

1. The Need for Heroes

He understood that we would give him anything—if he would always be the hero we required.

Richard Ben Cramer, *Joe DiMaggio: The Hero's Life*

Sports stars become heroes when they are admired for their athletic accomplishments. We yearn to feel connected to them, want to be like them, and enhance our self-esteem by imagining an association with them and basking in the glow of their success. When our heroes perform well, we feel like winners. When they falter, on or off the playing field, we distance ourselves from them. We are disappointed, resentful, and angry, not wanting to associate with losers. The greater our investment in a hero's accomplishments and the more we define ourselves through his achievements, the more we resent it when he lets us down.

Our need for heroes stems from early childhood. Our first heroes are our parents, whom we view as all-knowing and all-powerful as they protect us and shepherd us through early life. Gradually, especially after we recognize that even our parents are flawed, they are replaced by outside heroes, often from the world of sports. Children embrace sports heroes with a passion. This attachment provides a sense of specialness and an optimism that we can grow up and also be successful. As writer Peggy Noonan poignantly observes, "The young are moved by greatness. They are inspired by it. Children need heroes. They need them to lift life, to support a future you can be hungry for. They need them because heroes, just by being, communicate the romantic and yet realistic idea that you can turn your life into something great."¹

It is normal for children to sometimes live through their heroes and draw sustenance from the imagined connection. When I was twelve I faced an emergency appendectomy. As I was wheeled into the operating room, feeling overwhelmed and frightened, I thought about my baseball hero, Pete Reiser. I idolized the way he hit (I copied his batting stance), his base-stealing skills, and the way he made outstand-

ing catches even while sometimes crashing into the outfield wall. Although he had had several concussions, he always bounced back to lead the Brooklyn Dodgers to further victories. Thinking about Pete Reiser's overcoming physical adversity comforted me during my surgery, and the prospect of going to a game to see him hastened my recovery. This inner connection with my hero during this stressful period was a pivotal event in my youth.

James T. Farrell describes a similar experience in *My Baseball Diary*. In a moving chapter titled "Death of an Idol," Farrell recounts his reaction to the death of baseball star Eddie Collins. Recalling his deep attachment to Collins when he was a boy, Farrell notes, "It was as though he played ball for me. In my imagination, I lived in his career. He became my model . . . and in 1920, when the Black Sox scandal was exposed, I was proud that he was not one of the eight White Sox players accused of having thrown the 1919 World Series to the Cincinnati Reds."²

Thus hero-worship of sports stars seems useful in providing a sense of involvement, connection, and purposefulness. But it can be damaging if we are unprepared to realize that many of our heroes are also flawed and vulnerable. Hero hunger exists not only in the inner connection fans establish with sports stars but also in their pursuit of contact with them in real life. Sports celebrities are ubiquitously hounded for autographs, and athletes are sometimes insensitive to the intense value that adoring young fans give to such encounters. In his biography of Pete Rose, Michael Sokolove describes one such example: "His humor could also be cruel. When he was managing the Reds, a boy of about twelve approached him in the lobby of a Pittsburgh hotel. He was clutching an old Wheaties box with Rose's picture on it, which he wanted him to autograph. Rose waved him away. "No thanks," he said, "I already ate breakfast."³

At about the same age, a friend and I chanced to see Dixie Walker, another Dodgers star, on the street outside Ebbets Field. I mustered my courage, pulled a pencil and a crumpled piece of paper from my pocket, and timidly asked for his autograph. Walker scowled at me and indignantly shouted in his southern drawl, "I'm not gonna sign that junkie old piece of paper!" I was devastated as he turned and walked away.

