

Race in “The Race”: Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa, and Heroic Constructions of Whiteness

Michael L. Butterworth

News media in the United States often present sports figures as ideal representations of heroism. In the U.S., heroism has long been linked to frontier mythology, which celebrates the rugged individualist. This figure privileges a construction of heroism based on strength, masculinity, and a white ideal associated with American exceptionalism. Accordingly, in affirming the promise of the American dream, sports media often devalue racial inclusion. To show how heroism in contemporary American culture is a mythological enactment of whiteness, I analyze news media accounts of the 1998 home run race between Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa.

Keywords: Mark McGwire; Sammy Sosa; Baseball; Heroism; Mythology; Whiteness

In the summer of 1998, U.S. news media were consumed by the story about President Bill Clinton and White House intern Monica Lewinsky, an affair whose details were buried by an alleged cover-up. Coverage was extensive and relentless. Many trying to escape the excesses of American politics found a compelling alternative story in sports.¹ In particular, the feats of two baseball players—Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa—captured the collective imagination of Americans. *Time* magazine declared that they effectively provided a “sweet antidote” to the White House scandal (Isaacson, 1998, p. 6). In their pursuit of Major League Baseball’s single-season home run record, McGwire and Sosa together energized the sporting public and contributed to the rehabilitation of the “national pastime,” which was still suffering the repercussions of the 1994 work stoppage that had forced the cancellation of the

Michael L. Butterworth is Assistant Professor in the School of Communication Studies at Bowling Green State University. This essay has a long history, and the author would like to acknowledge the role of the late Martha Cooper, who helped framed the study in its earliest stages. In addition, the author thanks Oscar Giner, Robert Ivie, Susan Mackey-Kallis, Mary McDonald, Phaedra Pezzullo, Linda Steiner, and the anonymous reviewers for their guidance. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the annual convention of the Eastern Communication Association, Washington, D.C., 2003. Correspondence to: School of Communication Studies, 316A West Hall, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403, USA. Email: mbutter@bgsu.edu.

World Series. The 1998 "home run race" affirmed the virtues and principles of American character that historically have been assigned to baseball (Verducci, 1998d).

Regarding baseball as a distraction from politics does not mean that sport is apolitical. Rather, as Jhally (1984) contends, "While the symbolic power of sport is derived from the *appearance* of the separation of sport and social life, its cultural and ideological role is based instead on that unity" (p. 53). Indeed, being hailed as the "national pastime" assigns baseball a status that *depends* on sport's socio-political value. Over the years, the game has been celebrated as a metaphor for America itself, to the extent that Jacques Barzun (2002) famously commented, "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball" (p. 35).

Through various social and political phenomena, especially immigration and integration, baseball has been used to promote heroic individualism and the "American Dream" (Elias, 2001). Arguably, no single action on a baseball diamond is more symbolic of individualism than the home run. Sportswriter Tom Verducci (1998d) sums this up succinctly, declaring that the "home run is America—appealing to America's roots of rugged individualism and . . . fascination with grand scale" (p. 29). Verducci's words neatly articulate baseball with broader themes of American mythology. As Trujillo (1992) argues, such an articulation reminds us that baseball is a potent site for social drama. Accordingly, my analysis engages the myth of American individualism, particularly as it promotes white masculinity.

In concert with a growing scholarly interest in interrogating "whiteness" (Dyer, 1997; McKinney, 2005; Nakayama & Martin, 1999), I foreground the role of race in representations of the 1998 home run race. I argue that print journalists articulated problematic ideas about size, individualism, and race in American culture. In the process, sportswriters elevated Mark McGwire to heroic status and diminished Sammy Sosa's role in the pursuit of the home run record. Although Sosa was portrayed positively, his identity was constructed in accordance with long-standing stereotypes of dark-skinned and Latino peoples. Analysis of this coverage reveals the extent to which whiteness is a taken-for-granted norm in discussions about race and how sports media produce and perpetuate a discourse that privileges whiteness. I show how baseball is integral to the mythology of individualism, and I critique the nature of sports coverage that privileged McGwire as a mythic hero.

Constructing American Myth

To understand the heroic status assigned to Mark McGwire by the sports media requires jumping ahead to 2005. After President George W. Bush expressed concern about steroid use in professional sports in his 2004 State of the Union address, members of Congress increasingly pressured Major League Baseball to institute more stringent testing measures and more serious penalties for the use of performance-enhancing drugs. On March 17, 2005, the House Committee on Government Reform questioned baseball officials, union leaders, and star players during an 11-hour session. In retrospect, Rafael Palmeiro's vigorous defense, in which he insisted, "I have never used steroids, period" (quoted in Sheinin, 2005), has received the most

attention because he was later suspended during the season for use of the steroid stanozolol. At the time, however, McGwire was the subject of the majority of sportswriters' attention.

