiently recovered to get to his feet before the knockout count had been reached, and Tunney later won the fight on a decision.

The controversy seemed almost a counterpoint to the manner in which Dempsey conducted his private life; in matters outside the ring he appears to have been an honest and moral man. He wisely invested his earnings, rather than squandering money, neither drank nor smoked, enjoyed the company of respected public figures, and reportedly was shy around women after his first marriage ended in divorce in 1918. Such behavior would seem to be almost more typical of athletes today, few of whom are considered colorful, than of athletes prominent in the 1920's, yet Jack Dempsey was considered colorful. Why?

The reasons for Dempsey's popularity seem to have been twofold. On one hand, his manager was an expert at generating both sensational publicity and lucrative matches;

on the other, the period also produced a man considered the most successful promoter of fights in the history of boxing. At their hands Dempsey became more than a champion; he became a celebrity. And although the ways of the three men eventually parted it was not before the manager and the promoter had made their maximum possible contributions to Dempsey's career. When Dempsey broke his ties to the manager, Jack "Doc" Kearns, he already was champion and a wealthy man, with his largest purses still ahead of him; and by the time the promoter, George "Tex" Rickard, died, in 1929, Dempsey no longer was champion and was considered to be in retirement, although he attempted a comeback, of sorts, in the 1930's.

Predictably, most of the publicity accorded Jack Dempsey in late 1923 was based on his preparations for and fight with Luis Angel Firpo. With the exception of the fight with Gibbons, Dempsey had not defended his championship since July, 1921, and a number of boxing observers believed he had become bored with it. Then, too, he had selected as the site for his pre-fight training a camp at Saratoga Springs, New York, a spot famed as a summer playground of the well-to-do. The distractions at Saratoga were countless--mineral baths, swimming, boating, fishing, horse racing, golf courses, and glamorous people. Moreover, as the New York Times suggested prior to the championship match, "Firpo . . . has had and has earned most of the

publicity on this fight. Dempsey, as champion, is an old story."[1] If, faced with such a pre-fight climate, Dempsey had chosen to do his training at a casual and leisurely pace, it would have been understandable, if not forgivable.

To his credit, Dempsey trained for the match as though he were the challenger and not the champion, a policy whose wisdom and significance the New York Times readily applauded. Writers for the newspaper, in fact, seemed to view themselves as Dempsey cheerleaders--their respect and admiration for him both as an athlete and as a man showing through their writing before and after the match.

One week before the scheduled match, a story in the New York Times indicated that not only had Dempsey trained diligently but also that he still took every opportunity to learn more about his opponent, whom he had never seen in action. The story said, in part:

> In the expectation that speed will prove an important factor in his bout with Luis Angel Firpo . . . Jack Dempsey is devoting much of his time to developing nimbleness of foot without sacrificing strength. The . . . champion made a success of this phase of his training.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Dempsey showed that he is not taking anything for granted with respect to the approaching bout. He is not overlooking any chance to gain additional knowledge of Firpo's style of fighting, inasmuch as he has never seen the South American in action.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> His reply to statements that he should have an easy time with Firpo is: "Yes, they're all easy until

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[1]"Air of Confidence in Dempsey's Camp," New York Times, Sept. 11, 1923, p. 13.

> you get into the ring with them. Then you find it's different. The only time I accept a challenger as easy is when he is beaten . . . ."[2]

Another story reiterated that Dempsey's approach to the match, combined with his high degree of intelligence, offered insurance that he could only lose if Firpo landed a lucky punch. "The two boxers are diametrically opposed mentally," the story said, in part. "Firpo is sluggish, Dempsey keen. With the latter fighting is a serious business. He goes at it seriously."[3]

The Times, in fact, had a ready reply for almost any question about Dempsey's weaknesses prior to the fight. Did not Firpo's superior height, weight, and strength at least deserve acknowledgment? The Times failed to see that they could help the challenger. "These advantages, ordinarily, are important," a story said. "They are the advantages . . . upon which hopes of victory usually depend. But . . . when they are weighed against the overwhelming superiority of Dempsey, they pale almost into insignificance."[4] Did Dempsey still have enough pride to care about winning? "There is some indication that Dempsey is becoming oppressed by the burdens of power, wealth and fame,

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[2]"Dempsey Devotes His Time to Speed," ibid., Sept., 8, 1923, p. 9.

[3]"Dempsey and Firpo Face Biggest Test," ibid., Sept. 9, 1923, sec. 2, pp. 1, 3.

[4]"Dempsey Expected to Retain Title," ibid., p. 3.

though not enough oppressed to be ready to drop them," a reporter for the Times wrote. "But that is always the way with champions."[5] Another story turned on the theme that "The title does not mean as much to him as it once did, but it means enough that he will defend it to the last gasp, particularly against a foreign challenger."[6] What of the arguments that Dempsey had lost his old skill, and that he never was one of the better heavyweight champions in the first place? Two stories spoke to those questions, the first saying, in part:

> Some of the edge was shaved off his reputation when he failed to drop Gibbons . . . but the St. Paul heavyweight is a fine defensive fighter who . . . went into the ring with the fixed idea only of staying the limit. Then, too, Dempsey's long inactivity before the Gibbons bout doubtless had not a little to do with his lack of timing judgment in delivering his punches.[7]

In the second, a writer commented that:

> Dempsey, for several reasons, has never been what might be termed a popular champion, certainly not idolized as old John L. Sullivan, Jim Corbett and James J. Jeffries were in their heyday. . . . For this Dempsey has not been wholly to blame, for never was the crop of contenders as sparse as it has been during his regime.[8]

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[5]"Air of Confidence in Dempsey's Camp," p. 13.

[6]"Will Pay $1,300,000 to See Bout Tonight," ibid., Sept. 14, 1923, pp. 1, 14.

[7]"Dempsey and Firpo Face Biggest Test," pp. 1, 3.

[8]"Comment on Current Events in Sports," ibid., Sept. 10, 1923, p. 22.

And what of Dempsey's condition going into the fight? Had he really trained with discipline at Saratoga Springs, or had he merely gone through the motions? A writer for the newspaper said, almost lyrically, that:

> At no stage of his training has Dempsey looked so well. He was as light on his feet as a dancer. He was sure footed and steady on legs which are remarkably thin for a man of his size, but surprisingly strong. He never made a misstep . . . . Throughout the workout Dempsey breathed easily and he perspired freely . . . .
>
> Dempsey is in shape for the fight of his life. He has the body of a perfectly trained athlete. Also it is the strong, powerful body of a perfectly trained fighting man . . . the flanks are slim and the waist is small. But above the waist the champion's torso spreads fanlike and becomes immense. The back and shoulders reflect the tremendous power which Dempsey enjoys. Muscles ripple smoothly under the bronzed skin with each movement of the upper body.
>
> His arm movements disclose a contraction of the biceps where powerful muscles bulge. In the forearm musclar strands stand out like whipcords when he closes and opens his fists. And not an ounce of superfluous flesh is visible on any part of his body.[9]

Writers for the New York Times left no doubt that their sympathies lay with Jack Dempsey, but any newspaper must be prepared to accord to a new champion the honors due him if he should somehow succeed in overthrowing the old champion. Thus, its sports department saw the need to refrain from taking an irreversible position with regard to the fight, possibly even because a surprise victory by Firpo might have international implications a newspaper of

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[9]"Last Hard Workout Is Held By Dempsey," ibid., Sept. 12, 1923, p. 16.

the stature of the Times could ill afford to run afoul of. To cover such a contingency, a reporter wrote the following commentary prior to the fight:

