

Schmidt was a winner all the way

By **BILL KASHATUS**

When Mike Schmidt announced his retirement on Monday night I knew that my boyhood had ended. I am one of those 30-year-olds who "lived and died" with Schmidt over the 17 years of his major league career.

When the end came, I couldn't figure out if I was more upset for him, for the treatment he had received from the fans, the media and the Phillies front office — over his most recent contract — or for myself, because I would never be able to watch my childhood hero perform his magic again.

For years, it seemed, Schmidt just couldn't measure up. Many fans could not relate to his cool, withdrawn approach to the game of baseball. He was envied not so much for his natural abilities but his financial affluence. Fathers would point to him as an example for their Little League sons during the good times and boo him during the bad.

The truth is that Philadelphia always needed Schmidt. We needed him like we need any hero: to overcome the frustrations in our lives, to project our fears, hopes and aggressions onto an individual who can at least provide a symbolic solution to our problems. That is human nature. Unfortunately, many of Philadelphia's fans failed, over the years, to appreciate the fact that Schmidt has truly been a hero in every sense of the word.

Like all heroes, Schmidt has demonstrated the ability to overcome adversity in his career. His rookie season was a nightmare. The 18 home runs and 52 RBIs Schmidt compiled that year were overshadowed by his .196 batting average and 136 strikeouts.

But he displayed the potential to become one of the most feared power

He has lived, as he played baseball, with grace and dignity.

hitters in baseball. He would rebound from that rookie year to lead the National League in homers for the next three seasons. And while the boo-birds will never forget Schmidt's sub-par performances during the '78 and '88 seasons or the 1-for-20 dry spell he suffered during the '83 World Series, the faithful fan will always remember the capacity that the Phillies' third baseman displayed for coming back, even stronger, during the following seasons. Schmidt's three MVP awards in 1980, 1981 and 1986 serve as testimonies to his ability.

The key to Schmidt's success as a player was not his cool approach to the game but rather the pressure he placed on himself to perform. He took failure very personally. When Schmidt has shown his emotions, it has been as genuine as his personality — jumping on top of a pile of Phillies after the final out of the 1980 World Series or imitating a locomotive and high-stepping his way to first base after he had hit his 500th career home run in Pittsburgh.

Perseverance, dedication and pride in performance: Phillies fans should be able to relate to that ethic. We should be able to view his slumps, his down times, as reminders that he is only human and then celebrate the fact that a hero understands his limitations and still manages to achieve beyond the realm of the ordinary.

What's most important, though, is a hero's ability to be sensitive to the needs of others. In this sense, Schmidt's efforts have been grossly underestimated. Any big-name player can autograph baseballs or pose for the photographers, but what distinguishes the hero from the star is the moral code by which he lives and the example he sets for others.

During the 1970s and 1980s, when other superstar athletes were doing drugs, swapping wives and bad-mouthing umpires, Schmidt was speaking out against drug addiction, sponsoring a host of charitable organizations, rearing a family and playing the game of baseball with all the grace and dignity one would expect of a self-proclaimed Christian athlete. He was the most responsible hero a young boy could have.

For me, a kid growing up in Northeast Philadelphia, it was the 300-foot shot off the centerfield speaker on the ceiling of the Houston's Astrodome and the four consecutive home runs he hit in a single game at Wrigley Field that caught my attention. But it was the way Schmidt led his life that made him my hero.

Years later I would hear Schmidt, the parent, speak about the values he hoped to instill in his two children — respect for authority, doing one's best at all times, leading a Christian life — the same principles that have governed his life as an adult. It wasn't until that moment that I realized how fortunate I was, along with an entire generation of baseball-playing adolescents, to have a role model like Schmidt playing right here in Philadelphia.

As a high school teacher and coach, as well as a Phillies fan, I'm sorry that Schmidt is retiring because it's doubtful that a professional athlete with his integrity and sensitivity will come along again any time soon.

Whether we choose to admit it or not, human beings need heroes. We try to identify ourselves with a hero in order to define those values that are truly important in our lives. No matter how public a hero becomes, he remains very personal for those of us who adopt him.

Mike Schmidt will always remind me of the boyhood dream I treasured of becoming a major-league baseball player, and his example will continue to inspire me to strive for excellence in my professional and personal life. And when a hero can do something like that for his fans, his career has taken him much further than the Hall of Fame.

Bill Kashatus is a teacher and coach at Episcopal Academy in Merion.