When questioned by the committee, McGwire refused to offer any specifics. "I'm not here to discuss the past," he said repeatedly (Wilson, 2005). In the words of sportswriter Howard Bryant (2005), the testimony signified "the end of Mark McGwire as an American icon" (p. 390). Others echoed Bryant's assessment. One headline in the *New York Times* declared about McGwire, "A Role Model is History" (Vecsey, 2005). Mike Lupica, who had waxed poetic about McGwire in *Summer of '98*, referred to the player as the "biggest fool" of the hearings (Lupica, 2005). And Larry Stone (2005) lamented the "Herculean McGwire crumble" (p. C4). Meanwhile, Sosa received comparatively little criticism for claiming that his inadequate command of English necessitated that his lawyer speak on his behalf. Some, such as Bill Madden (2005), affirmed Sosa's integrity by declaring him the "real record-holder for most homers in a season" in light of McGwire's silence (p. 96).² Quite simply, since McGwire was expected to reaffirm the essence of baseball's purity, his refusal to say anything substantive instead made him the epitome of baseball's contamination.

To understand the symbolic importance of McGwire's testimony in 2005 requires a reconsideration of how sportswriters constructed both Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa during the 1998 home run race (the "Race" hereafter). Although elements of heroism were present before 1998, it was during the Race that he was constituted rhetorically as a mythic hero. Sosa, meanwhile, was virtually unknown to the mainstream media before 1998. As the competition between these players progressed, the sports media hailed McGwire as the embodiment of the rugged individualist and Sosa as an exemplar of the American dream.

American Myths of Individualism and Whiteness

A myth is a symbolic expression of a word or story, as its Greek origin *mythos* suggests (Doty, 1986). In its most general sense, a myth "explains something," or solves some kind of problem (Robertson, 1980, p. 6). More importantly, myths are instructive, as they describe "exceptional people doing exceptional things that serve as a moral guide to proper action" (Hart, 1990, p. 305). Lincoln (1996) summarizes the cultural function of myths as "stories through which groups accomplish the task of sociocultural reproduction by inscribing their values and sense of shared identity on those who are its members-in-the-making" (p. 168). Central to myth is the hero, an individual who can be understood in archetypal terms (Rushing, 1989). These individuals typically are superhuman in some sense (Robertson, 1980), and must undertake a task or series of tasks that test resolve and fortitude but ultimately leave the hero transformed (Lowry, 1982).

The focus on individual heroes provides a logical connection to mythology specific to American values, especially given the individualistic character of American culture. Hégy (1991) argues that Western cultures commonly respond to myths of progress,

and Rushing (1986) notes that the U.S. "has drawn upon the frontier for its mythic identity" (p. 265). This identity is driven by the "rugged individualist," whose goal is to venture into—and conquer—"unknown frontiers . . . and new and unfamiliar places" (McMullen, 1996, p. 31). More specifically, this individual reinforces a masculine ideology, constituted by strength, size, power, and the ability to tame and harness the forces of nature (Rushing, 1989).

Implied in this archetype is another characteristic: the hero is presumed to be white. Whiteness is central to this mythology because it works alongside the assumption that white Christians represented a "chosen people" (Hughes, 2004), charged with civilizing and taming the savage wilderness. As Omi and Winant (1994) explain, only when European settlers reached America did "distinctions and categorizations fundamental to a racialized social structure, and to a discourse of race" emerge (p. 61). This racial discourse constituted a white/colored, civilized/primitive dichotomy. White identity need not be explicitly privileged, of course, because racial superiority is embedded in the myths of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny.

That the racial identity of the rugged individualist remains unstated is consistent with American cultural patterns that continue to the present. Historically, "whiteness" has been the taken-for-granted norm of American identity. Because whiteness is privileged as the cultural norm, it goes unmarked. As Nakayama and Krizek (1995) note, "The invisibility of whiteness has been manifested through its universality" (p. 293). As a result, "In addressing race, in the law, in literature, in popular culture, in communication studies, in religion or other areas of our lives, whiteness is privileged, normalized, deified and raceless" (Johnson, 1999, p. 1). Furthermore, when whiteness goes unmarked anyone not white subsequently is defined as the "Other" and becomes "raced" (Dyer, 1997, p. 1).