> It is a curious fact that, in spite of the odds being all in Dempsey's favor, in spite of the fact that Firpo is criticized as being both unskilled and unschooled in the arts of pugilism . . . the ticket sale up to date augurs one of the greatest throngs in the history of fighting. . . . The interest is doubtless based on the psychology peculiar to the sport . . . .
> . . . . . .
> The South American may--not many think he will--but he may--slip over a knockout punch. The hundred thousand are taking no chances of not being there in the event that such a thing happens. To be "in at the death of a champion" and to acclaim his successor is something.[10]

Dempsey, of course, vindicated most of the optimism of the New York Times and other newspapers, but in doing so sorely tested it and raised a serious question about his ability to withstand other challenges in the future--it was, in fact, his last successful defense of the championship. The New York Times, with its own credibility to think of, acknowledged these matters in post-fight stories and offered the following reassessment of Dempsey:

> As a cold matter of fact he was a beaten man, had it been a man with a fighting brain he was facing . . . Dempsey did not have sense enough to cover his chin.
> . . . . . .
> Four years as champion, with all the attendant luxury and easy living, undoubtedly have affected the champion, but the extent of this luxurious life has not progressed to a point where it seriously has impared Dempsey's

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[10]"Comment on Current Events in Sports," p. 22.

> fighting qualities. He had to be at his best, physically and mentally, to withstand the terrific punches of Firpo . . . .[11]

And the following day, a reporter wrote that:

> a badly discolored left eye . . . was the only mark the champion had . . . however, he had a distinct memory of one of his hardest ring bouts. Dempsey freely admitted what everybody else knew--that he had emerged triumphant from a trying situation.[12]

Generally speaking, however, New York was in Dempsey's corner as well as in his debt. If the city and its news media had provided the facilities for such an event and had generated the interest of the tens of thousands of spectators who witnessed it, Dempsey in return had provided more excitement than most boxing followers there had seen in many years. He had done all a man could be asked to do to win--Firpo was knocked to the floor seven times in the first round before landing the punch that sent Dempsey through the ropes--and had emerged still a worthy champion, with his courage and honor intact. Moreover, he had come completely across the continent to do it--his home was in Los Angeles. Heavyweight championship matches, historically considered the most prestigious in the sport, generally had been denied New Yorkers in recent history. The most recent ones had been held in such distant or

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[11]"Firpo Had Title Within His Grasp," ibid., Sept. 15, 1923, p. 1.

[12]"Dempsey Praises Firpo as Fighter," ibid., Sept. 16, 1923, sec. 1, part 2, pp. 1, 3.

otherwise inaccessible points as Shelby, Montana; Jersey City, New Jersey; Benton Harbor, Michigan; Toledo, Ohio; and Havana, Cuba. Dempsey had fought a championship match in New York in 1920, but it had been held indoors at the old Madison Square Garden--the first of three arenas that have borne that name--whose seating capacity was limited.

The New York Times was cognizant of the fact that its city now was the world capital of boxing, thanks in no small measure to the Dempsey match. As a result, the heavyweight champion enjoyed the almost unqualified support and admiration of the newspaper. Had the Times known then that it would be nearly three years until Dempsey next chose to defend his title, and that he no longer would be welcome to do so in New York, however, its admiration and support might have been less than enthusiastic.

A writer of the New York Times had found that the Dempsey training camp was "an old story" and that "there is not much news unless he loses,"[13] but readers of the Detroit Times were treated to what seemed to be a contest to find stories where there really were none. In their determination to keep the image of Dempsey before the public, Damon Runyon and other reporters of the Hearst organization went to inordinate and sometimes ridiculous lengths seeking material or angles about which to write.

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[13]"Air of Confidence in Dempsey's Camp," p. 13.

Each man purported to be a closer intimate of Dempsey than the others, and news of the technical aspects of Dempsey's preparations for the fight with Firpo went begging while reporters struggled to decide whether Dempsey was superhuman or a mere mortal.

It is not difficult to understand that many New York writers believed themselves to be "on the inside" with Dempsey. The champion moved around the city with an easy familiarity, having once lived there for six months when he still was an obscure and struggling fighter, and having fought two championship matches in the area, one in 1920 and one at nearby Jersey City, New Jersey, in 1921. Then, too, according to Mel Heimer, a syndicated columnist and biographer of the former champion, Dempsey enjoyed traveling in New York cafe society and occasionally could be seen at one or more of the city's famous night spots.[14]

Because Luis Angel Firpo lacked refinement and sophistication, and perhaps because he was a native of South America rather than of Western Europe where, conceivably, he might have commanded a full measure of respect from Hearst writers, he suffered in comparison with Dempsey. The champion no sooner arrived in New York on the final leg of his cross-country trip from Los Angeles to the training

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[14]Mel Heimer, The Long Count (New York: Atheneum, 1969), pp. 75-76.

camp in Saratoga Springs than a reporter wrote that his preparations for the fight with Firpo would be merely "routine." The story also said, in part:

> The champion never looked better. He is carrying practically no excess weight, bubbles over with boyish spirit and his clear brown eyes twinkled merrily as he greeted intimate friends with playful hugs and gentle taps of his big hands.
> . . . . . .
> "Say, I could fight in a week," said Dempsey. "I feel great."[15]

Another writer found cause to depreciate the challenge of Firpo, although the scheduled match still was more than a month away. His story said, in part:

> Some of our nice, home-loving heavyweights should connect with the idea that discretion is the better part of valor--and not toss challenges promiscuous-like in the general direction of "Jacko the Demps."
> They might get wounded.
> . . . . . .
> Dempsey is still good enough to take the measure of anyone in the game--and knock out about nine-tenths of the group . . . .
> . . . . . .
> Give him Wills, Willard, Firpo or another of these big, slow-moving persons, and he'd dart in and out, crashing with rights, crashing with lefts, bringing down his man in the end.
> . . . . . .
> The man who will dethrone Dempsey is not a man of the size and the bulk and the slowness of Firpo . . . . Rather it must be a fast, clever man with a dangerous punch . . . .[16]

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[15]Sid Mercer, "Dempsey Trains at Saratoga Springs," Detroit Times, Aug. 5, 1923, sec. 3, p. 1.

[16]Frank G. Menke, "Champion Still Looks Part of Great Fighter," ibid., Aug. 12, 1923, sec. 3, p. 3.

Still another reporter offered as his explanation of Dempsey's greatness that

> It is the truth that Dempsey takes care of himself. He is a real athlete, in love with his game and a respector of his body. Booze and the high life, which has [sic] tumbled many a champion before his day, has no part in the champion's life. His preparations for Firpo at Saratoga have been hard and most conscientious.
> . . . . . .
> This writer will not be surprised to see Firpo on the floor in the first round and knocked out before six rounds. As for Firpo taking the championship from "Man Killer Jack," he might just as well hope to wear a halo in Perdition. It can't be done.[17]

When Dempsey's training camp was opened one day only to the well-to-do a reporter for Hearst's Universal Service wrote that

> It was society day at the camp and more social lights and multi-millionaires were in the crowd than ever before saw a fist champion do his training tricks.
> . . . . . .
> A pleasant time was had by all.
> Dempsey wasn't quite so vicious with his sparring partners as he had been the day before, but he made all the boys step around in loveliest fashion to escape being conveyed to undertaking parlors. He was jolted by a George Godfrey uppercut, lost his temper for a second and crossed over with a right which made George think that the tower of the Woolworth building had fallen against his chin.[18]

Of all the Hearst writers on the scene, however, none tried harder to show that he had the ear of Dempsey than did Damon Runyon. His pre-fight columns implied

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[17]Thomas J. Cummiskey, "Luis Firpo No Match for Mauling, Tearing Dempsey, Belief of Critic," ibid., Sept. 9, 1923, sec. 3, p. 9.