Any direct contact with a sports hero can be exhilarating, and some young fans cherish the contact even when they are mistreated. In *The*

Baseball Hall of Shame 3, Bruce Nash and Allan Zullo deplore one such incident. An eleven-year-old boy approached his favorite Dodgers pitcher, Ron Perranoski, in the bull pen and asked for his autograph: “The reliever turned around and viewed the bright-eyed boy with annoyance. Can’t sign during the game, he said. ‘League Rules.’ Then in one motion Perranoski reached in his warm up jacket, pulled out a water pistol, and squirted Scott in the face. The pitcher quickly stuck the gun back in his pocket, folded his arms, and resumed watching the game.”⁴

In recalling this incident as an adult, this fan described the power of hero hunger to override abuse. He noted, “Like any kid, I was just thankful for the contact with a major leaguer—no matter what. I told Perranoski, ‘thank you,’ and then I wiped my face and walked away.”⁵

The issue of star athletes’ acknowledging the powerful influence that comes with being a role model is a controversial one. Adoring kids are prone to scrutinize their heroes’ actions on and off the field and to imitate them in their own ways of being in the world.

Charles Barkley’s famous statement “I’m not a role model” created substantial media attention. Barkley was refuting the assumption that the athlete’s job includes exemplary behavior in his personal life. He did not want to be burdened with this pressure or responsibility, and he proclaimed that that place in children’s life belongs to their parents. In a similar disavowal, Shaquille O’Neal has stated, “I don’t like the word role model. Role means playing a part . . . [look to us] to be a real model. Don’t be like us, be better than us. . . . If you see us make a mistake, don’t make the same mistake.”⁶

Many sports stars share Barkley’s position; they do not want to invest in cultivating an image of humaneness and high-mindedness. They want to be recognized only for their performance in the playing arena. While Barkley may be technically correct, his view misses the point that being a role model simply comes with the territory, in that kids will identify with their heroes and imitate their actions. Though Barkley and others want to avoid that mantle, like it or not hero-hungry fans will drape them in it.

The availability of star-crazed women for sexual encounters makes many athletes prone to sexual promiscuity. What message does it send to kids, who yearn to imitate their idols, when Wilt Chamberlain reveals in his autobiography that he had sex with twenty thousand women, or when Steve Garvey is accused of multiple paternity incidents? Does it

tarnish the image of the hero in the worshipers' eyes, or does it foster a desire to become a world-class stud? The hero's value system and ways of conducting himself have a profound effect on his devoted followers. The "bad boy" image portrayed by Allen Iverson or Dennis Rodman may create an example that glorifies nonconformity and arrogance.

In contrast, numerous sports icons are extremely mindful of their status as role models, and they accept the responsibility that comes with this position. Their commitment to compassion, concern, and integrity enhances their image in admirable ways. Professional football greats like Boomer Esiason, Kurt Warner, and Doug Flutie have candidly discussed with the media the challenges of dealing with their handicapped children. Watching these heroes be compassionate, loving, and sensitive in highly stressful real life circumstances makes us want to cultivate these qualities in ourselves. Harry Carson, another football legend, has been outspoken about the dangerous long-term effects of athletes' head injuries. His addressing such a cause wins him even deeper admiration among his longtime admirers. Sandy Koufax gained enormous prominence in 1965 when he declined to pitch in the opening game of the World Series because it conflicted with his observance of Yom Kippur, the holiest Jewish holiday. Koufax thus put his allegiance to his Jewish identity ahead of his loyalty to the Los Angeles Dodgers. His action augmented his status as a principled role model. In 2001 Shawn Green, a present-day Jewish Dodgers superstar, captured the essence of being a modern role model. Green also declined to play in a crucial late-season game in order to observe Yom Kippur. He made his decision "partly as a representative of the Jewish community, and as far as my being a role model in sports for Jewish kids, to basically say that baseball or anything isn't bigger than your religion and your roots."⁷

