

Editorial

Heroes as humans

"Athletes and sports institutions bear the brunt of people's general dissatisfaction with the ethical bankruptcy of their society."

—Harry Edwards
Professor of Sociology
University of California at Berkeley

It is with increasing regularity that the off-field problems faced by professional athletes are becoming more newsworthy than their on-field exploits. Here in Edmonton, Oiler forward Mark Messier weaves his Porsche over the center line and wipes out three parked cars. His teammate Dave Hunter has scored his first off-ice hat trick by racking up three separate arrests for drunk driving. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a former clubhouse caterer for the Philadelphia Phillies baseball team is on trial for selling cocaine. Among his customers were such green diamond notables as Keith Hernandez, Lonnie Smith, and Enos Cabell.

What is just as disturbing though, is not these sad tales of drug and alcohol dependency, is the reaction of the average fan to them. In *Time Magazine* (Sept. 16 issue) the fan response to the drug trial was "a mixture of sorrow, regret and anger."

"Making that kind of money, they ought to set a better example," said one disgruntled Texas Rangers booster.

Reactions such as these are common, shared by many people I have talked to on the subject. And this attitude reinforces these statements by Edwards; sport is the very last aspect of our lives that people will not allow to be ethically bankrupt. Politicians are no longer paragons of virtue. We now expect and even look for their flaws. When a politician is caught with his hand in the proverbial cookie-jar, our first reaction is not one of shock at the hand being there in the first place. Rather, we instantly wonder how far down into the cookie jar his hand goes, and from what other cookie jars he is stealing. Anybody trust a lawyer? What about bankers? Doctors? People accept legal and financial improprieties from people who should be the very cornerstones of society, yet they will ostracize a 19-year-old kid who, thrust into the pro sports fast-lane with a multi-year contract, surprisingly develops drug problems.

What is this strange love-hate relationship we have with sport that allows us to go beyond any rational bounds to protect its integrity yet also makes us denigrate it when its seamy underside is somehow exposed.

Our affinity for sport seems to stem from the underlying attitudes in our culture. For one thing the sports attitude is one that pervades all of the North American psyche, particularly that of the United States. Everything is perceived in the concrete extremes of life's continuum. Events are looked at as right or wrong, black or white, victory or defeat; and in a world that is otherwise awash in gray areas, sport will give us this fix of black and white.

Sport is unlike so-called "real life" in that it is a complete entity in itself — there is a definite beginning and end. It creates its own time frame (one hour of football time is three hours of real time). The playing surface is mapped out, the rules are direct and inflexible. There is an equal number of players on both teams. The problems of life have been simplified before you — the goal is to put the puck in the net or to put the ball in the hoop. All confusing extraneous matters have been removed to allow for concentration on the task at hand. There are no gray areas; what you see is what you get.

Through sport we can see the physical manifestation of man's nobler virtues in a classic battle of good versus evil. The players appear strong and fearless, all fighting for a common cause, sacrificing individuality for the good of the whole. But it is the way they give of themselves that enables us to appreciate them. For example, few can appreciate the thrill Albert Einstein must have got when he developed his theory of relativity. They can't revel in the victory because they have no concept of what it took to attain it. Also, the problem was a cerebral one, hence not visible. Sport on the other hand can be shared by all. We love to watch the slapshot of a Reed Larson and we empathize with the pain etched in the face of a marathon road runner at the finish line. We can readily understand what it takes for them to accomplish their feats; we understand physical pain.

But where athletes embody our aspirations of fame and glory, so do they also prove to be convenient targets for harboured jealousies and resentment. As CBS sports correspondent Robert Lipsyte points out in an interview in *Harper's* magazine (September issue) this resentment begins in elementary and junior high school.

"The privilege of the athlete is in a sense the first privilege. In the fourth and fifth and sixth grades athletes are more likely to be popular, to be picked first — and this is an age when all kids are so vulnerable. The scientists and the poets, the other talented kids, haven't emerged yet. The only way kids can judge themselves is by the worthiness of their bodies — by their performance in sports," he said.

Sport is definitely a thread that runs through all our lives. Not all of us have childhood memories of writing poetry or playing with graduated cylinders, but we all participated in games.

The resentment begins because if at one time we participate in sport, then we will eventually be rejected by it. The poor ones aspire to the better ones who in turn aspire to the best, but one by one they're almost all weeded out. Some of us may be the last pick in a choose up game of flag football, another might be cut by the lowly Calgary Stampeders — but in each case we secretly envy and resent, to varying degrees, those who do what we do, only better.