[18]Universal Service Wire, "Society Sees Champ Do His Tricks," ibid., Aug. 27, 1923, p. 12.

private conversations with the champion, although this is not to say that he may not actually have had such conversations. Still, Runyon broached subjects that other sportswriters at the camp did not presume to discuss. One column described the manner in which Dempsey prepared himself to begin training, saying, in part:

> Before beginning his training for a fight, Jack Dempsey always puts in from one to two weeks at what he calls "playing around."
>
> It really amounts to nothing more than a complete mental rest.
>
> In that period Dempsey endeavors to dismiss from his mind all thoughts of his work. He gives himself a mental vacation. Generally he takes a hunting or fishing trip. During the last week he has found diversion at the races.
>
> Dempsey could not have picked a better place for a mental vacation . . . than Saratoga Springs during the races.[19]

Another column attempted to reassure those who feared that Dempsey would not take the challenge of Firpo seriously enough. Runyon wrote the following:

> Just how seriously does Jack Dempsey take Luis Angel Firpo?
>
> Does the champion believe the tales that are told him of Firpo's crudeness, of his singular inefficiency, or does he take greater stock in the statements of those who tell him that Firpo is a big, strong, rough, hard-hitting fellow?
>
> The writer is inclined to think Dempsey believes the latter.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Firpo is . . . crude and cumbersome . . . . But he is . . . dangerous when it comes to hitting, and one good smash often offsets great speed and knowledge of boxing.

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[19] Damon Runyon, "Says Damon Runyon," ibid., Aug. 10, 1923, p. 14.

> The writer thinks Dempsey realizes this.
> The writer thinks the champion has an estimate of the "Wild Bull of the Pampas" that will at least keep him from making the mistake of underestimating him.[20]

A third column speculated that if Dempsey somehow should lose to Firpo he still would continue to seek his living as a prize fighter. Runyon wrote:

> What would Dempsey do if Firpo beat him?
> Would he retire?
> The writer thinks not.
> The writer has often heard the champion remark that he is going to quit the game when someone "hits him on the chin."
> Dempsey thinks he means this--now. Perhaps he would drop out of sight for a few months. Then you would see him active again.
> Dempsey is only 28 years old. He has done nothing to undermine his constitution, to make him old beyond his time, as many fighters do. He could go on for some years, after losing his title, making a great deal of money.[21]

Runyon's fascination for Jack Dempsey continued well after the fight with Firpo. He knicknamed the champion "The King of Fistiana" and took pleasure in describing the way in which "crowds follow him in the streets, wait outside his hotel for a glimpse of him." "Dempsey is king," Runyon wrote, "not because he is heavyweight champion, as because of his tremendous color and personality." The column continued:

> Dempsey has something of Sullivan, something of Corbett and all of William Harrison Dempsey in him . . . .
> First of all he loves the crowd. He loves to be in it and of it whether he is the cause of the crowd or

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[20] Ibid., Aug. 11, 1923, p. 12.

[21] Ibid., Aug. 23, 1923, p. 12.

> not. He loves to rub elbows with humanity in general. He must have people around him. He is in his element in a mob.
>
> Willard and Jeffries made no secret of disliking the crowd. The crowd quickly sensed the dislike and let Willard and Jeffries alone. The crowd knows that Dempsey likes it, therefore the crowd likes Dempsey, and he is king.[22]

Still later, Runyon found another angle about which to write. Dempsey had come to New York for the Christmas holidays and passed some of his time doing "light training." The sportswriter saw significance in this routine of the champion and wrote:

> "Light training" to a professional boxer consists of long walks, calesthenics and dieting.
>
> Why is the world's champion in light training?
>
> He has no match for the near future . . . . He is young, in good health. He has no bodily ailments to overcome. Why should he be in "light training?"
>
> It is because Dempsey desires to keep himself in perfect condition, to prevent the accumulation of fat that comes with idleness, to keep his stomach in good order, his mind attuned to the business of his life.
>
> That is why Dempsey is world's champion.[23]

Some of Runyon's bias is understandable. Only the year before he had accompanied Dempsey and a party of friends on a pleasure trip through Europe.[24]

It should perhaps be mentioned that at least one of the Hearst reporters who had so quickly dismissed the challenge of Luis Angel Firpo prior to the championship

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[22] Ibid., Dec. 17, 1923, p. 19.

[23] Ibid., Dec. 20, 1923, p. 26.

[24] Heimer, The Long Count, p. 82.

match later felt compelled to acknowledge Firpo's heroic struggle. Shortly after the match a story appeared in the Detroit Times crediting Firpo with not having known "the meaning of fear." Even in this, however, the writer made no pretense at being objective. His story continued:

> If Firpo were about five years younger . . . he would have a most royal chance at becoming the wonder of wonders of the ring.
>
> Jack Dempsey is that wonder man now, the greatest, I believe, the ring has ever known.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Dempsey, in that astounding first round, threw science to the winds. He fought a slugging battle, as Firpo fights. Next time he is pretty apt to fight as he did in the second round, with all his wonderful ring craft, scientifically applied.[25]

Jack Dempsey did not defend his championship again until September, 1926, three years--and eight days--after the Firpo match. His long absence from the ring was excused on several grounds, and damned on several others; but the recurring theme was that he had exhausted the supply of logical challengers--except one.

Harry Wills also was a heavyweight boxer at the time, and a good one. Many boxing observers thought that Wills deserved the opportunity to meet Dempsey for the

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[25]Thomas J. Cummiskey, "Dempsey-Firpo Return Bout Planned," ibid., Sept. 17, 1923, p. 19.

championship and, in fact, the two men eventually did sign an agreement in 1925 calling for such a match. The match was not held, however, and in boxing circles there was speculation that Dempsey secretly was afraid of Wills and never intended to fight him in the first place. The Dempsey followers argued that the match had fallen through because the promoter--not Tex Rickard in this case--failed to raise the prize money he had guaranteed the champion. More to the point, however, seemed to be the climate of public opinion. It is questionable whether the fight would have been sanctioned in many, if not most, sections of the nation, because Harry Wills was a negro.

As the months of 1925 passed and it was apparent that Dempsey would not fight again soon, criticism began to mount on several fronts. Disgusted followers of boxing wrote letters critical of Dempsey to their local newspapers. A few newspapers printed editorials recommending, even demanding, that Dempsey be stripped of his title for failure to defend it within a reasonable period of time. The New York State Athletic Commission, a governing body of professional boxing, voted to refuse Dempsey permission to fight anyone else in that state until after he had defended his championship against Wills. And the old criticism of Dempsey's evasion of military service during the World War was renewed for the first time since he fought Georges Carpentier in 1921.

Judging from their stories and columns of 1925, sportswriters seemed generally to believe not so much that Dempsey actually ought to fight Wills as that Wills ought to be offered the opportunity to meet Dempsey--the point being that their motivation probably was prompted less by a desire to protect the interests of Wills than it was by a desire to prod or to shame Dempsey into action. Memories of the only negro ever to hold the heavyweight championship--the obnoxious and widely hated Jack Johnson--still were fresh in the minds of many followers of boxing and it is questionable that many sportswriters were anxious to give Harry Wills a stage from which to perform as Johnson had. Still, it is safe to say that if sportswriters generally regarded Jack Dempsey as a hero in 1923, few could be found in 1925 who regarded him as much better than a villain.