As adults, many fans continue to identify with sports heroes. They gain a sense of well-being when they feel connected to a successful star, a sense of being a winner rather than a loser. We tend to anoint our heroes as gods because we need the feeling of specialness that we derive from the sense of affiliation with an outstanding athlete. In his illuminating book *Why Men Watch Football*, Bob Andelman points out that spectators' involvement with football fills certain needs of the male psyche. Among them are the need to select and admire a hero, to identify with a winner, and to connect with a part of ourselves that takes us back to the more carefree days of boyhood. Andelman posits that "in watch-

ing the game many men are meeting one or more deep-seated psychological needs. Such as the need to associate with a winner, the need to have something go right in his life . . . the need to be validated, to feel the satisfaction of victory.”⁸ Watching football, according to Andelman’s research, can provide an escape from the pressures of work and family responsibility, counteract despair, and supply a measure of hope. This view is elaborated by psychologist Thomas Tutko, who maintains, “Heroes provide hope. They provide identity. They provide an opportunity to be a step above and beyond where you are right now.”⁹

Idolizing sports heroes is an aspect of “celebrity worship syndrome,” a term coined by psychologists James Houran and Lynn McCutcheon to describe an excessive fascination with the lives of the rich and the famous. These researchers contend that nearly one-third of Americans have an unhealthy interest in the lives of celebrities, which in extreme form can become an addiction.¹⁰

The opportunity to reminisce and extend the connection to our own days of athletic glory is also a factor in our involvement as sports spectators. Bruce Ogilvie, a renowned sports psychologist, has noted, “I think that very high on the list of reasons men watch football is to recapture and relive their early adolescent years and, through their identification and emotional participation, vicariously live out again this period in their life. For most of the men who have played football or been athletic, these sorts of vicarious satisfactions have very, very positive rewards/effects.”¹¹

Andelman concludes that “contemporary men are desperately searching for heroes in their lives. We’re wanting for role models at a time when the ranks of positive male role models are fairly thin. So many athletes undeserving of our loyalty have been glorified by the press and glorified by Madison Ave. . . . Men search for an identification with a winner, a male figure who is effective, virile, and capable, one who knows how to get things done. Having a sports hero meets a need.”¹²

The need for heroes frequently merges with a powerful emotional investment in the fortunes of a sports franchise. The hero becomes a more concentrated extension and embodiment of the cherished team. People often feel connected through their shared allegiance to the home team, especially when the local team is succeeding. Being able to chant “We’re number one!” after a championship makes fans feel united and

special. Many people's self-image is bolstered or depleted depending on how well their team does. The emotional investment in the fortunes of the team becomes entwined with their self-regard, and they develop a love affair with the team. When the success of the franchise becomes strongly linked with an aspect of self-image, the meaning of winning and losing may be blown out of proportion. When the team does poorly, their opinion of themselves may be correspondingly negative, and feelings of personal inferiority, inadequacy, and failure may emerge. Psychologist Robert Cialdini has noted that "winning and losing teams influence the morale of a region, a city or a college campus. A substantial segment of the community may actually have clinical features of depression when their team loses. People become 'blue' for several days, disoriented and non-productive, whereas if they win, they are pumped up and active."¹³ Cialdini refers to this as "basking in reflected glory." In many cities an atmosphere of depression and failure prevails after the loss of a significant game. The fans were counting on their team to deliver a victory—to make their day—and instead they feel personally let down. A classic example is the way the fortunes of the Green Bay Packers, a small-town team, affect the emotional well-being of the people of Wisconsin. The governor, Jim Doyle, asserted that "the Packers are more than just a state team; they determine the state's mood. They throw this state into a depression if they lose. Productivity is affected. It's been like that forever."¹⁴

Reflecting on fans' commitment to hometown franchises, columnist Russell Baker has stated, "The home team is composed of players who year after year fight for the honor of the bleak, decaying city . . . the home team may, in fact, be one of the few things that help you to continue tolerating this pretty awful hometown."¹⁵