Jewett and Lawrence (1977) suggest that the individualist archetype is often characterized by what they regard as the American "monomyth," a primarily redemptive story in which popular culture heroes serve as replacements for the "Christ figure." The dependence on religious symbolism is unsurprising, given the extent to which Christian ideals are embedded in American mythology. In this context, heroic narratives effectively bolster the myth of American exceptionalism, a myth in which "citizens regard the American way of life as though it were somehow chosen by God, uniquely important to the history of the human race" (Novak, 1988, p. 35).

American mythology is deployed on multiple discursive levels. Accordingly, critical attention to media representations constitutes an effort to challenge and alter problematic constructions of race. "It appears that for this country's (mostly white) journalists, as for many ordinary whites, whiteness is an unmentioned centrality, the 'elephant in the room' that is called out only when a comparative reference is made to racial outgroups" (McKinney, 2005, xii). The maintenance of this racial discourse occurs through representations of many popular institutions, not the least of which is sport.

Mythological Enactment in Sport Culture

The quasi-religious hero identified by Jewett and Lawrence (1977) is common within sport culture. As Rowe, McKay, and Miller (1998) argue, “one of the few areas where people can construct and follow heroes” is in sports (p. 129). VandeBerg (1998) specifies that modern sports heroes “are models of athletic competence and of social values who are admired for their outstanding and skillful athletic performance, their courage, expertise, perseverance, assertiveness, generosity, social ideals, dependability, honesty, and character” (p. 138). Sport is an enactment of American mythology, then, because it is driven by performance, the ability to conquer uncharted territory, and the prominence of individual acts of greatness. These themes are especially relevant in baseball.

Baseball’s development is linked to the development of America itself. The game’s origins in the mid-19th century are embedded in American agrarian, pastoral imagery. Central to baseball’s mythology are the green, lush fields of ball “parks” that claim to provide a safe haven from the world outside. As the United States moved rapidly toward industrialization and urbanization, baseball was seen as a respite from the emerging tensions between traditional rural America and a developing urban power (Crepeau, 1980). The idea of baseball as sanctuary, in fact, “has long been mythologized as an American ‘field of dreams’” (Sobchack, 1997, p. 180).

However, as Kimmel (1990) identifies, this field of dreams was prompted by a “crisis of masculinity” in the late 1800s: “While providing the illusion of equality and offering organized leisure-time distraction, as well as shaping working-class masculinity as constituted by its superiority over women, baseball helped white working-class men accommodate themselves to the emergent order” (p. 64). The construction of the ballpark as a homogenized space for white, middle-class men was a theme repeated in the 1960s, when several new ballparks were built in and around “suburban white refuges” (Voigt, 1976, p. 12). Baseball’s connection to the myth of American exceptionalism, therefore, is directly linked with race. As Novak (1988) argues, baseball “is as close a liturgical enactment of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant myth as the nation has” (p. 58).

Baseball also is built around the rugged individualist hero. Warshay (1982) notes that baseball’s focus on individualism “helps to relate the longtime popularity of baseball to the individualistic ideology that has long been emphasized in American culture” (p. 233). For example, Trujillo’s (1991) study of coverage of baseball pitcher Nolan Ryan demonstrates how sport culture cultivates “hegemonic masculinity.” Among the outcomes of such representations is the celebration of the heroic Western frontier hero, to whom baseball owes much of its identity. Such depictions also marginalize competing images based on race, sexuality (Trujillo, 1991), and gender (Sabo & Jensen, 1998). Therefore, hegemonic masculinity becomes yet another vehicle through which whiteness is affirmed in everyday cultural practices. Sobchack (1997) says the dominant ideology that is reproduced depends, in part, on the “white Middle American male Casey at bat” as the narrative’s focal point (p. 181). In 1998, this figure was enacted not on a movie screen, but on the real fields of dreams in

American ballparks. In the following section, I demonstrate how sportswriting during the 1998 baseball season constructed a heroic archetype based on privileged norms of masculinity and whiteness. This coverage, while favorable to Sammy Sosa, nevertheless diminished him in comparison to Mark McGwire.

Writing Mythology into the Race

Baseball and sportswriting came of age at the same time—the late 19th century to early 20th century—and thus have a shared tradition unique to sport (Crepeau, 1980). Further, baseball writing reaffirms cultural values in subtle, pervasive ways (Trujillo & Ekdom, 1985). Matthews (1995) concludes, "The sports press is essential to the existence of a sports culture, giving meaning to the events situated within that culture" (p. 276). Sports heroes are enacted and remembered largely "by the sportswriters . . . who earn their livings by fabricating the illusion that the mythology of sports is true and real" (Powers, 1992, p. 285).