Along with that of sportswriters on other newspapers, the patience of boxing writers for the New York Times ebbed and was replaced with dismay and suspicion at the conduct of Dempsey. After a meeting of the New York State Athletic Commission, at which persons acting without Dempsey's consent made an agreement that the champion would meet Wills in that state at some undetermined date, James P. Dawson of the Times wrote that

> Like a derelict wallowing in the storm-tossed sea, the weakened seams holding together the Jack Dempsey

> heavyweight title ship burst yesterday and the craft can scarcely be salvaged.[26]

The real dismay of the sports department of the newspaper, however, was perhaps best reflected in an editorial several days after Dawson's story. Dempsey had been feuding with his manager, Kearns, and was trying to sever his ties to the man. The New York State Athletic Commission retaliated by issuing Kearns a new license recognizing him as Dempsey's manager. The champion declined to come to New York to attend hearings of the commision and insisted on communicating by means of telegrams and air mail letters, much to the disgust of the news reporters. The editorial in the Times said, in part:

> It is difficult to find an excuse for Jack Dempsey's actions. He is the ruling monarch of the ring, pugilism's most imposing physical figure. He has a position to uphold, championship to defend. Yet Dempsey cuts a sorry spectacle with his backing and filling, his announcements one day in one section of the country that he will fight . . . anybody any place, and his proclamations another day in another section of the country that he won't fight anybody any place.
>
> This is not the Dempsey of old, the fearless, powerful ring fighter who rose from obscurity to fame and affluence, the young giant who hurdled every obstacle in his path to a championship and mowed down those who questioned his right to the throne when he reached the heights, in a manner which gained him wide popularity and friends to be counted by the thousands. Now Dempsey is losing his great popularity--if, indeed, he has not already lost it . . . .
>
> There is one of two courses of action open to Dempsey. He wants to fight and will or he doesn't

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[26]James P. Dawson, "Forfeits Posted by Kearns and Rickard for Dempsey Bout," New York Times, Aug. 19, 1925, p. 16.

> want to fight and won't. His definite acceptance of either course will be welcomed by a fight public, which has wearied of an endless wordy battle across the Continent. The public is entitled to know if Dempsey intends to fight again . . . .[27]

Late in September Dempsey finally yielded to pressure and affixed his signature to a contract to meet Harry Wills. On the surface, the contract appeared to be above board, but a writer for the New York Times decided that Dempsey's motives were suspect and hinted as much in a story the following day:

> The closing of the match ended a long and patient campaign by the negro challenger for a battle to which he was entitled . . . . At the same time, the signing apparently has precipitated a situation which may result in a serious menace to boxing, as court suits are in the offing, and they can have no beneficial effects.
>
> An ominous quiet greeted the news of the signing in local circles. Promoter Tex Rickard . . . emphasized that he has been the victim of gross ingratitude on the part of Dempsey, in view of the fact that it was through the instrumentality of Rickard the champion became what he is today.
>
> Jack Kearns, who . . . still is legally the manager of the champion whether Dempsey likes it or not, reflected the sentiments of Rickard.[28]

The real suspicion of the Times, however, was saved for a second sports editorial that said, in part:

> It is apparently but a gesture on the part of the champion, a sop to the pursuing Wills and at the same time to that part of the boxing world which has been insistently clamoring for a Dempsey-Wills match.
>
> Dempsey has some underlying motive for affixing his signature to the contract . . . . The champion

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[27]"The Week in Sports," ibid., Aug. 24, 1925, p. 11.

[28]"Dempsey-Wills Sign to Fight in Indiana," ibid., Sept. 30, 1925, pp. 1, 18.

> has evaded a Wills match too long and too successfully not to have some ulterior motive for at last apparently capitulating to public demand. . . . probably it is . . . that Dempsey in his heart feels that a bout between himself and Wills never will be tolerated, that States throughout the Union will prohibit the battle until in the end a nation-wide ban is placed on the bout. Dempsey then will be in a position to . . . point to the fact that he signed to box Wills, but the recognized authorities forbade the match.
> . . . . . .
> The news was received here with mistrust, to say the least. On the Pacific Coast, Dempsey's home land, the announcement caused not a ripple of excitement. It is a fair indication of the public's attitude toward the signing.
>
> Boxing followers cannot be blamed for questioning the sincerity of purpose which dictated this course to Dempsey.[29]

Fortunately, or unfortunately as the case may be, the furor over the Dempsey-Wills match subsided rather quickly once it was discovered that the promoter, one Floyd Fitzsimmons, lacked the money to back up his guaranteed prize money to the champion. Prospects for the match seemed irreparably damaged, and soon afterward Dempsey accepted an invitation to go to Mexico for a series of personal appearances and boxing exhibitions. It was on the occasion of his visit to Mexico City that a reporter for the New York Times recorded the newspaper's last real attack against the champion. In an unattributed, but copyrighted, story the reporter wrote that:

> Jack Dempsey objects to giving the public a free view of the world's champion. He has moved from the Hotel Regis to a small village near Mexico City because he

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[29]"The Week in Sports," ibid., Oct. 5, 1923, p. 19.

> believes that his appearance before crowds will lessen the drawing power of his boxing exhibition. The crowds, as usual, were composed largely of small native boys who were anxious to see the widely advertised fighter.
>
> The American Legion had flatly turned down a proposal to give a smoker to Dempsey, as it considers him unworthy of such attention from the fighters in the World War. However, the American Club, after bitter opposition of many members, has decided to hold a smoker . . . . Many Mexican sympathizers of the allies are unable to forget Dempsey's attitude . . . and several times the word "coward" in Spanish has been hurled at the champion when passing.[30]

The ugly little story seems to have been less in keeping with the character of the Times than with that of the rival New York Herald-Tribune, whose boxing writer and sports columnists openly campaigned for Dempsey's banishment in disgrace from the heavyweight championship. Jack Lawrence, boxing specialist of the Herald-Tribune, referred to Dempsey's "smug silence" in the matter of the Wills match and wrote that, "If Dempsey doesn't come to reasonable terms in the immediate future the Boxing Commission would be justified in declaring his title vacated."[31] When the governing body decided only to refuse Dempsey permission to fight anyone else in New York before he met Wills, a news story under Lawrence's name said, in part:

> The New York State Athletic Commission yesterday continued to play a phlegmatic and somewhat

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[30]"Fearing Free Views of Him May Hurt Gate, Dempsey Leaves Mexico City for a Village," ibid., Oct. 29, 1925, p. 20.

[31]Jack Lawrence, "Boxing Board Without Word from Dempsey," New York Herald-Tribune, Aug. 2, 1925, sec. 10, p. 2.

> pusillanimous role in connection with the Jack Dempsey-Harry Wills controversy . . . it was plain after some thousands of words had been spilled promiscuously that the situation remains quite unchanged.[32]

W. O. McGeehan, an outspoken sports columnist for the newspaper, was one of the writers who revived the accusation at this time that Dempsey had been a slacker during the World War. On one occasion McGeehan wrote that

> As I recall it, I deplored the fact that Mr. Dempsey, the heavyweight champion fighter of the world, could not get interested in the World War, which was open to all comers. I was reproached for hounding a lovable character, an ornament to society and a credit to the manly art of mauling. I have committed many crimes in the name of sport writing, but I am innocent of any part in the making of a popular idol out of Mr. Jack Dempsey.[33]

And, on another occasion McGeehan, who professed to admire the upcoming young heavyweight, Gene Tunney, not yet regarded as being ready to fight Dempsey, reiterated his indignation that Dempsey had not served his country during the war. His column said, in part:

> While I felt it would be poetic justice and all that sort of thing if Gene Tunney, of the Marines, could beat Jack Dempsey, of the shipyards, I could not picture it happening. The prize ring is no place for poetic justice.[34]

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[32]Lawrence, "Boxing Commission Again Fails to Take Any Action on Jack Dempsey-Harry Wills Problem," ibid., Aug. 5, 1926, p. 16.