Thus, we need our heroes. We need them to be masterful, special, and worthy. We need to perceive them as wonderful, using a prism that magnifies their greatness. Fans who rise and fall with the feats of their heroes will be overly invested in not being disappointed. Even though we grow up and move on and the intense interest in sports that once consumed us wanes, a part of us nostalgically hangs on to childhood memories of a time when we were carefree, innocent, and perhaps passionately involved with our sports heroes. The intensity with which many of us cling to boyhood idols is eloquently described by Farrell: "But there is more than the lost desire for glory in boyhood memories of

baseball. There is the remembrance of fun, of physical release, of days spent playing in the sun when nothing else but a base hit, a run scored, a fly ball caught mattered. . . . And I suspect that I was not singular in the way in which I looked upon baseball and dreamed of it. It was no mere game. It was an extension of my inner feelings and hopes. My favorite players were like my ambassadors to the world. . . . We never lose our boyhood. It hangs in our minds.”¹⁶

We often see our sports heroes as supermen, and many will ultimately reveal wings made of wax as their talents wane and they tumble from the heights where we have placed them. But our heroes are human, with human imperfections, and they cannot always handle stardom.

Fans can be tolerant of declining abilities as their heroes age, and they often move on to embrace new stars who have been promoted by the media. When an aging superhero like Michael Jordan leaves retirement and returns to the game, many fans also yearn to recapture his glory and success. We hate being disillusioned. An extreme example was the Ford Bronco chase when spectators lined the Los Angeles freeway and cheered O. J. Simpson on even though he was a fugitive. A 1998 study of professional athletes by the Indiana University School of Law concluded that “for any player who makes a game-winning touchdown, basket, home run, or goal, the world is his oyster as the media and public exalt him to the level of a living god. Unfortunately, behind the pageantry and glamour of professional football, basketball, baseball, and hockey often lies an ugly reality of off-the-field criminal activity.”¹⁷ This report goes on to indicate that “the three most reported crimes committed by athletes are domestic violence, sexual assault, and drug related crimes.”¹⁸

When off-field scandals strike their heroes, fans are often profoundly disillusioned. Under the media spotlight, we are forced, somewhat grudgingly, to recognize that many of our sports heroes are lacking. This can be painful, since we want our heroes to remain exalted. We need to keep them on the pedestal we have created. When our heroes’ image becomes tainted, we often feel brought down by them.

Stars’ off-field misbehavior routinely receives intense media coverage, so that every new unseemly incident by a professional or college athlete is immediately thrust in our faces. A very different situation once existed, in which the athletes were shielded from negative publicity.

Incidents such as Babe Ruth's contracting a venereal disease and Ty Cobb's impulsively shooting a mugger went undisclosed. In our current culture this protection no longer occurs, and the public is bombarded with stories about their heroes' sexual assaults, domestic violence, drug-related crimes, and other antisocial behavior.

With the advent of free agency and the escalation of sports stars' salaries, we have come to expect much more. Multimillion-dollar contracts translate into monumental expectations. Many fans unconsciously believe that if a star is being paid that much, we are justified in expecting him to produce colossal feats. We expect our sports heroes to cushion the sadness of what is missing in our lives or compensate for our own lost glory. In chronicling the career of David Cone, Roger Angell observed, "I hadn't understood how quickly we fans can turn our backs when our old heroes go south. This wasn't what we wanted from them, this bumbling and struggling. Get away—don't you know why we're here? Show us how to win again—get out there and be great!"¹⁹

When athletes falter because personal frailties interrupt and sidetrack their path to the Hall of Fame, we are not always compassionate: they must not let us down. We are loath to recognize the pressures created by our expecting herculean feats. Since we are paying their huge salaries through inflated ticket prices, we have the right to expect king-size accomplishments. When some of them stumble, we do not own our part in creating an atmosphere in which they must fulfill our unrealistic dreams. We feel disappointed, disillusioned, and unforgiving, and we are disinclined to consider our contribution to the stress that can lead a hero astray. Thus we are apt to underestimate the burden of stardom—of constantly living up to the performance standard of fans who feed off their success.