To analyze the coverage of the Race in terms of discursive frames and themes, I gathered sources primarily through the Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe database, and secondarily through my own familiarity with prominent sport publications. *Sports Illustrated* is heavily represented here, as it is the standard of print journalism in sport. Additionally, I examined the sports sections of over 20 major daily newspapers in the United States, and in several general interest magazines, such as *Time*. In this way, I sought to identify common threads among both mainstream sportswriters and journalists who focus on a wider range of human interest stories. In the process, I collected over 300 articles, roughly 50 of which yielded the content critiqued below.³

Before 1998 only two baseball players had ever hit as many as 60 home runs in a single season. Babe Ruth's record of 60, set in 1927, was eclipsed by Roger Maris, who hit 61 in 1961. Throughout the 1990s, however, Ken Griffey, Jr., and Mark McGwire, among others, hit well over 50 home runs in multiple seasons, thus heightening the anticipation that the record could be broken. In March of 1998 *Sports Illustrated* previewed the upcoming season and featured McGwire on its cover. In the article "Man on a Mission," Verducci (1998a) speculated about McGwire's chances of reaching the magic number of 61. Eisenbath (1998) assured fans that they "may now commence on McGwire's behalf the countdown to 61" (p. A1). Rosenberg (1998) quoted Atlanta Braves manager Bobby Cox, stating, "Mark McGwire has a chance to hit 70 home runs" (p. 15G).

Scholars (Warshay, 1982) and sportswriters (Shaughnessy, 1998) agree that baseball's obsession with statistics and records is unique. The result is the "most mythologized, most revered, and most American of sporting records" (Verducci, 1998d, p. 28). The attention given to the record before the season began placed McGwire's efforts into a pre-established mythological frame, one that never mentioned Sammy Sosa. Moreover, I argue that McGwire's heroism is constructed in three ways: first, through a fascination with McGwire's size and strength; second, with the positioning of McGwire as the rightful front-runner; and third, in images that marginalize Sosa through representations of racial identity.

Sizing Up Big Mac and Slammin' Sammy

Both Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa are large, strong men. However, as the cover of the 1998 year-end issue of *Sports Illustrated* demonstrated, McGwire is the much larger of the two. His commonly used nickname of "Big Mac" is a constant reminder of his presence, to say nothing of its opportunistic value to a fast food chain. During the 1998 season, sportswriters frequently focused on McGwire's physical, near-superhuman stature. These media representations located McGwire in a familiar mythological tradition, with both the literal descriptions of his physical attributes and the comparative references to other strong, heroic figures diminishing Sosa's prowess in the process.

Several writers focused on statistical measures. In the *New York Times*, McGwire was described as "6 feet 5 inches of power bulging in his massive forearms and shoulders" (C. Smith, 1998, p. C1), or "6-foot-5-inch, 250-pound Godzilla with a bat" (Anderson, 1998, p. C1). The CBS Sportsline website called him the "prototype you'd expect," at "6-foot-5, 230 pounds" (Kahn, 1998, para. 2). *Maclean's* referred to him as a "mountainous man, six feet, five inches and 245 lb" (Levin, 1998, p. 47).⁴ *Time* declared that the "girth of Mark McGwire's forearm is greater than that of a large man's neck; his biceps look as if they've been inflated with a bicycle pump" (Okrent, 1998, p. 141). *Sports Illustrated* simply summarized, "Everything about him is big" (Verducci, 1998a, p. 77).

While these descriptions evoked the image of the mythical American frontiersman, other passages directly articulated McGwire with particular figures. The *San Francisco Chronicle* called McGwire a "nearly mythical presence now, Bunyanesque in his status" (Jenkins, 1998, p. E2). Several other sources referred to McGwire as a Bunyan-figure. He was also compared to Charles Atlas (J. Smith, 1998), Casey at the bat (Jackson, 1998), and Babe Ruth. The *Chicago Sun-Times* called him baseball's "new-age Babe Ruth" (Slezak, 1998, p. 24). The *Cleveland Plain-Dealer* hailed him as this "generation's Ruth" (Shaw, 1998, p. D1). For *Sports Illustrated*, McGwire was "a red-haired Ruth—a huge thing, pitcher turned hitter" (Reilly, 1998a, p. 45).

