

At the Sunday social cricket match, the other team's captain opens the bowling with an action like a vandalised Hills Hoist. He's a well-known Australian artist, beginning to round and shine in a fiftieth way, but he's still as cocky on the pitch as a man half his age. All through the innings he keeps moving everyone around, even the ring-in who plays in the Sheffield Shield. Later, when his turn comes to bat, the artist is out LBW for a duck and delivers a war dance over the call that would have done McEnroe proud. This man makes good paintings, but on the playing field he's just another bloody fool.

I was reading an essay the other day which reminded me of that artist. The essayist enthused: "Winning has, I imagine, the same meaning for elderly jocks as reaching the top of the mountain has for the mountain climber." He reckoned to do well in a game proved his "qualities of character." A footnote said he dropped dead of a heart attack aged 60. Playing volleyball.

The idea that athletes should be our role models and that sport builds character is a sad comment on who and what we aspire to be. Most of us secretly know the truth: sport often builds victims of triviality. People who worship victory at any cost. People who lie, cheat and cripple the other guy to win. People who pump themselves up with drugs to make them more violent. People who stage ridiculous temper tantrums to show they have no idea of what's important in the world. People who are unable to undertake any occupation that doesn't involve physical collision or the propulsion of a missile. People who are shallow enough to sell their dignity to greedy bastards who manipulate them to line their own pockets.

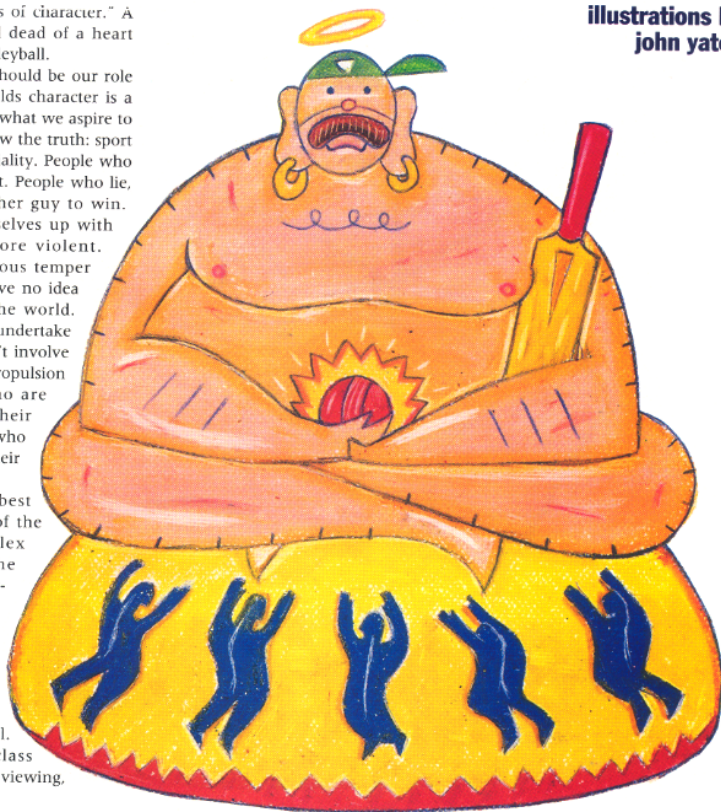
And yet, sport at its best gives us the fascination of the human form in complex motion and shows us the inspiring spirit that empowers it. Those who deny this deny the timeless ingenuity of sport itself: they deny history.

Like many, I love watching a contest showcasing a high level of skill. But because these top-class conflicts make compelling viewing,

SURE, WE CAN ADMIRE AND RESPECT THEM. BUT ARE SPORTS STARS THE BEST WE CAN DO FOR MODERN-DAY ICONS?

HEROES ARE HARD TO REFINES

by **steve bunk**
illustrations by **john yates**



a lot of money can be made from them, which invites corruption. The worst of this corruption is moral, and it goes from the big scale all the way down to guys like the artist/cricketer who takes his doddering pitch exertions so seriously. His self-image as a classy athlete is corrupt, but nobody says, "Go home, and don't come back until you grow up." We don't because we respect his reputation in work: his identity as a man. We understand his need. And that's what the idolising of sports stars is really about – the dream of fame and wealth.

This is the key to understanding the male identity. The artist is a high achiever at work, and he can't separate that from play. Our "must win" cultural brainwash is the cause of this obsession

to identify strongly with professional athletes so that we begin to act like the ruthless, self-centred brats they too often are.