In a penetrating article describing the meteoric rise and precipitous fall of Doc Gooden and Darryl Strawberry, Peter Richmond targets the combination of fans' adulation and these stars' self-destructive tendencies as a prescription for their premature demise. Both Gooden and Strawberry had outstanding early success, earmarking them as potential Hall of Famers. Neither one could handle his success and the pressure to surpass enduring records. Richmond suggests that "both became full-blown, always-ready-to-relapse addicts. They were going to be the second coming of Koufax and Williams, until they rejected our mythology and sought solace in the dark safety of their own self-

destruction. Now the question isn't whether they've finally learned their lesson. It's whether we've learned ours."²⁰ He concludes that "by telling a kid he was a god, we may have given him a false sense of invincibility."²¹ Both Gooden and Strawberry were eventually suspended during their downward spiral. Gooden bounced back somewhat, showing that in some cases disciplinary action does serve as a wake-up call and may deter future self-destructive behavior.

In admonishing the fans for their role in the unfulfilled potential of these stars, Richmond concludes, "Gooden is keeping up his end of things. For the time being Darryl is, too. It's the rest of us who show no signs of reforming, who shake our heads at the tragedy of all that wasted talent, at the anti-climatic whimper with which each ended his career, twisting our heads to look for another young man to anoint, someone else to entertain us, to lead us back to the glory days."²²

Although the public is often in denial regarding the excessive pressure that hero hunger creates, those at the helm of the sports industry are more realistic. The NBA commissioner David Stern has stated, "We must pay the price for failing to meet people's expectations. And we are! . . . We are going through a period where people are questioning our players' conduct. . . . There's a special responsibility that comes from being a professional athlete. . . . The price we pay for being in the fish bowl is that the media plays up the players' frailties. . . . A young man gets into trouble and because of the [media] coverage it gets a lot of publicity. . . . It may not conform to the image of the heroes of yesteryear."²³ Stern is pointing out that our insatiable need for heroes leaves a narrow margin for support when they are tarnished by media attention to their misconduct.

Media attention forces us to deal with the reality that many of our heroes have feet of clay. As novelist R. D. Rosen noted in a letter to the *New York Times*, "Like organized religion (but with beer during the service), major league baseball is a mass mechanism for the experience of hope and the deep contemplation of humility."²⁴ But when the system fails, when our awareness of our heroes' weaknesses or self-destructive tendencies emerges full blown and our ability to sustain our hopes through our connection to them is significantly compromised, disillusion may set in. Reality is sometimes painful to digest, but as former baseball hero Jim Bouton has pointed out, "athletes are not special people, they are people with special skills."²⁵

In truth, herodom is time sensitive. The average professional athlete's career lasts only a handful of years, and time will ultimately erode the most magnificent talent, even if he is relatively immune to illicit temptations or personal demons. Sooner or later our idols must fade, and we must face our disappointment and turn to new heroes as the keepers of our flame of hope. The loss of the blissful and perfect connection we create in our minds is inevitable.

Star athletes face enormous pressure to maintain a positive image in the public eye. Fans eternally seek validation for their devoted worship, so a high-profile athlete is wise to cultivate a positive relationship with the media lest he be depicted as an antihero. The media also play a significant part in creating and sustaining an athlete's image. Hying an athlete with praise, or even with relentless criticism, brings attention to a sportswriter and builds a following for the writer himself as well as for the player. In 2001 when the Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter hit a home run to win game four of the first World Series ever to extend beyond October, he was quickly heralded on the front page of a New York newspaper as "Mr. November."²⁶ This story overshadowed the news about the latest anthrax-related death in New York City. Such headlines enhanced Jeter's image as the darling of Yankee fans.

In 2002, during Barry Bonds's magnificent chase of the single-season home run record, fans were less enthusiastic than might have been expected, in part because Bonds had acquired an unappealing image as arrogant and disdainful. Many fans rooted against him, and at times even his teammates seemed unsupportive. In his defense Bonds maintained that his bad-guy image as unresponsive to the fans was an inaccurate invention of the media. If Bonds is correct, it reinforces the common belief that the media have enormous influence over the way fans perceive their sports stars.