As for Sosa, it was difficult to find references to size or strength. When such references were made, typically some qualifier was attached. The *Chicago Sun-Times*, for example, called McGwire "larger than life; while Sosa is merely big" (Slezak, 1998, p. 124). The *New York Times* referred to Sosa as "powerful and compact" (Vecsey, 1998a, p. D1), an image that reduces his stature. In 2005, Sosa was listed as six feet, zero inches, and 230 pounds ("Sammy Sosa," 2006). While this means he is shorter and lighter than McGwire, it by no means describes a small man. However, sportswriters never compared Sosa to other mythical figures of strength and physical stature. Instead, he was commonly described in terms of his heritage, an issue addressed below.

Thus, representations of McGwire simply outmuscled those of Sosa. The only threat to this image was the revelation that McGwire used the performance-enhancer androstenedione (andro), a supplement that, in 1998, was legal in Major League Baseball (Shaughnessy, 1998). At the time, however, only a minor controversy erupted

from this information. After all, andro was allowed in the game, and in the end, it created a bigger, stronger Western icon.⁵

The construction of McGwire as an archetypal hero according to his size and strength created the image of an individual carrying the weight and burden of an entire community. Again, this adventure came at a time when America seemed to need it most. *Time* magazine, for example, lamented the ubiquity of the Clinton-Lewinsky coverage (Isaacson, 1998) and used this logic to anoint McGwire as its "Hero of the Year." While some felt McGwire's home runs provided a distraction from the political chaos in Washington, D.C., others focused on his ability to assume the Christ figure. As baseball attempted to recover from the cancelled 1994 World Series, many argued that McGwire's heroics saved the game (Keown, 1998a). The *Chicago Sun-Times* (Mariotti, 1998) described McGwire as "part of America, capable of lifting not only the Cardinals on his back, but an entire baseball season" (p. 104). Given baseball's need for redemption, what McGwire—as depicted through the print media—allowed fans to accomplish was a spiritual transformation in which the game was restored to its rightful place in American culture. Aden (1995) and Sobchack (1997) argue that, when faced with uncertainty about the present or future, audiences look to nostalgia. "This nostalgia for a 'pure' American identity is satisfied by sports—and, most particularly, by baseball" (Sobchack, 1997, p. 179). VandeBerg (1998) identifies this nostalgic turn as a phenomenon of the late 1990s, thus giving greater potency to the drama of the Race. Redemption through McGwire allowed audiences to enact a nostalgic reflection that situated the baseball season within an idealized American mythology.

Only an individual of enormous physical prowess could lift an entire sport and community on his shoulders in this way. All of these descriptions privileged McGwire in this drama, and reinforced the Western masculine ideals of heroism. For sportswriters, as a result, even a large, strong man like Sosa failed to embody archetypal heroic standards. Ideologically, the view of McGwire in mythical terms reinforced an American need to celebrate size and strength, and to do so at the expense of competing images.

Prophesizing the Hero's Return

Because sportswriters framed the story of McGwire's season as early as spring training, he was situated as the pre-determined front-runner once the Race actually ensued. McGuire (1977) argues that myths are narrated by an "oracular persona" (p. 2). Our modern oracle is the mass media, in this case prophesizing the deeds of a baseball hero and his ritual return to home (plate). Throughout the season sportswriters consistently portrayed Sosa as an intruder in the Race and dismissed him as a sidekick or runner-up.⁶ As I demonstrate below, some of the stories overtly identified Sosa's second-rate status, while others insinuated that Sosa intentionally positioned himself to hide in McGwire's considerable shadow.

The use of public opinion polls helped establish McGwire's preferred status. The *San Francisco Chronicle* declared "everybody is rooting for McGwire," and quoted, as

others did, a *USA Today* poll in which McGwire received 79 percent of the votes, and Sosa 16 percent, when fans were asked who they wanted to break Maris's record (Keown, 1998a, p. B1). The *Boston Globe* stated that Sosa was "running no. 2 in baseball's popularity contest" (Whiteside, 1998, p. C1). The *New York Times* referred to Sosa as "the underdog having a career year," as opposed to McGwire who was performing as predicted (Dedman, 1998, p. 3). *Maclean's* labeled Sosa an "upstart," implying that he was an unexpected player in the drama (Levin, 1998, p. 47). *Sports Illustrated's* Rick Reilly (1998c) claimed "Sosa has been Sammy Sequel all the way" (p. 102). Many others relegated Sosa to the status of sidekick, either by directly using the term or by associating him with sidekick figures such as Ed McMahan, Barney Rubble, or even Al Gore (Bayless, 1998; Moore, 1998). In *Sports Illustrated*, Sosa had "second-fiddled" for McGwire all season (G. Smith, 1998, p. 50). Presumably, that meant it should stay that way.

