

# Seeing Through the Illusions of the Sports Hero

by William C. Rhoden

Oct. 21, 2012



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A star with the Phoenix Suns at the time, Barkley was lambasted by a large portion of the news media who insisted that high-profile athletes, by virtue of their celebrity, should act like paragons of virtue, even if they weren’t.

Barkley, in his text for a Nike advertisement, was referring to role models, not sports heroes, but the concepts come from the same deep-seated need to make things what they are not. We crave illusion, and athletes have historically been vessels of our self-deception. In light of the dramatic falls of Michael Vick, Marion Jones, Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, Tiger Woods and now Lance Armstrong, we need to either recalibrate our definition of the sports hero or scrap it altogether. The concept is based largely on ignorance: the less we know about an athlete, the easier it becomes to invest him with lofty ideals. The ideals have little to do with the athlete’s character and everything to do with creating an artificial construct that serves a need.

Sports heroism contains a number of elements.

There is the emotion of heroism.

My father loved Joe Louis and Jesse Owens, and he wasn’t alone. They were icons of an era. After Louis defeated Primo Carnera in 1935, a writer for The Los Angeles Times gushed: “The colored race couldn’t have chosen two more remarkable men than Jesse Owens and Joe Louis to be its outstanding representatives. Owens is being hailed as the greatest track and field athlete of all time, same thing goes for ‘Dead Pan’ Joe Louis, whose decisive defeat of Carnera has sent the scribes scurrying to the dictionaries seeking superlatives of greater scope than any they’ve used before.”

There is the propaganda of heroism.

Louis and Owens — the grandsons of slaves and the sons of sharecroppers — were tools of an American image-making machine designed to show the world, and Nazi Germany in particular, that the United States had it right.

But the heroic reality, based on a myth to begin with, is often grim.

Louis battled drug addiction for years, was forced to fight past his prime and wound up destitute. He appeared on TV game shows at the end of his career, wrestled professionally and spent time in a psychiatric institution.

When Owens refused to continue a tour across Europe after the 1936 Berlin Olympics, he was barred for life as a “professional” by the Amateur Athletic Union. He was hounded by the Internal Revenue Service and was even tracked by the F.B.I., which monitored his talks abroad to make sure Owens was no Paul Robeson.

As Owens headed to the ballpark one afternoon to participate in yet another cheesy moneymaking exhibition, he came across an article in that day's New York Post that poignantly described his condition.

“By all odds the most famous athlete on the field, Owens will also be the least fortunate,” the article said. “He attained a degree of proficiency in his sport far above the reach of any Dodger or Red in baseball when he won four gold medals at the Olympic Games.” The newspaper added: “Tonight Owens will be on display for half an hour. He will give handicaps to ball players in the 100-yard dash. He will skip over a flight of low hurdles and try to beat ball players who are running 120 yards on the flat. He will give an exhibition of broad jumping. The holder of six world records will be one of the trained seals rounding out the show. It's a terrific comedown, but it's a living.”

There is the hypocrisy of heroism.

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Why did Nike abandon Armstrong and not Tiger Woods or Kobe Bryant?

Nike said it was betrayed and misled, though certainly no more than the world was deceived by Woods, who implied — or allowed marketers to infer — that his great character was at the root of his athletic success.

Armstrong was simply an illusionist: he told us he was riding up the sides of mountains without chemical help.

The reasons Nike stuck with Woods and abandoned Armstrong have more to do with money. Woods and Bryant are still making loads of it for the corporation. Woods remains golf's greatest attraction; Bryant has won N.B.A. championships and, according to Forbes, is the second most highly compensated athlete behind Woods.

But Armstrong has no more mountains to climb, no more Tour de Frances to win. Publicly humiliated, his reputation shattered, Armstrong has no value to any of the companies who backed him, including his own, apparently. Last week, Armstrong announced he was stepping down as the chairman of Livestrong, his cancer foundation. At least Armstrong is alive to defend what is left of his reputation.



Finally, there is the tragedy of heroism.

Joe Paterno was revered at Penn State. He was admired and celebrated by journalists as the coach who did it the right way, who graduated his athletes and stressed character. But Paterno was fired for his role in the Jerry Sandusky child sexual-abuse scandal. The university's board of trustees determined that Paterno should have and could have done more to protect the children whom Sandusky abused. Will all the good that Paterno accomplished be buried with him, overshadowed by the scandal?

At the funeral of Julius Caesar in Shakespeare's play, Mark Antony says, “The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.”

But must this be?

Armstrong did overcome cancer and has, in fact, raised millions of dollars for cancer research. Paterno did in fact graduate players. Consider the public citizen who runs into a burning building and saves a family. Later we discover that the same citizen has been cited for domestic abuse. Should personal scandals negate the good deed? The lives are still saved.

Sport has no enduring worth unless attached to a set of higher values.

A few years after Barkley made his comments about role models, Bill Bradley, the former senator and Knicks star, wrote a wonderful book, "Values of the Game." It focused on basketball, but the values Bradley outlined form the foundation of all sports: passion, discipline, selflessness, respect, courage, leadership, responsibility, resilience.

Given the realities of social media, forgiveness and resilience are far more valuable than heroism.

There is nothing heroic about the athlete who plays hurt and performs brilliantly, the hitter who smacks the game-winning home run or the kicker who makes the winning field goal on the last play of the game.

Perhaps we can agree, moving forward, that our sports heroes do good things but do not have to be good people.

In her book on heroism, "Heroes, Saviors, Traitors, and Supermen: A History of Hero Worship," Lucy Hughes-Hallett argues: "Virtue is not a necessary qualification for hero status; a hero is not a role model. On the contrary, it is of the essence of a hero to be unique and therefore inimitable."

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