This argument can be applied to two superstars of the golden era of baseball. Joe DiMaggio played the media game, gave the press good copy, and was adored as a graceful gazelle. Ted Williams, in contrast, was indifferent to cultivating this aspect of being a famous athlete, so he was often vilified by the press and chronically felt misunderstood and misrepresented.

Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams may have been the two greatest sports heroes in the middle of the twentieth century, when baseball was the king of sports. The National Basketball Association was not yet in

existence, and professional football had only a cluster of teams in one league with a ten-game season that culminated in a playoff between divisional leaders. The age of television, which became the ideal medium for football coverage, had not yet arrived (the Super Bowl, inaugurated in 1967, would ultimately be every year's most-watched television program). So baseball prevailed as America's premier sport.

DiMaggio and Williams were the dominant stars of Major League Baseball in the 1940s, and they played a large role in the dominance of the American League over the National League. The junior circuit, as it was called, won thirteen of the first seventeen All-Star Games played between the two leagues. It wasn't until the late 1940s and 1950s that the National League regained parity, in large measure because of the head start National League teams got in hiring black players. Ironically, the New York Yankees, with Elston Howard, and the Boston Red Sox, with the signing of one Pumpsie Green, were among the last Major League teams to integrate white and black players.

DiMaggio came to the Yankees in 1936, was heralded as the next Babe Ruth (Ruth had left the Yankees in 1934 and retired in 1935), and was an immediate sensation. Williams broke in three years later with the Red Sox; he was less prone to injury than DiMaggio and played for nine years after DiMaggio retired in 1951.

The press fell in love with DiMaggio and pumped him up as a superstar. In fact, he became the first to play on World Series championship teams in his first four years in the majors. Joe DiMaggio—even his name became lyrical. The media enthusiastically dubbed him “Joltin’ Joe” and “the Yankee Clipper,” and an adoring public made him public hero number one. He could do no wrong on the field; he was considered the best all-around baseball player of his time; and his private life was unsmirched. He was raised in a close-knit family of poor fishermen in San Francisco, the next-to-last of nine children born to Italian immigrants Giuseppe and Rosalie DiMaggio. He grew up without much ambition or direction, did poorly in school, and was expected to follow his father and his older brothers as fishermen. As a young man, Joe recognized he didn't want that life. Instead, he followed his brother Vince, who had pursued baseball and hooked up with the San Francisco Seals of the Pacific Coast League.

As a New York Yankee DiMaggio effortlessly projected an image as a graceful warrior. He carried the Yankees to unprecedented heights—

they won nine World Series championships and ten pennants during the thirteen years of his active playing career. His most remarkable feat was his hitting streak of fifty-six consecutive games in 1941, a record that is unlikely ever to be challenged. The media continued to reinforce and encourage the public's thirst for a hero. He won legendary fame, reflected in three popular songs that embraced his lyrical name. The first was the Les Brown's band recording of "Joltin' Joe DiMaggio," then the Broadway show *South Pacific* made famous the line, "Her skin is tender as DiMaggio's glove." Many years later, during the troubled period of the Vietnam War, Paul Simon's hit song "Mrs. Robinson" included the lyrics, "Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio? / The nation turns its lonely eyes to you." Thus, in a time of national crisis and angst, DiMaggio represented a hero who could lead us and heal our wounds. These lyrics, written more than fifteen years after his retirement, also reflected the yearning for times perceived as happier.

On only two occasions during his playing days did the fans turn against DiMaggio. His first taste of extended boos and jeers occurred after his prolonged holdout past opening day in 1938. The Yankee management portrayed him as greedy, and many fans felt he had failed as the "pure" hero they needed. Such a hero would not put a salary squabble ahead of his obligation to his adoring public, especially when the country was still reeling from an economic depression. Up to that point he had been viewed primarily as a magnificent player who was unselfish and unblemished.

The second episode occurred in 1942, when he was having a subpar season at the plate. He had not signed up for the armed forces at the beginning of World War II, as other stars like Hank Greenberg and Bob Feller had done. In the patriotic zeal sweeping the country, DiMaggio's image became tainted once again. After that season, in which he did contribute to winning yet another pennant, he enlisted in the army, at age twenty-eight, and he served for three years, until the end of the war.