Sportswriters also suggested that Sosa had helped create his underdog status. "What a wise and beautiful job Sosa has done in positioning himself as the 'happy-to-be-here' guy," commented the *Chicago Tribune* (Bayless, 1998, p. 1). The *San Francisco Examiner* suggested that "Sosa set himself up" in the sidekick role (Knapp, 1998, p. C1). *People Weekly's* comment that Sosa "has played slyly funny second banana" also implied an intentional effort (Jerome, 1998, p. 115). *Sports Illustrated* stated that "Sosa has prospered while drafting behind McGwire's huge popularity and Most-Likely-to-Succeed status" (Verducci, 1998c, p. 21). Many writers pointed to Sosa's self-deprecating comments about McGwire being "the Man" (Bayless, 1998; Vecsey, 1998a; Whiteside, 1998). There can be little question that Sosa consciously used the media to his advantage in 1998. As a dark-skinned, Dominican-born player, he must have known that to interfere with McGwire's celebrity would do him more harm than good. Yet he never said anything to that effect.

Other writers reaffirmed McGwire's status by excluding Sosa. In his review of the 1998 season, Verducci (1998e) wrote of the "tale of Mark McGwire and the great home run race of 1998" (p. 38). Another *Sports Illustrated* writer (Reilly, 1998b) recalled, "I've never seen anything like Mark McGwire chasing Roger Maris' home run record" (p. 94). The *New York Times* declared, "Babe Ruth invented the home run—now Mark McGwire has refined it" (Vecsey, 1998b, p. D1). *Sports Illustrated* named McGwire and Sosa as their "Sportsmen of the Year," but *Time* settled for just McGwire in selecting its "Hero of the Year."

Race in the Race

As noted earlier, the frontier hero is typically represented as masculine and white. Baseball's expansion and "golden era" in the early to mid-20th century often is romanticized, despite the exclusion of black or Latin players (Aden, 1995). This has created a dynamic in the mythology of America and the "American game" that continues to the present. Because of a deep connection to frontier imagery—in other words, an era that pre-dates baseball's integration—black and Latin baseball players have struggled to find a role within that mythology. The racial dimension of the Race

can be seen in direct references to heritage, and in characterizations based on Latin and black stereotypes.

At the start of the 1998 season Sosa was largely unknown outside the Chicago area; many of those who did recognize his name thought of him as a selfish braggart (Stein, 1998). To an extent, then, it made sense that Sosa needed to be introduced to a wider audience. In coverage of Sosa, the focus often was on his heritage. Unquestionably Sosa's humble background in the Dominican Republic was a compelling part of the story, but this frequently was linked to Sosa merely in contrast to McGwire's physical stature. After describing McGwire in terms of size—a "mastodon"—the *Boston Globe* referred to Sosa as "a relatively unknown slugger from the Dominican Republic" (Shaughnessy, 1998, P. A1). The *Washington Post* compared McGwire to "Popeye" and called Sosa "the self-deprecating Dominican" (Fisher & Jeter, 1998, p. A1). In the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sosa was described as "a Dominican who rose from poverty" (Keown, 1998b, p. E1).

The consistent references to Sosa as Dominican defined him explicitly in terms of his heritage, reinforcing the distinction between him and the white American, McGwire. Moreover, they cemented Sosa's "just happy to be here" persona, as they featured a familiar narrative of an immigrant finding success in America. In this respect, media coverage defaulted to the traditional narrative of baseball's ability to assimilate immigrants into the American "melting pot" (Elias, 2001). Thus, while Mark McGwire was celebrated as an exceptional American, Sammy Sosa became a vehicle for reaffirming American exceptionalism.

Sportswriters (Boswell, 1998) and scholars (Regalado, 1998) have credited baseball's current "renaissance" to the influx of Latin players. While often viewed as exemplars of the American dream, Latin players have largely fought stereotypes and marginalization. Such stereotypes find Latin players depicted as "selfish" (Verducci, 1998b), "showboats" and "hot dogs" (Warshay, 1982), or "hot-tempered" (Regalado, 1998). Perhaps no player better illustrates the depiction of Latin players than Roberto Clemente, the player whom Sosa honored by wearing the number 21. Clemente is widely hailed as the finest player ever to have come from Latin America, yet he was often misunderstood as unintelligent or quick-tempered. In an effort to anglicize him for mainstream audience, for example, baseball card manufacturer Topps even referred to him as "Bob" on many of his cards in the 1960s (Markusen, 2002).