But we may also resent the athletes because of the adulation and respect they receive for something that, at times, can appear quite trivial. Have any of us, in our travels, not encountered the school jock? He's a guy who is loved by peers and elders alike, not to mention the legions of lithe nubile young things in tight sweaters, freshly washed blue jeans and smiles that reveal God's gift to orthodontia. You may be analytical, intelligent and great to talk to, but who cares? So there you sit and stare at this guy who may have the intellectual prowess and charisma of a marble, but can catch a football a little bit better than you.

This I believe, is why we're quicker to punish an athlete for his transgressions than say, a politician. We don't resent politicians so much because we never really encounter them early in life. Politics has never rejected us like sport.

So we make our athletes live puritanically exemplary lives we feel must accompany such awesome athletic talent. We aren't quick to forgive them their failures either, because we see them tossing away the fame, the glory, the adulation we could never achieve.

So at a time when we are sanctimoniously knocking our sporting heroes one by one of their mythic pedestals, it seems important to stop and remind ourselves that we were the ones who put them up there in the first place.

Dean Bennett

Correction

In the September 10 issue we mistakenly reported the untimely financial demise of the comic specialty shop, The Comic Master. This is untrue. The Comic Master is alive and well and doing business as usual. We apologize for any inconvenience caused.



Letters to the Editor

Information

The two items which, according to last week's *Second Wind*, were going to be this week's *Second Wind* are, instead, being run in the letters section. Our apologies for any confusion this may cause.

Bible as guide

Coming back to the University this fall, and reading the first few issues of *The Gateway* and *The Grind*, I get this familiar ache in the pit of my stomach. The papers call themselves the representative voice of U of A students. *The Gateway* (we will ignore *The Grind* for the time being), in its initial copy of the school year, quoted from its first ever editorial proclaiming it to be "a register of student public opinion." Seventy-five years later, it is still "the newspaper of the University of Alberta students." But I don't feel (and this is where the ache comes in) that *The Gateway* represents my views at all.

In fact, I can think of few times *The Gateway* mentioned views similar to mine except with ridicule. An exception to this is Gilbert Bouchard's "Media watch" column on "Christian amnesia." He makes a very good point in saying that our society, for the most part, fails to recognize the debt it has to Christian tradition. In the course of his column, however, he states that he does not "accept the Bible as a guide for living." Personally, I think the Bible is an excellent guide for living.

The Bible presents a complete moral system — including not only laws for dealing with moral dilemmas, but also guidelines for making choices in exceptional cases. Many of the characters in the Bible

give us examples to follow, whereas others are examples to avoid. Some of the books of the Bible are letters of instruction and encouragement from outstanding thinkers of the day. As a whole, the Bible contains a package deal on how to live in our world.

Upon further consideration, I realize university should be teaching us to think intelligently and to discuss rationally. One of the first steps to rational discussion is the articulation of one's beliefs, along with the logical support of them. So, at risk of being labelled Victorian or being compared with Ted Byfield, I have done just that. In doing so, I hope I have given representation to another section of the student body, and eased a bit of the pain in my stomach. I also hope I have given those of opposing viewpoints an opportunity to defend their beliefs and thus enhance their university educations as well.

Jon Arnold
Education II

Bouchard bash

Re: Christian Amnesia by Gilbert Bouchard (*The Gateway* September 12, 1985)

I take offence to Mr. Bouchard's flippant references to Scripture as dogma and myth. The past century has yielded up many archaeological finds in the Near East. Information and research has validated much of biblical history and enlarged the view of life in the ancient world as pictured in the Bible. Many opinions abound today about the Bible and its worth to students, parents, educators and others. Archaeology does not "prove" the Bible — that is, it does not prove its spiritual assertions. In fact, archaeology has not set

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Jennifer Strain was furious when she discovered that Tamara Dean had kidnapped her cat and was forcing it into doing a stand-up comedy routine with James MacDonald and Rob Campbell at the sleazy *Janine McDade Cabaret*. "We'll help you!" cried John Watson, Gilbert Bouchard and Edna Landreville. Together, they stormed the club, knocking over Roberta Franchuk's Lutfulkabar Khan's and Tim Hellum's table; spilling beer over Alex Miller; punching out Greg McHarg; and insulting Pernell Tarnowski's shirt until they rescued the suffering feline. "Stop it!" screamed the cat, "My name is Maurice Lipsyte, not Morris!"