On his return he led the Yankees to four more World Series championships and resumed his status as the premier baseball hero. As stated by Lefty Gomez, a former teammate quoted in Maury Allen's *Where Have You Gone, Joe DiMaggio?* "He was a guy who knew he was the greatest baseball player in America, and he was proud of it. . . . He was always trying to live up to that image. . . . He knew he was Joe DiMaggio, and he knew what that meant to the country."²⁷ Between his accomplish-

ments on the field, the media hype, and his uncanny ability to promote his image as the all-American hero, the fans were provided with an ongoing object for worship. As Richard Ben Cramer stated in *Joe DiMaggio: The Hero's Life*, "He was, at every turn, one man we could look at who made us feel good. For it was always about how we felt . . . with Joe. No wonder we strove for 60 years to give him the hero's life. It was always about us. Alas, it was his destiny to know that, as well."²⁸ After an injury-plagued season, he retired in 1951. According to his older brother, Tom DiMaggio, "He quit because he wasn't Joe DiMaggio anymore."²⁹

Throughout his career DiMaggio was admired not only because of his impressive baseball statistics (home runs, batting average, Most Valuable Player Awards, etc.) but also because he was seen as performing day in and day out with a quiet excellence and exuding class and grace. After he left the game he was still venerated for decades. Remarkably, fans continued to more or less unambivalently revere the image of our hero as we needed to see him. It was not until the publication of Cramer's book in 2000 that we posthumously learned more details about his dark side. Cramer depicts DiMaggio as self-centered, emotionally cut off and insensitive to the needs and feelings of others, and obsessed with money. But these personality characteristics were not exposed by a favorable press during his career. According to Cramer, writing about Joe sold newspapers. The public needed him to be larger than life, and he knew instinctively how to perpetuate his image.

The adulation of Ted Williams among Red Sox fans was not nearly as universal as that given to Joe DiMaggio by Yankees followers. DiMaggio fell from grace posthumously, whereas early on Williams struggled with a lack of hero-worship from a significant segment of the hometown fans. At times he was disdainful of the fans as well as the press, which deprived him of the total admiration he felt was his due. Instead, he had a love/hate relationship with the media and the public. When he produced on the field he was a giant and was elevated to the throne. But when he was scornful or indifferent to fans' need for him to cultivate his image as a hero, he was demonized.

Like DiMaggio, Ted Williams came from an impoverished background in California. His mother appears to have neglected her two sons in favor of her devotion to the Salvation Army, a passionate commitment that absorbed her time and energy. According to Williams's biographer, Ed Linn, "Her special mission was ministering to the needs

of the drunks, prostitutes, and unwed mothers.”³⁰ His father, a photographer in a small shop in a working-class neighborhood, was also uninvolved at home and gave Ted little time. In his autobiography Williams describes how he and his brother would wait on the porch after dark for one of their parents to come home and let them in. He had little interest in school and was ill prepared for a career after high school. Although he was a scrawny adolescent, he was most comfortable hitting baseballs on the nearby playground. After high school he fulfilled his dream of becoming a ballplayer by signing with the San Diego Padres, the local Pacific Coast League team, and he worked his way up to the major leagues by age twenty. He was an instant success, hitting thirty-one home runs and batting .327 in his rookie season. He became the darling of Boston and soon acquired the nicknames “the splendid splinter” (his tall thin body frame filled out in later years) and “the thumper.”

In 1941, his third year in the majors, Ted had an outstanding season, with a batting average of .406. At the time, hitting .400 was not regarded as highly exceptional, since previous stars such as Ty Cobb, George Sisler, and Roger Hornsby had reached that level several times. The Most Valuable Player Award that year went to Joe DiMaggio, who had amassed his sensational fifty-six-game hitting streak. With time Williams’s accomplishment in 1941 has taken on greater stature, since no player reached that plateau for the rest of the twentieth century. A few players have flirted with this level, including Williams himself again in 1957, but none have achieved it. With the advent of high-caliber relief pitching and more efficient fielder’s gloves, it is questionable whether we will ever see another .400 hitter.

