

A HERO FOR ALL TIME

On the 100th anniversary of his birth, we should remember the unassuming baseball legend Lou Gehrig as the hard-working, everyday player who can still teach us about character.

BY WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

Thursday, baseball celebrates the 100th anniversary of Lou Gehrig's birth. It's likely to be a refreshing change from having to mark the anniversaries of other prominent figures we've elevated to the status of hero.

As Americans, we often say that we want role models who reflect values we hold dear. But we deceive ourselves into believing that they're devoid of human frailties. In current popular culture, sports has given us Allen Iverson of the Philadelphia 76ers, a trash-talker who, like the adolescents who adore him, believes that his only responsibility to the team comes on game day. Michael Jackson and Madonna thrive on the shock value of their music and are worshipped in part because of their difficult childhoods. We are left to wonder whether they deserve our pity more than our admiration.

What made Lou Gehrig's example so enduring was that he was an ordinary person who was keenly aware of his human frailties and still managed to accomplish extraordinary things.

Born on June 19, 1903, in a tenement house on New York's Lower East Side, Gehrig grew up in poverty. He worked at odd jobs to contribute to his German immigrant family's income while struggling through school. Gehrig's hard work in the classroom and on the athletic field earned him a scholarship to Columbia College.

Had his ailing parents not needed the money to pay medical bills, Gehrig might well have completed his degree. Instead, he signed with the New York Yankees after his sophomore year in 1923 and made a virtue out of a necessity.

Six feet

tall and 200 pounds, Gehrig became the premier clean-up hitter in baseball for most of his 17-year career. His statistical totals underscore his enduring status as an American sports hero. He won five American League RBI titles and, in 1934, the coveted Triple Crown for leading the league in batting average (.363), home runs (49), and runs batted in (165). Just as impressive are his .340 lifetime average and 493 career home runs. With Gehrig, the Yankees captured seven pennants and six world championships.

From June 2, 1925 until May 2, 1939, when he benched himself, Gehrig appeared in every game the Yankees played. Shaking off injuries, illnesses and even, in the last season of his career, the crippling disease that ultimately claimed his life, Gehrig played in a total of 2,130 games. That record, which earned him his "Iron Horse" nickname, stood until Cal Ripken of the Baltimore Orioles eclipsed it Sept. 6, 1995.

The streak also defined Gehrig's character as few records have defined any other sports hero. His example of consistency, hard work and pride in his performance endeared him to the common man. Withdrawn, modest and unassuming by nature, Gehrig happily surrendered the spotlight to more celebrated teammates such as Babe Ruth and Joe DiMaggio. He accepted his subordinate position without envy or resentment, admitting that he wasn't a headline guy, just the Yankee who's in there every day.

Gehrig was cut down in the prime of his life by amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a cruel neurological disorder now known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Yet instead of being bitter, or trading on his name, he spent the last years of his life working a \$6,000-a-year job as a New York City parole commissioner, writing letters of encouragement to other ALS victims and cheering on his Yankees until his death June 2, 1941.

Unlike so many other prominent figures whom we have elevated as heroes, Gehrig never pretended to be anything more than a common person. In the process, his humility taught us valuable lessons about ourselves and the society in which we live, inspiring us to pay attention to the better angels of our nature.

New York Yankees first baseman Lou Gehrig takes a swing at a ball during a special appearance at Yankee Stadium in 1940, the year before he died of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis — the disease that later was named for him.

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