[33]W. O. McGeehan, "Down the Line," ibid., p. 16.

[34]Ibid., Aug. 15, 1925, p. 11.

One must wonder, however, whether at least some of the concern of sportswriters for the New York newspapers was not motivated by threats to that city's prestige as the boxing capital of the world. As 1925 gave way to 1926, Jack Dempsey still was under no binding contract to fight a championship match and seemed to feel no inclination to so commit himself. Dempsey was at home in California most of the time and could not even be reasoned with by New York officials, except at considerable public expense. Then, given this situation, the New York State Athletic Commission refused to declare Dempsey's title vacant in that state, despite the fact that its members had both the power and, presumably, the justification for doing so.

If Dempsey could not be used as a drawing card, with or without his championship intact, even the promotional genius of Tex Rickard might not have been sufficient to sustain interest in a match between the two logical contenders for the title. A less than capacity crowd of spectators to such a match, especially if the match were held in New York, could do irreparable harm to the city's prestige. Moreover, one of the logical contenders was Gene Tunney, a native of New York City. And if Tunney somehow inherited the championship without a fight critics of boxing undoubtedly would argue for years that his status was tainted since he had not actually defeated Dempsey to win it.

Then, too, New York no longer was the only logical city in which championship matches could be held. Yankee Stadium, the Polo Grounds, and the magnificent new Madison Square Garden, which had opened in 1925, all were excellent facilities for important prize fights; but Chicago, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles all had outdoor arenas seating more than 100,000 spectators, numbers greater than anything New York had to offer. The possibility at least was remote that New York might lose face if the Dempsey matter was not soon resolved.

That sportswriters of the New York newspapers were more than just casually concerned about the Dempsey matter would seem to be underscored by an almost relaxed attitude on the part of writers in other sections of the nation, particularly in Detroit. Detroit, too, was a center of interest in boxing, perhaps because its large blue collar population particularly enjoyed spectator sports during leisure time. Those persons who read sports news in the Detroit Times, however, were exposed to no calls for action by Dempsey. Other than those stories that were written by reporters for the Hearst syndicates and wire services, the Detroit Times sports department took no irreversible position with regard to Jack Dempsey.

Most of the negative comment about Dempsey, at that, came only from one writer, Sam Hall, whose stories took the

position that Dempsey was not afraid of fighting any other boxer, Wills included, but that he was afraid to do so in New York. Hall wrote that

> [Dempsey] has been, and still is, in bad here and fears his title would be taken away from him on the slightest excuse, perhaps a foul. Another [fear] is that the boxing commission would pick the referee and the judges without consulting him. Still another is that he would have to fight to a decision.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Dempsey personally is not afraid of Wills. His courage is unquestioned. But he is afraid of losing his title and that makes him nervous . . . . He wants to be on the safe side as much as possible.
>
> Other champions have done that. There has been many a championship fight with the referee picked by the title-holder and it has long been no secret that champions prefer no-decision bouts.[35]

Hall later predicted that, "Dempsey and Wills are not going to fight anyway. They can't fight in this country because they will not be permitted."[36]

Either out of stubbornness or out of naivete, the boxing writer of the Detroit Times went so far as to assume that all parties who signed the contract for a Dempsey-Wills championship match were sincere and that the contract itself was a genuine article. His quarrel was with Dempsey's courage to stand up and fight against a negro rather than with his longstanding refusal to fight at all. He wrote that, "there isn't a law in the land that will stand up if

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[35]Sam Hall, "Dempsey Afraid to Fight in New York," Detroit Times, Aug. 14, 1925, p. 22.

[36]Hall, "'Show Down' Coming As Wills Lands," ibid., Sept. 5, 1925, p. 13.

it bars a black from fighting a white man where boxing is allowed." His story continued:

> If Dempsey can't whip any man in the world, white, black or yellow, he really doesn't deserve to be called the champion of the world, no matter what effect a mixed match may have in the end.[37]

He later wrote that he had knowledge of a better than $1 million guarantee made to Dempsey for the fight by a syndicate of businessmen from South Bend, Indiana, and added:

> You can mark Dempsey down as being afraid of Wills if he doesn't go through with the contract. He gets his million just as soon as he goes through with the fight.
> . . . . . .
> Dempsey . . . realizes that he is in the middle. The South Bend syndicate has not forced his hand and has given him plenty of time.
> . . . . . .
> Jack Dempsey has signed to fight Harry Wills. Until he repudiates his contract . . . he must be considered as sincere and a champion who isn't afraid to meet his most worthy challenger.[38]

The reaction of the boxing writer for the Detroit Times would seem to have been understandable, even predictable. Residents of his city may have had considerable interest in the heavyweight championship matter--although on a lesser level than New York, Detroit was active as a site for prize fights--yet there was no local angle from which he could view the developments. Jack Dempsey had

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[37]Frank MacDonnell, "Fakaroos in Order," ibid., Oct. 2, 1925, p. 30.

[38]MacDonnell, "Dempsey Guaranteed Cool Million," ibid., Nov. 12, 1925, p. 29.

not fought nearer Detroit than Toledo, Ohio, in 1919, nor was he likely to in the future. Followers of boxing, however, could be depended upon to form opinions of the champion's conduct and to turn to the sports pages of their newspapers for reinforcement of their opinions in the stories and columns. It would have been unoriginal, if not unprofessional, to have echoed the views of syndicated writers from New York whose very vantage point lent credence to whatever they wrote. His only alternative would appear to have been to seize upon the most significant of the issues that no one else had discussed, in this case the racial issue.

At the same time, the writer may not have dared to come down too hard on Dempsey after the contract had been signed for the match with Wills, just in case it had been signed in sincerity. If only because of his vantage point in Detroit he probably lacked the scope of understanding in the matter that was enjoyed by experienced writers in New York, and thus believed that since Dempsey still was the champion he at least deserved the benefit of the doubt until his actions proved otherwise.

Many students of the history of boxing believe that Jack Dempsey did not really become a hero to the public

until after he lost his championship to Gene Tunney in 1926. Then, "The nation took the beaten villain to its heart, loved him again, and dubbed him hero," Paul Gallico wrote. "And hero he remained up to and through the famous Battle of the Long Count in Chicago . . . ."[39]

To help prepare himself for a return match with Tunney in 1927, Dempsey asked for the opportunity to fight some other good heavyweight and was matched with Jack Sharkey at Yankee Stadium in New York. The disputed punch below the belt and subsequent knockout gave Dempsey a victory, and it was a tribute to his popularity that the match attracted a sellout crowd although no championship was at stake.

The match with Sharkey was held in July, 1927, with the Tunney fight scheduled for September 22, at Soldier Field, Chicago. The times, however, had become more complex than ever before and posed new obstacles for Dempsey. He had been champion for seven years, but now he once again was the challenger, an adjustment few champions look forward to. He had not fought well against Tunney in 1926 and numerous reports had circulated that he had not been at his best physically; there were dark suggestions that his food and beverages had been tampered with. There also were accusations, some hinted at by Dempsey himself, that the

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[39]Gallico, The Golden People, pp. 86-87.

conduct of Tunney before and during the fight smacked of illegality--although the charges by Dempsey were not made until shortly before the return match. In addition, criticism of Dempsey's own tactics in the Sharkey match persisted almost until the day of the second fight with Tunney. Moreover, Dempsey was now thirty-two-years-old and unquestionably was no longer as swift as he once had been. He had remarried in 1925, but the second Mrs. Dempsey, the former Estelle Taylor, a motion picture actress, was not a strong woman physically and reports also circulated that the marriage was on unsteady ground. Finally, a number of persons in the Chicago area sought to have the return match cancelled, or at least rescheduled at a different arena, on grounds that Dempsey had reneged on previous contracts to fight under their sponsorship and that his attitude toward military service was not consistent with the spirit Soldier Field sought to commemorate.

