

How 3 became gold-plated sports super heroes

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By ROBERT LIPSYTE

Sports is an unending mirror of our life and fantasies. Nowhere is this easier to see than in sports' choice of its super heroes.

The Gold-Plated Age of American sports—that mid-70s to late '70s era of instant legends and sudden millionaires and overnight bankrupts—was dominated by the images of three celebrity athletes whose impact on the nation's psyche was as deep and significant as their effect on the games they played.

Joe Namath, Billie Jean King and Muhammad Ali were supreme performers at their peaks, now past, but each had something more. Call it magnetism or sex appeal or charisma, it allowed people to use them as extensions of their hopes and daydreams, as living symbols of the ultimate.

PHYSICALLY TOUGH, sentimental, street-wise men like Joe Namath flanked the assembly lines and daydreamed of dressing up on Saturday night, drinking with the boys and chasing girls—their rewards for using their bodies as investment capital, as had their fathers and grandfathers.

It is no accident that so many of the white football players are the sons and grandsons of those men who came to America from Eastern and South-Central Europe.

Namath's father had come from Hungary as a boy, settled in Beaver Falls, Pa., a steel mill town, and instead of encouraging his four sons to play soccer, his own game (and Nelson Rockefeller's), he steered them into baseball and football.

These were the American sports, the high-risk, short-term games that could get an uneducated "ethnic" some local recognition, discount clothes downtown, a municipal summer job, a free college education, and a one-way ticket out of town.

JOE MADE it to the University of Alabama, where he starred but never graduated. Then to New York, where the owner of the Jets, a wealthy team in a shaky new league that desperately needed a television contract, paid him



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\$400,000 to play quarterback, an unheard of price in 1965.

America was astounded. What could be worth that much money? So everyone rushed out to see what \$400,000 looked like, and in so doing justified the price.

The publicity was enormous, the stadium was packed, the networks were ready to make a deal. And Namath, long before he showed his truly electrifying talent, was authenticated in the popular mind by the price tag on his arm.

HAD NAMATH really been the Sixties Super Stud of his image—cool, hip, mod, swinging, the bait to hook the youth cult—but he could never have been the effective athlete he was.

Broadway Joe was really a throwback to an earlier tradition in sports: he was dedicated to his team, highly

responsible in his work habits, and loyal to his friends and family. His longish hair, his occasional beards, his peacock clothes were the reflection of what bank tellers and steel hammers were wearing on their weekends.

It was only the middle-management, white-collar "technocrats," the young men who were buying pro football as romanticized psychodrama of their own corporate careers, who somehow saw Namath as outrageous or liberated or transcendent.

BILLIE JEAN'S road to the top was more difficult and less-traveled than Joe's, but she was no pioneer. Babe Didrikson and Althea Gibson, among others, had suffered and sacrificed before her.

A great male athlete is always considered a superman, while a great female athlete has traditionally been

thought of something less than a complete woman.

Billie Jean became special in the same ruthless way everyone else becomes special. She let her marriage slide into a sporadic relationship; she traveled continually for instruction and tournament experience; she underwent extensive knee surgery; she blotted out anything that might distract her from becoming what she called Numero Uno.

When people asked her why she didn't go home and have babies, she would snap right back, "Why don't you ask Rod Laver why he doesn't stay home?"

IRONICALLY, it eventually took a man to authenticate Billie Jean.

On Sept. 20, 1973, in a grotesque extravaganza in the Houston Astro-dome that brought tennis into big-time show biz, Little Myth America beat Bobby Riggs, a male of comparable size, but with considerably less championship experience, 28 years older and of far less accomplishment.

That Billie Jean would represent all women in such a contest was logical—she was Number One. The trick, of course, was that Riggs, a middle-aged hustler, was allowed to represent all men.

Nevertheless, the victory was seen



Mirror of American Life

as a feminist triumph, and the Joan of Arc joined Broadway Joe as a folk hero for the 1970s.

As Namath emerged from what has been called "the rise of the unmelancholic ethnic," so Billie Jean King was a natural product of the women's movement.

MUHAMMAD ALI, as befits a hero who rose and fell and rose again, came out of the confluence of several movements.

The earliest professional athletes in America were black slaves—boxers, jockeys and oarsmen. As soon as money, prestige and mythic symbolism were offered to sports heroes, the blacks were squeezed out. They have yet to regain their places in rowing and at the racetrack.

In the 20th century, they began boxing again, and by the 1960s they were on their way to dominating most

major sports.

Black sports participation was being encouraged by the establishment, to the detriment of black progress; all those young black men's energies and talents were being diverted toward thousand-to-one shots in sports.

CASSIUS CLAY of Louisville, a handsome, ebullient functional illiterate, came out of both traditions.

He jockeyed his way through high school, won a gold medal at the 1960 Olympics in Rome, and was "bought" by a group of 10 Kentucky whiskey and tobacco millionaires who had, as Clay put it, "the complexion and complexion to give me protection and direction."

Clay-Ali has never been given proper credit for understanding that his only hope for personal independence was through divorce from mainstream America. His reputation of his white owners, of Christianity, of the American involvement in Vietnam were of a piece with his unorthodox boxing style and his immodest public-seeking ("I am the greatest!").