Such overt offenses are now rare. However, a more subtle form of racism persists when Latinos are characterized in comic terms, as near-cartoon characters who allow mainstream audiences to laugh at racial stereotypes instead of confronting them. Some sportswriters identified this trait with Sosa, specifically in his enactment of the 1970s "Saturday Night Live" character Chico Escuela, who happily intoned, "Beisbol been berry, berry good to me" (Slezak, 1998). Sosa himself freely used the phrase (Gammons, 1998), which allowed for greater perpetuation of the stereotype. It is important to note that Sosa's skin color is dark enough for him also to be characterized through images that have long affected African Americans in U.S. culture. Consequently, representations of Sosa often evoked the legacy of black

stereotypes, including that of the “happy coon” (Jackson, 2006). During the Race, sportswriters frequently reduced Sosa to comic relief. The *New York Post*: “The game was doing its best to turn Sammy Sosa into Ricky Ricardo. Isn’t it cute the way he merrily mangles the English language?” (Matthews, 1998, p. 94). While the comic image endeared Sosa to many, cynicism crept into some accounts of the Race. *Sports Illustrated*’s Steven Rushin (1998), for example, referred to Sosa’s “lounge act” (p. 35), while fellow writer Rick Reilly (1998c) labeled it his “just-happy-to-be-in-America shtick” (p. 102).

As the sports press deployed norms of whiteness in its coverage of the Race, the representations of size, front-runner status, and race converged. Sosa became McGwire’s “home-run-race rival . . . comedy-team partner, soul-mate, and adopted little brother” (Verducci, 1998d, p. 31). As the season progressed, the image became complete: McGwire as the archetypal American hero, his racial identity never mentioned, the fact of his whiteness taken for granted; and Sosa as the grateful, dark-skinned buddy just happy to be along for the ride.

Coming to Terms with the Race

Coverage of the “Great Home Run Race” of 1998 evoked a mythological enactment of American heroism. In particular, McGwire was privileged rhetorically through sportswriters’ characterizations of his size and strength, emphasis on his front-runner status, and reinforcements of racial stereotypes. Audiences were invited to view McGwire as an exemplar of American character and to view Sosa as the latest demonstration of the desire to be an American in the first place. That is, in addition to popular media such as television and film, sportswriting participates in the unspoken privileging of whiteness.

Baseball has long been the “American game,” and the Race uniquely reflected its mythology. Reilly (1998b) claimed, “The home run race was as American as a Corvette” (p. 94). Reilly and a host of sportswriters reinforced this American ideology in their representations during the 1998 season. But if Reilly is correct, what are we to make of the values embedded in such an ideology? As Grant (1998) argues, sport does not offer a mere escape from reality, but rather it is an immersion in the values and practices from which we attempt to escape. More specifically, the “prominence of media sport today not only [reflects] the values of the wider society,” but might promote “some of the more questionable ones” (p. 57). In other words, the rhetorical construction of McGwire in the sports press as an archetypal hero is not innocent. It marginalized competing visions that might oppose values of individualism or exceptionalism, especially if those competing images created a racial opposition. Any oppositional reading of the Race found only minimal traction. In the long run, the events of 1998 served to perpetuate stereotypes of and biases against Latin ballplayers. Latinos in baseball are then further marginalized when they attempt to make the leap to managerial or executive positions (Regalado, 1998). It is an extension of what Edwards (1985) calls a “plantation system,” in which minority athletes are promoted

or exploited for the benefit of white ownership interests, and then ignored when their playing days have ended.

Unfortunately, the dominant constructions of whiteness in baseball did not end in 1998. When Barry Bonds surpassed McGwire's 70 home runs by hitting 73 in 2001, he received little of the fanfare or adulation that greeted McGwire. To be sure, the cool reception had much to do with a population still in shock from the September 11 terrorist attacks. Moreover, writers were unlikely to invest as much energy in Bonds' achievement since it followed so closely on the heels of McGwire's. In addition, Bonds has a well-established reputation for being arrogant, selfish, and surly. As a prominent African American athlete, Bonds occupies an ambivalent space in the American sporting landscape. And unlike athletes like Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, he has not transcended traditional racial categories through his public persona (nor does he claim to want to do this).⁷ While the scope of this essay prevents a comparison of McGwire and Bonds, such an analysis would probably reinforce the problematic dimensions of race on display in 1998.