Under the circumstances, the former champion could have been forgiven if his attitude toward sportswriters had been short or guarded. Instead, reporters found him genial and cooperative, with the result that he may have enjoyed the most favorable publicity of his career.

There was every evidence that reporters for the New York Times had forgiven Dempsey for his inactivity of two years. Their stories made it apparent that they enjoyed visiting his training camp and that they fretted when the

former champion seemed lax or ineffective in his routine. James P. Dawson, the boxing specialist of the Times, evinced concern on several occasions, particularly one on which several thousand persons had been admitted to the camp to watch Dempsey box against his sparring partners. Dawson thought the crowd was too large and had destroyed Dempsey's concentration. The reporter wrote that

> if he got any benefit out of the drill he is a wonder . . . for Dempsey worked under conditions such as never before in the history of boxing have been experienced by any fighter in training for an important battle.[40]

Richards Vidmer, another sportswriter of the Times, filed a story expressing distress over Dempsey's habit of playing golf for relaxation while in training. The heat at Chicago was too intense for an activity as strenuous as golf, Vidmer wrote, and added:

> Dempsey cannot afford, at the age of 32 . . . to lose any of the strength or stamina he has gained through the rigorous weeks of preparation he has put in.
>
> Dempsey's object is to build up his energy, not to have it melted away by the sizzling waves of heat . . . . . He declared today that eighteen holes on the links took too much out of him. It must be explained, however, that it weakens him only because he takes the game too seriously.[41]

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[40] James P. Dawson, "Mob Rushes Ring as Dempsey Drills," New York Times, Sept. 11, 1927, sec. 10, p. 8.

[41] Richards Vidmer, "Dempsey Workout Canceled by Heat," ibid., Sept. 14, 1927, p. 37.

Sportswriters tend to regard athletes whose ages have caught up with their physical skills in the same fashion as they regard injured athletes--as human interest stories. Jack Dempsey was the underdog in the return match with Tunney as it was. To have dwelled on his advancing age and the accompanying reduction in speed and stamina before a boxing public that once again had come to admire and respect him would have done a disservice both to the public and to Dempsey. As a result, reporters for the New York Times seized on the smallest events that could be used to make Dempsey seem a humanist. Dawson wrote fondly of the visit of a small tribe of Blackfoot Indians to the training camp for the purpose of conferring upon Dempsey the rank of honorary chief and of the presence in camp of a teenage boy who had hitchhiked from Florida to see Dempsey fight. Dawson's story said, in part:

> He arrived with nothing but the clothes on his back and these were nothing to speak of. But when Dempsey saw the appearance of the lad he had him taken to town, fitted for two suits, underwear, ties, shirts, shoes and knickers, and today Dorr was . . . joyous in his new raiment and absolutely confident Dempsey is the greatest fellow in the world.[42]

Richards Vidmer observed Dempsey lounging in front of a Victrola one afternoon listening to grand opera recordings and wrote:

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[42]Dawson, "Dempsey Engages in Surprise Drill," ibid., Sept. 11, 1927, sec. 10, p. 8.

> Dempsey is almost as much interested in classical music as Tunney is in literature. He isn't a musician himself, never having been able to master even the harmonica, but every other member of his family plays some sort of instrument and Jack is highly appreciative.[43]

Two days before the Tunney fight, Vidmer also witnessed the visit of a large group of school boys to the camp from a nearby community. He filed a story that said, in part:

> he was informed that a group of school boys from Harvey, Ill., had called for a sight of the former champion . . . [so] Dempsey appeared to confront 250 thrilled youngsters, sitting orderly in the chairs on the clubhouse porch. It was evident that they wanted to hear him say something, so he did in quite an oratorical manner.
>
> "Boys, whatever you do, whether you go in for business or the arts or a professional life," said Dempsey, "lead a clean, honest life. Avoid the use of liquor and tobacco. That's the best advice I can give anyone. Now I want to shake hands with every one of you."
>
> Whereupon he stood unflinchingly before the rush and clasped the trembling hand of each of the excited youngsters.[44]

The same reporter apparently was convinced that the years had worked a significant change in Dempsey and that could have some effect on the fight. He wrote that

> The Dempsey of old . . . that is still idolized by the American fight fan, was a hail fellow well met, who let the world go by on its own natural course and left an atmosphere of the unconquerable in his wake.
>
> The Dempsey of old didn't care what any one thought of him as a boxer, so sure was he of his own prowess . . . . The Dempsey of old sometimes read what was written about him and if it was pessimistic he laughed.

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[43] Vidmer, "Dempsey on Toes after Five Rounds," ibid., Sept. 17, 1927, p. 9.

[44] Vidmer, "Dempsey to Rest Until He Is in Ring," ibid., Sept. 20, 1927, p. 23.

> But the Dempsey of today is not so confident. He wonders what the world thinks of him. He reads everything that is written about him and is obviously anxious to please the powers of publicity. He is interested and eager with the sports writers and poses patiently for photographers.
>
> In the years when he was champion he took his popularity as a matter of course. In his present position . . . he wonders just how great is his popularity. He has become sensitive to public opinion . . . .[45]

Although most of the pre-fight speculation was favorable to Gene Tunney, sportswriters for the New York Times were both generous and kind in their considerations of Dempsey's chances for victory. James Harrison wrote that

> it would be particularly fitting . . . if Jack Dempsey should overthrow a ring tradition that has resisted the best efforts of John L. Sullivan, Jim Corbett, Jim Jeffries and other masters of the hallowed past.[46]

On the morning of the fight, Harrison wrote, in part:

> Sentiment, loyalty, affection--these are responsible for the strong support that Dempsey is receiving on the eve of the battle. A very picturesque figure, Jack has thousands and thousands of friends who back him to the limit.[47]

Vidmer added, in another pre-fight story that

> on the surface, at least, Dempsey appears in as fine physical condition as he can hope to reach. His eyes are clear and bright with enthusiasm. His walk is

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[45]Vidmer, "Dempsey's Guards Form Solid Wall," ibid., Sept. 13, 1927, p. 27.

[46]James R. Harrison, "Sports Spectacle of Ages Thursday," ibid., Sept. 18, 1927, sec. 9, pp. 1, 4.

[47]Harrison, "Tunney Will Defend His Crown Tonight; Betting Now Even," ibid., Sept. 22, 1927, pp. 1, 20.

> brisk. His shoulders swing with nervous energy, and in his ring regalia his muscles ripple and glow beneath a smooth, brown skin.[48]

Dempsey, of course, did not win the rematch with Gene Tunney. His knockdown of Tunney in the seventh round, after which the champion had by most estimates fourteen seconds instead of the normal ten in which to regain his senses, precipitated a controversy that remains one of the most widely discussed in the history of the sport. Dempsey stubbornly refused to retire to the most distant corner before the referee counted the seconds over the fallen Tunney, voiding any hope that the match would end in a knockout at that point. The opportunity was open for sportswriters to criticize Dempsey as they wished for his conduct; Tunney had taken advantage of the mistake and had reached his feet at the count of "nine," a count that otherwise would have been "fourteen."