His sense of his own destiny was far greater than Namath or Ms. King's ("Moses had troubles, too, so did Jesus"), and his impact, of course, was not only greater than theirs, but his example made it easier for them to take political stands or challenge their own sports' bureaucracies.

THE 3½ YEARS of Ali's exile, in which he was illegally deprived of his livelihood, was the factor that authenticated Ali in the public mind.

It proved even to people who hated his color, Muslim religion and social position that he was not "putting them on." He lost millions of dollars by refusing to be drafted, proof of his "sincerity."

Ultimately, his largest fandom developed in Africa and Asia among non-whites. As Ali has said, "This is Joe Namath's country, but my world."

His multi-million dollar boxing spectacles abroad have helped make his face the most recognized on the planet.

But legends always die; sports legends are among the most intense and have the shortest shelf life. New generations demand their own heroes as prizes and standards.

And even now, Namath and King and Ali are in the bathroom of Valhalla, selling us lotteries on television, the last stop before the certifiable obsolescence called sports immortality.

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Super heroes of sports: Joe Namath of the New York Jets, Billie Jean King of professional tennis, and heavyweight boxing champ Muham-



mad Ali—living symbols of the dreams of many Americans.



Entertainment press displaces moribund parties

By JESSE PITTS
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I am going to discuss the potential impact of some trends in the mass media upon the strength of democratic institutions.

Representative government requires selection of candidates on the basis of their political philosophy, which is an indication as to how they will react to problems once in office—and of their past performance in defending their constituency's interests.

If each voter had to establish these facts for himself, it would take him an inordinate time. After all, if the average citizen has extra time, after a hard day's work, his personal returns are likely to be greater if he invests that time in his job or his family than if he invests it in visiting farmers and asking them: "What is PBB really like?"

The citizen used to delegate most of this work to specialists, i.e., party politicians who are knowledgeable and whose candidates likely to be competent and to have a good chance of winning.

Party sponsorship of a candidate is normally a good indication of his political philosophy and his capacity to survive screening by pros.

HOWEVER, PARTIES have lost much of their power in the last 15-20 years.

The Republican Party, because of its weakness, has become near to being dominated, on the national level, by its more extreme wing. Extremism usually means greater dedication, in time and money, because politics becomes a form of religion.

This was the reason President Ford had a hard time defeating Gov. Reagan in the 1976 primaries, which are frequently dominated by militants, political militants, ethnic or single-issue militants who come out to vote.

The Democratic Party has been weakened as well—witness the capture by Sen. McGovern of the 1972 nomination and Gov. Carter's capture of the 1976 nomination.

TELEVISION has a large part of the responsibility for the decline of the

two-party system, because candidates with money can use the new medium to win primaries and general elections by bypassing the parties.

TV has also taken over the political party's function as a source of information about local or national campaigns and politics. Prof. Robinson now goes so far as to say, "It is now the networks that act as the shadow cabinet" rather than the Republican Party.

If the national parties have lost so much of their functions, the citizen has only the media to rely upon for information and selection. In the past, media pressure and the wish to win could help the political parties relatively "honest." Now the media is the field practically to itself.

Is the media better able to fulfill the selection function than the political parties? I doubt it, for the reason that there is no equivalent of the two-party system in the media.

THE OVERWHELMING weight of media reporting and writing is still on the left-liberal side. The Republican

ownership of many TV stations and newspapers makes very little difference.

If I were a candidate, I would rather have the reporters and the cartoonists (and the barbers) on my side than the editorial writers.

Furthermore, at a time when the press should be gearing up to discharge its responsibility for the political selection function—by increasing its expertise and its fairness—it finds itself threatened by technological changes which make it more difficult for the entertainment function to continue subsidizing serious reporting.

The computer age has created great opportunities for labor saving in the newspaper field.

A result is that the initial size of the investments required has created great opportunities for corporations with high capital resources. They can buy out newspapers and manage them much more effectively than the old local owners.

These corporations, on the other hand, are much more vulnerable to "bottom line" considerations. When

they win, they win a lot. But when they lose, they lose a lot as well.

THIS SITUATION does not promote chance-taking. It promotes, for instance, a greater reliance on the entertainment function of the press.

The youth market (18-33) has been found, through surveys, to want "more crime news, photos, feature stories, how to do it articles, consumer information, movie and restaurant reviews and guides, and alternative lifestyle articles" (i.e., rationalizations for the "me" ethic).

So what we get in our newspapers is not more thoughtful news but more "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" type news. Those who want more go to specialized periodicals or to commercial newsletters at \$1.20 subscription rates.

The gap between the cultural haves and have-nots may be increasing, even while college education (for what passes for it) becomes more common.

IN 10 YEARS, eight to 10 large groups may well own the bulk of the American daily and Sunday press.

The new owners are unlikely to be less liberal than the network executives of today, and furthermore they will use for their serious news the syndicated features of the conglomerates built around The New York Times, the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times.

Instead of broadening the market for ideas, the new trend will narrow it, unless there develops a conservative TV network and a conservative equivalent to The New York Times (an expanded version of the Wall Street Journal?).

More important, as far as I am concerned, is that journalists should take control of their profession away from the conglomerates.

With the help of boards of ethics and of ombudsmen financed from fees levied upon owners, they should demand that the information function on a local, state and national level be fully served with balance and expertise instead of becoming a mere appendix to entertainment.

The future of our democracy may well depend upon it.

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