In 2003, Sammy Sosa embarrassed himself by using a corked bat, which was discovered when it splintered apart in an at-bat against the Tampa Bay Devil Rays.⁸ When the media reacted swiftly and harshly, some found racism at work below the surface. Former player Jose Canseco told ESPN:

The way [the media] is portraying him because he's a Latin, black athlete is completely wrong. I guarantee you if this were Mark McGwire or Cal Ripken, Jr., a so-called "protected athlete," an "All-American" name, this would have never happened." (quoted in Kennedy & Bechtel, 2003, p. 23)

Meanwhile, others noted the contrast to McGwire's andro mistake. As Chuck Finder (2003) wrote, "When andro was found in Mark McGwire's locker that 1998 Summer of Swat, there was nowhere near the outrage and bile as with Sosa" (p. C2). As if to prove that Sosa can still be reduced to a stereotypical punch-line, printed t-shirts referred to the corked bat incident by invoking Ricky Ricardo's familiar refrain: "Oh Sammy . . . Yoos got some' splaining to do!" (Kennedy & Bechtel, 2003, p. 23). While most sportswriters elided the question of race, Wade (2003) offered: "The baseball landscape . . . is ever taking on more color. And the media routinely, if mostly innocently and ignorantly, continue to cast players in stereotypical roles based on race" (p. C1). While I do not suggest that Sosa should not have been held accountable for cheating, I regret that critics so easily turned to racial caricatures.

Juffer (2002) argues that Sosa's immense popularity and commitment to America—as demonstrated by his overt patriotism following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks—constitute a rearticulation of baseball mythology. "Baseball still tells a powerful story about the greatness of America, but America is now inclusive, indeed more representative of all of the Americas" (p. 338). To the extent that more African Americans, Latinos, and Asians are participating in Major League Baseball than ever before, this certainly is the case. However, as these players remain clearly marked by race, there are pervasive reminders that the sports media cultivates and communicates hegemonic relationships based on identity. Andrews (2000) notes,

“Despite the ever-increasing presence of African American, Hispanic, and Latino players within the game, baseball continues to be a touchstone of white (sporting) culture” (p. 192). Responses to McGwire’s Congressional testimony made clear that whiteness retained its privileged position in the sports press. Only by revisiting and critiquing the rhetorical constructions of race, especially in the ever-present sports media, can we hope to move beyond the currently limited conceptions of racial inclusion and representation.

Notes

- [1] Following convention in sociology and cultural studies of sport, I will use the term “sport” to refer to the institutionalized relationship between games, athletes, fans, and media. As Andrews (2006) notes, this usage provides “a necessarily malleable collective noun suggesting the diversity and complexity of what are temporally and spatially contingent expressions of physical culture” (p. 1). I will use “sports” in reference to specific institutional components of sport (i.e., “sports media,” etc.).
- [2] Madden did not anoint Barry Bonds, who hit 73 home runs in 2001, as the legitimate record holder because, in Madden’s estimation, Bonds, too, is guilty. Madden refers to Bonds as a “steroids cheat” (2005, p. 96).
- [3] I should note that this analysis focuses on mainstream journalism in the United States. The label “mainstream” reflects an orientation that is always already positioned to privilege common cultural norms. A different and equally productive study might assess the coverage of the Race from alternative perspectives, especially in Spanish-speaking publications.
- [4] Reports of McGwire’s weight varied. He was always reported at six feet, five inches, however.
- [5] Had McGwire used an illegal substance, it could have disrupted the myth by violating the American sport ideal of “fair play,” a value dating back to Puritan America (Crepeau, 1980). The recent attention given to the issue of performance-enhancing drugs in baseball calls into question the “authenticity” of the Race. While space prevents a more extended treatment of this, it should be noted that McGwire’s presumed guilt in the wake of the 2005 Congressional hearings certainly complicates the heroic myth and intensifies the disappointment he now provokes. This disappointment was illustrated most concretely when only 23.5% of the Baseball Writers Association of America membership voted for McGwire on their 2007 Hall of Fame ballots, leaving him far short of the 75% needed for election (Antonen, 2007).
- [6] Many of these reports do, in fact, praise Sosa’s efforts and enthusiasm, but rarely take seriously his chances to best McGwire.
- [7] This should not be read as an unreflective endorsement of Jordan’s or Woods’ racial politics. As others have demonstrated, both of these enormously successful athletes have frequently enhanced their success by minimizing their racial identities (Andrews, 2000; Houck, 2006).
- [8] “Corking” a bat refers to the process of drilling an opening at the top of the barrel of the bat and filling it with cork. This is desirable because it potentially increases bat speed and produces more spring when the bat makes contact with the ball.

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