Soon after arriving in Boston, Williams became the new hope of many Red Sox fans. However, he was distressed by the demands for even greater performance being placed on him by a hero-hungry public. At a press conference on Ted Williams Day at Fenway Park in 1991, he complained, “I thought I was doing pretty good in 1940. I ended up hitting .344 and I got booed right out of the park because I wasn’t breaking Babe Ruth’s record. . . . The press was on me because I wasn’t driving in runs. I still drove in 100 runs, but I still wasn’t doing enough, and I got a little burned over that. Then they started writing personal things, and that’s all water over the dam, and I shouldn’t have taken it quite as seriously, but it affected me. It hurt.”³¹

Here we see the origin of what became a long-standing feud with

the press and the fans. It is likely that the emotional scars of growing up neglected created a deep-seated sensitivity to criticism and a lack of appreciation even when he had made it as a star. He understandably overreacted to rejection and disapproval. When he was criticized or unfairly booed he felt misunderstood and angrily fought back against his disloyal attackers, a thin-skinned and unprofessional response. In 1956 the Red Sox general manager fined him \$5,000, a princely sum in 1956 dollars, for spitting in the direction of heckling fans. There had been several similar outbursts earlier in the season. Two years later, after another tirade of spitting at fans, he was fined again, this time by American League president Will Harridge, for “conduct detrimental to the best interests of baseball.” Williams later apologized, and though the fine was only \$250, he said, “I’m principally sorry about losing the \$250.” He excelled at the game of baseball, but he didn’t care to play the game of dealing with the press and the fans. He often felt beleaguered and was too proud to promote himself as a hero. He came to hate the sportswriters, sometimes treating them accordingly, and they repaid him by overlooking him time and again when voting for the Most Valuable Player Award.

Dave Egan, who wrote a sports column for a Boston newspaper, was often critical of Williams, and Ted came to hate Egan most of all. As Ed Linn noted, “Ted, despite his disclaimers, could not bear to be attacked on any grounds at all. Egan accused Ted of being completely selfish, jealous of the success of various teammates, more interested in fishing than in baseball, and greedy for money. He went so far as to accuse Ted of contributing to juvenile delinquency because he refused to wear a tie or tip his hat, thereby encouraging the youth of the city to rebel against the established rules of society.”³²

Interestingly enough, it was Egan who supported Williams during two major personal crises when other newsmen and fans scorned him. Like DiMaggio, Williams did not rush to enlist in the armed forces at the beginning of World War II, as other Major League stars did. When he appealed to retain his 3A draft listing in 1942, Ted was roundly derided. This was an unpopular decision in a national atmosphere of patriotism, and Williams did join the service from 1943 through 1945, three years of his prime, and again during the Korean War.

The second crisis occurred in 1948 when he was found fishing in the Everglades while his wife prematurely gave birth to their daughter.

When he arrived in Boston five days later, he told reporters he hadn't been able to get a flight out of Miami for five days. When asked if he thought the delay would influence public opinion, he snapped, "To hell with the public. They can't run my life."³³ The press came down hard on him. Paul Gallico, a respected columnist, wrote, "You are not a nice fellow, Brother Williams. I do believe that baseball and sports pages would be better off without you. . . . When, oh, when, will you thick headed athletes catch on that the public is your darling, that you may not disillusion us, that you cannot live as other men but dwell in glass houses and that this is the price you pay for wealth and success?"³⁴ Of course, as Linn points out, "The public was not Ted's darling. On the contrary, Ted was the public's darling."³⁵ This incident became magnified because we need our heroes to measure up to our moral, ethical, and personal standards. The fans' resentment and disappointment expressed the attitude, "How dare Ted Williams march to his own drummer and disillusion us by flagrantly indulging his own hobbies instead of being a devoted family man during a time of crisis?"