

Ol' 'Double X' is a story for our athletes

By William C. Kashatus

Last Saturday, Jimmie Foxx of the old Philadelphia Athletics was honored by his hometown of Sudlersville, Md., which dedicated a lifesize bronze statue of the Hall-of-Famer. Foxx is one of baseball's greatest and most poignant figures; his life may serve to remind other athletes that superstardom is fragile and temporary even for the most exceptional performers.

Signed at 16 by Connie Mack in 1925, James Emory Foxx quickly endeared himself to teammates and fans. The powerful bat of "Double X" led the Athletics to world championships in 1929 and 1930 and a pennant in 1931.

During a 20-year career, Foxx compiled a batting average of .325. His slugging average of .609 was bettered only by Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig and Ted Williams, and his 534 home runs placed him second to Ruth on the all-time list until 1966, when Willie Mays passed him. Voted the American League's Most Valuable Player in 1932, '33 and '38, Foxx was among the few to capture the Triple Crown. His induction into

the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1951 established him as one of baseball's finest players.

But Foxx never achieved the legendary status of Ruth or Gehrig. He was, in fact, exploited, the most underpaid superstar of his era. His salary with the Athletics peaked in 1930 with the signing of a rare three-year contract — for a total of \$50,000. When time came to renegotiate, Mack pleaded poverty and asked him to swallow a large pay cut. Foxx dutifully obliged.

In 1945, with many of the game's stars still off at war, the 38-year-old slugger came out of retirement to play for the hapless Phillies, who were more interested in his drawing power than in his baseball ability. He embarrassed himself, hitting only .268 with 7 home runs.

In 1952, Foxx agreed to manage the Fort Wayne, Ind., Daisies of the American Girls' Baseball League. Other jobs followed — salesman, public speaker, baseball coach at the University of Miami — none of which Foxx held for very long. Whenever he needed money, someone was always ready with a check or a loan because of who he once had been. But eventually, they, too, forgot him. By 1958 Foxx was a poor

alcoholic with a heart problem. He died in 1967, only 59.

To be sure, Foxx created many of his own problems. He lived the good life during his playing days. His gregarious personality and trustful nature made him an easy target. A generous man, he spent his money faster than he could earn it. Nor was he able to adjust to a life without baseball. No one had ever prepared him for it.

Foxx's story reminds us of the danger of pampering outstanding young athletes. We seem to judge them by a separate standard, ignoring their indiscretions as long as they produce on the playing field. Just as quickly, we forget about them when their careers are done.

Some adjust. Others, like Foxx, never do. The magnitude of their fame is surpassed only by the severity of their collapse. They become tragic heroes, the kind we embrace out of pity, or perhaps guilt in having somehow contributed to their decline.

To the selfish sports stars of today: Learn from Jimmie Foxx's story. Spare us another tragic hero.

William C. Kashatus is writing a book about the 1929 Philadelphia Athletics.

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