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What Cal Ripken really did for us all

In April 1974, during the late days of his campaign to break Babe Ruth's all-time record of 714 home runs, Hank Aaron was forced to contend with an intrusive media, a relentlessly demanding public and racist threats on his life.

At one of his lowest moments, he admitted that his quest had taken all the fun out of the game. "I used to love to come to the ballpark," he said, "but now I hate it. Every day becomes a little tougher because of all this, especially when they say they'll be disappointed if anyone tops Babe Ruth. I don't want them to forget Ruth. I just want them to remember me!"

Hank Aaron found more relief than joy in setting a new home run record. Throughout his quest, he was haunted by the ghost of a man who had been considered the greatest player in the history of the game as well as by the selfishness of those who, for whatever reason, tried to exploit or degrade his own baseball legacy. It wasn't fair to Hank Aaron or to major league baseball.

Perhaps Cal Ripken's more joyous achievement — playing in his 2,131 consecutive game to break Lou Gehrig's record — offers hope that the baseball world has gained a better perspective

from the experience. Cal Ripken actually seemed to enjoy his quest. Whether he was signing autographs, taking a curtain call or being interviewed by the media, he did it with a heartfelt, if not bashful, smile.

On the night he broke Lou Gehrig's record, he gracefully circled the entire stadium, shaking hands with the fans, the groundskeepers, the opposing team and even the umpires. For a refreshing change, it wasn't the "in-your-face" display that we have grown accustomed to these days in professional sports. In fact, Cal Ripken had to be coaxed out of the dugout by his teammates to do the lap.

Maybe Cal Ripken himself said it best in his closing comment that glorious evening: "Whether your name is Gehrig or Ripken, DiMaggio or Robinson," he reminded us, "or that of some youngster who picks up his bat or puts on his glove, you are challenged by the game of baseball to do your very best, day in and day out. And that's all I've ever tried to do."

Cal Ripken has given us more than a new record. He's also taught us about humility. Lou Gehrig would be proud.

William C. Kashatus
Philadelphia

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EDITORIALS