Given Dempsey's error, however, writers for the New York Times generally were understanding, even sympathetic. James Dawson's story of the fight indicated that he may have believed in Dempsey's cause more than in that of Tunney. He wrote:

> On the strength of that colossal mistake of Dempsey's, it is hard, indeed, to say that Tunney was the better man in the ring tonight. Rather, the seventh round demonstrated what many have always contended despite

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[48]Vidmer, "Dempsey Is Eager to Enter the Ring," ibid., p. 21.

> assertions of Tunney and his associates to the contrary, that the real Dempsey would mow down the best Tunney like a cutting machine at work in a wheat field.
> . . . . . .
> all things considered, it can not be denied that while Dempsey was defeated, he covered himself with glory.[49]

The following day, Dawson touched on the controversial time issue but camouflaged whatever personal bias he may have had with a story that said, in part:

> The fans, regardless of their opinions on the question of fleeting time which proved so costly to a better Dempsey than many expected to enter the ring, were satisfied with a hair-raising battle in which Dempsey was the savage warrior of old, or as near that as it was possible to get.[50]

John Kieran, the sports columnist of the Times, had made clear his opinion of Dempsey before the fight, writing that

> In the popularity contest he carries all countries by a rising vote. He is "It" and there is no argument about it.
> . . . . . .
> Jack Dempsey has "color" in large quantities. . . . He wore his regal robes of office in a thoroughly fitting manner. In short, he was the sort of chap who belonged on the heavyweight throne.[51]

After the fight Kieran wrote that the victory by Tunney was the best thing for the boxing game because it proved that Dempsey had lost the 1926 fight because of age, not because

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[49]Dawson, "Gene Tunney Keeps Title by Decision After 10 Rounds," ibid., Sept. 23, 1927, pp. 1, 18.

[50]Dawson, "Tunney Is Ready for Dempsey Again," ibid., Sept. 24, 1927, pp. 1, 10.

[51]John Kieran, "Sports of the Times," ibid., Aug. 26, 1927, p. 13.

the match had been illegally tampered with. His column, however, also paid a fitting tribute to Dempsey:

> Dempsey put up a great fight. The veteran warrior still has some of his old skill, most of his punch and all of his old courage. He is the most popular fighter of this generation, and, as the advertisement states, "such popularity must be deserved." It is.
>
> A great fighter, Dempsey. And let it be said that it took a real fighter to beat him . . . .[52]

Gene Tunney, the native of New York, respected member of the armed forces during the World War, and heavyweight champion by virtue of two decisions over Jack Dempsey, hinted at one of the reasons for his rival's irresistibility to sportswriters in the 1920's--and, by inference, his own lack of appeal. "Looking back objectively," he wrote more than forty years later:

> one has to conclude that he was more valuable to the sport . . . than any prizefighter of his time. Whether you consider it from his worth as a gladiator or from the point of view of the box office, he was tops.[53]

Tunney did not exactly suffer from a lack of exposure in the New York Times. He was, after all, the champion. On sheer volume of words Tunney may have enjoyed greater publicity before and after his second fight with Dempsey, but it is questionable that he stirred in sportswriters for the newspaper the same intensity of feeling,

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[52] Ibid., Sept. 26, 1927, p. 19.

[53] Gene Tunney, "My Fights With Jack Dempsey," in Great Sports Reporting, ed. by Allen R. Kirschner (New York: Laurel-Leaf Library, Dell Publishing Company, 1969), p. 142.

than did Dempsey. Jack Dempsey, for all his faults, had helped restore public confidence in boxing and had been instrumental in helping put the city of New York back on the boxing map. It may just have seemed ungracious that a New Yorker should be the man who finally took away Dempsey's championship.

The publicity commitment of the Detroit Times to the second Dempsey-Tunney match would appear to have been near total. The reports of the paper's own boxing specialist, Frank MacDonnell, competed for space on the sports pages with the stories of writers for the Hearst wire services and syndicates, with frequent photographs of the two boxers in various forms of training and relaxation, and even with daily columns under the bylines of Dempsey and Tunney, their respective managers, and former heavyweight champions commissioned to offer their so-called expert commentary. The logical extension of such a commitment would seem to be that if the fight had been scheduled for the Detroit area the Times would have allocated the entire newspaper to coverage of the event.

MacDonnell may have been a knowledgeable boxing writer in his own locale, but in the training camps of the two heavyweights at Chicago he was limited in what he could convincingly write about. It is doubtful that he had more than a nodding acquaintance with either Dempsey or Tunney or with the men who managed and trained them. Based on

that lack of familiarity MacDonnell naturally was at a loss to find significance in many of the daily routines, habits, and idiosyncracies of the two boxers. The result was that his reports related both to the boxers and to his readers at an essentially visceral level.

This is not to suggest, however, that MacDonnell's reports lacked judgment or propriety; indeed, his style of writing may have been what readers of the Detroit Times could best identify with. At the very least, Jack Dempsey projected a visceral image. An attempt to humanize him as writers for the New York Times appeared to be doing may well have been lost on readers of the Detroit newspaper.

Examples of MacDonnell's style are numerous. On one occasion Gene Tunney had addressed a crowd in Chicago and had attempted to make a semantic distinction between a prize fight and a boxing match. MacDonnell filed the following report of the incident:

> He's an odd heavyweight champion, this man Tunney. The people can't understand him and neither can the newspapermen.
> . . . . . .
> He made a speech in Chicago. Here is part of it:
> "I am not going to fight here . . . . In fact, I am opposed to fighting. I am going to engage in a boxing contest."
> Isn't that a pip? . . .
> The customers pay to see a fight, not a waltz . . . .
> Dempsey became the world's greatest box office attraction because he was a fighter.
> He is the peer of all attractions today because the people believe he will try to fight.[54]

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[54]Frank MacDonnell, "The Truth and Nothin' But," Detroit Times, Sept. 3, 1927, p. 9.

After a visit to Dempsey's training camp, MacDonnell wrote that

> while he didn't look like the Dempsey of old, the big fellow appears to be in excellent physical condition and his boxing was far from terrible. Facing fellows he couldn't open upon, Jack had to pull his socks for fear of knocking the lads out in the center field of the race track training grounds.
>
> It would seem to me that he should have a few mates that he can smack around every once in a while for good luck, if nothing else. He can't expect to get the proper timing by consistently pulling his punches.[55]

And the following day, after reflecting on Dempsey's training routine, the reporter decided that

> Bigger, but not better than in the old days, Dempsey is care-free and happy, his mental condition seems to be perfect and his physical condition at this stage of the comeback journey appears to be what it should be, everything considered.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> So much for the big fellow's mental and physical condition. I would add, however, that there isn't reason why he shouldn't be the world's greatest attraction. He's so human in every respect . . . he deserves the plaudits any way you take it.[56]

Three days before the fight, MacDonnell returned to the camp of Dempsey for an up-to-date assessment of the former champion's condition. As much as he seemed to want to be convinced that Dempsey was in condition to win back the championship, MacDonnell was able only to write the

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[55]MacDonnell, "Jack Dempsey Looks Fair in Workouts," ibid., Sept. 11, 1927, sec. 2, p. 1.

[56]MacDonnell, "The Truth and Nothin' But," ibid., Sept. 12, 1927, p. 13.

following ambivalent report that nonetheless seemed to imply that he was a Dempsey supporter:

> Soft-looking, but not soft; speedy but not fast enough; vicious, but not the old killer; a puncher and still not the puncher of other years; serious and serious enough for anything--that was Jack Dempsey yesterday.
>
> He shadow-boxed; he sparred; he almost fought at times and then he punched the bag. When it was all over everybody at the place considered the former champion much better than he was against Tunney a year ago and a whole lot better than he was before his victorious battle with Sharkey.[57]

MacDonnell did, in fact, come out in print with the prediction that Dempsey would win, acknowledging, however, that his choice was motivated by sentiment. "I won't be wrong on Dempsey again if he missed tonight," he wrote, "because he will never pull on another glove if he is outclassed. After all, he is not a bad fellow to go down with, or win with."[58] Just how emotionally involved the writer was became evident in his post-fight column:

> I haven't any regrets about my mistake in judgment. I would still rather be wrong and go down with a . . . courageous old righto like Dempsey than be right with Tunney.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> This business doesn't produce a Dempsey very often. Few have his heart, his killing spirit, his toughness and his courage.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> An improved Dempsey, a vastly improved Dempsey, fought Tunney last night and lost. It was a crying

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[57]MacDonnell, "Dempsey Appears Better," ibid., Sept. 19, 1927, p. 13.

[58]MacDonnell, "Dempsey Picked to Win by MacDonnell," ibid., Sept. 22, 1927, pp. 1, 33.

> Dempsey that left the ring last night and strong men and great men weep when they lose.[59]

Judging from his writings, MacDonnell believed or seemed to realize from the start that Dempsey could not win. Viewed in this context, his stories and columns in the Detroit Times underscore the contention that he did not personally know Dempsey--or at least that he did not know Dempsey well--and that he was able only to identify with the former champion on an idealistic level. Had he been close to Dempsey their mutual understanding might not have interfered with his knowledgeability as a boxing observer and critic. Instead, he covered his unfamiliarity with subjectivity--although he at least was not unwilling to admit it.

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[59]MacDonnell, "The Truth and Nothin' But," ibid., Sept. 23, 1927, pp. 19-20.

CHAPTER VI

Nearly a half century has passed since the peak years of the Golden Age of Sports. The intervening years have wrought countless changes, not the least of which have been the surpassing of almost all of the feats and records of Babe Ruth, Red Grange, and Jack Dempsey. Many sports enthusiasts, in fact, could argue that today's athletes generally are superior to those of the 1920's and that Babe Ruth at his best would not have been a match for the skills of contemporary baseball players, nor would Grange in football, nor Dempsey in boxing. Others, of course, could argue that although modern athletes appear to manifest superior mechanical skills they hopelessly lack the color and vitality of their predecessors.

Neither argument is without substance. There is no question that technological, economic, geographic, and social factors by the score have improved and standardized levels of athletic competition. At the same time, however, these improvements would appear to have been made at the expense of the athlete's individuality; indeed, the most highly prized of athletes by present standards are those who are willing to subjugate their individuality for the

good of the team. In recent years some professional teams have gone so far as to subject their athletes to batteries of psychological tests in an effort to determine how improved team unity and efficiency might be achieved.

Athletes who today attempt to assert their individuality often do so at no small personal risk. In exchange for a colorful reputation such an athlete may be courting public disapproval, official censure, or, if he is a professional, the sale or trade of his contract for that of a less controversial player. Particularly sensitive is the exercise of individuality by a black athlete, or one of Latin American or American Indian descent. Although these athletes often are the physical superiors of their white counterparts, their actions evoke caution on the parts of sportswriters, broadcasters, and even the promotional specialists common to highly organized forms of sport. Any attempt to build or to propagate a colorful image or to rationalize a controversial one by trading on aspects or idiosyncracies of black, Latin American, or Indian character must be weighed carefully against the recently awakened pride, dignity, and sensitivities not only of the athlete himself but also of other members of his race.

Spectator sports have increased in number and exposure and have expanded in scope so that by their very nature they tend to stifle heroism. No region of the

United States, except Alaska, is without significant representation in the major spectator sports. By 1972 more than ninety professional franchises were active at a major league level, along with more than 100 colleges and universities participating in football and basketball at the highest amateur level. A homogenization has taken place, with the result that literally thousands of athletes now compete for the attention that a few hundred were able to share fifty years ago.

Much of the mystique of organized sport has been lost. Citizens everywhere can see and watch even the finest athletes almost at will. Television and radio have made possible almost immediate summaries of the day's significant sports activity and the technique of the "instant replay" affords followers of sports a second, third, or even a fourth opportunity to see moments or plays of special importance during a game or match. Moreover, professional analysts, often former athletes themselves, sit at the elbows of sports announcers, predicting the next move on the field below or criticizing--constructively--the previous one. And the popular pre-game and post-game interviews reveal the attitudes and emotions of players, coaches, and managers, not to mention their respective levels of intelligence and sophistication. In short, the performance, of today's athletes, no matter how spectacular, are more easily placed in perspective than ever before.

Unlike a Babe Ruth or a Red Grange, the outstanding athlete today no longer seems to overshadow his deeds; rather, the deeds now seem larger than the man. The deeds, in fact, may have become more important than the man. The time has been reached in spectator sports when the difference between a profitable and a losing venture no longer is measured by a full stadium, but by lucrative broadcasting contracts. And television cares little who scores the winning point so long as one is scored.

Spectator sports and the mass media long have needed each other, and, happily, the decision-makers in media have been willing to invest large amounts of time, space, and prestige in sport. Newspapers in the 1920's particularly made extensive commitments to the future of spectator sports. Various sports reciprocated by producing a host of exciting, colorful personalities at precisely the time when the nation was most ready for them.

Not unlike the 1970's, however, the 1920's were cynical times, and since both sport and newspapers mirror the times there were elements of cynicism in them as well. Nonetheless, it is a measure of the commitment of newspapers to the future of organized sports that, no matter how sorely tested, their sportswriters never lost faith in the intrinsic good of their heroes. Jack Dempsey idled away three years rather than defend his heavyweight championship, but without any particular handicap to himself.

Red Grange defied convention by signing a professional football contract, but won vindication even from the New York Times in the end. And Babe Ruth, who committed sins with roughly the same frequency that he hit home runs, never gave newspapers cause to forsake him. Harold Seymour, a historian of baseball, wrote that

> He [Ruth] dallied with women all over the circuit and also patronized the brothels. . . . His suite was always well stocked with prohibition liquor and beer. Two other Yankee players had standing invitations to his nightly revels. By midnight Ruth, having taken his pick from among the girls, bid the rest of the company good night and shooed them out the door.[1]

And yet, so long as Ruth confined his indiscretions to his private life he was safe from newspaper criticism.

A latter day sports personality, Jim Bouton, a former pitcher with several major league baseball teams, recently broke an unwritten but time-honored rule of professional sports and wrote a book about the behavior of some of his teammates in the inner sanctums of the sport--clubhouses, dugouts, and team buses. Bouton told several stories that were anything but flattering to the images of professional athletes and, not surprisingly, was roundly scorned by baseball officials, players, sportswriters, and some fans. Perhaps goaded by some of the criticism, Bouton wrote a sequel to the book in which he said, in part:

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[1]Harold Seymour, Baseball: The Golden Age, Vol. II of Baseball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 431.

> I think it's possible that you can view people as heroes and at the same time understand that they are people, too, imperfect, narrow sometimes, even not very good at what they do. . . . You want heroes, you can have them. Heroes exist only in the mind, anyway.[2]

Bouton would have been given an argument fifty years ago. Journalists of the 1920's took the concept of heroism in sports seriously and generally manifested an unwillingness to tamper with heroic images once they were established. By preserving a certain distance between themselves and the best athletes the writers declined to risk any disillusionment that might have resulted from closer personal contact. By these techniques the sportswriters were able to protect for a time the mystique of highly organized forms of sport and of sports heroes that is largely absent today because of ever-widening exposure through the media of mass communications.

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[2]Jim Bouton, I'm Glad You Didn't Take it Personally (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1971), p. 124.

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