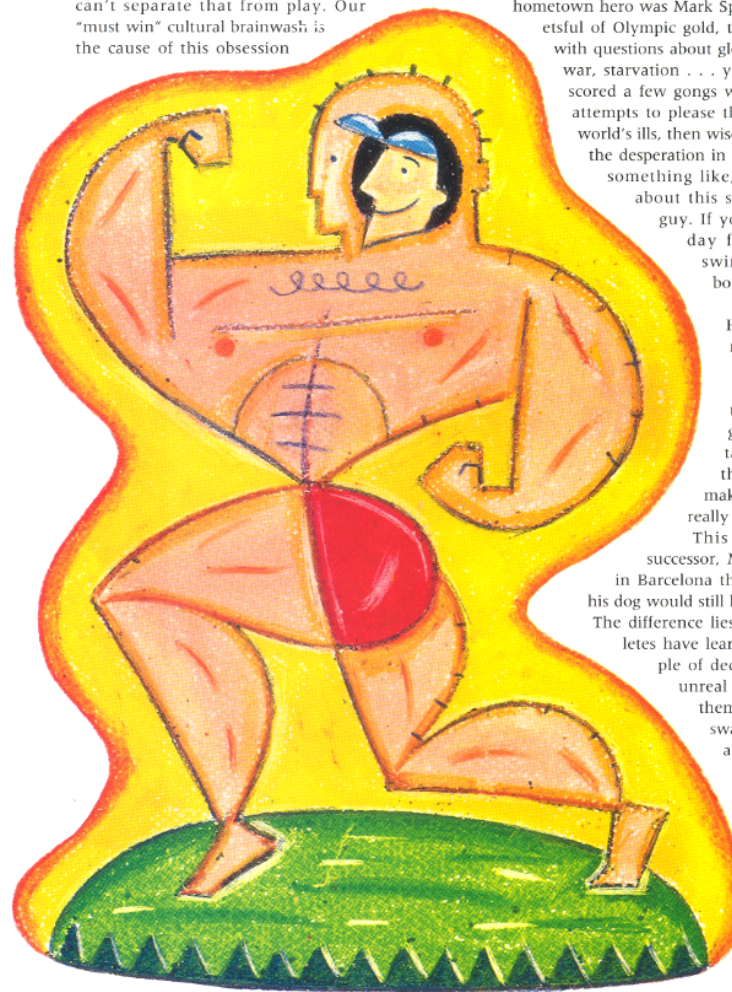
One of my early lessons in this thinking was gained by looking at Mr Smith, a coach at my high school. Mr Smith was famous for chewing on a towel during games, slobbering and moaning into it, eyes tragic as war under a military haircut. The man was a dribbling neurosis in search of an excuse. I used to gaze at him and think, "Here's a guy who believes winning a school game is everything – and we're supposed to take him seriously."

This was in Sacramento, California, where our hometown hero was Mark Spitz. After he won pocketful of Olympic gold, the media besieged him with questions about global politics, economics, war, starvation . . . you name it. Poor Mark scored a few gongs with his unsophisticated attempts to please the press by solving the world's ills, then wisely gave up. I remember the desperation in his words when he said something like, "Look, I don't know about this stuff. I'm just a boring guy. If you spent eight hours a day for most of your life swimming laps, you'd be boring, too."

Later, Spitz moved to Honolulu and became a millionaire from real estate investments. Then he said: "I used to think winning Olympic gold medals was important, but you can't eat them. Now I know that making money is where it's really at."

This is a far cry from his successor, Matt Biondi, who noted in Barcelona that if he didn't do well, his dog would still lick him in the morning. The difference lies in how some top athletes have learned, over the past couple of decades, to cope with the unreal adulation heaped upon them by remembering not to swallow the hysteria whole and choke on it. The same applies in all entertainment fields. Witness, for example, the evolution of rock stars from the drug fatalities of the Sixties to the corporate smoothies of the Nineties.

Unfortunately, we the admirers





haven't become as sophisticated. In fact, the situation for fans seems to be getting worse as the grip on our imaginations by the mass media becomes stronger. The fame, youth, strength, wealth, virility we crave are all embodied by the world champ, the gold medalist, or the blokes selling beer and batteries on the tube. So we admire them, but are athletes the best we can do for modern heroes? Is being able to kick a ball what we want most out of life?

This is what I call the "vulgarity factor" – part of the mass marketing hype that controls all entertainment. The goal is to reach the lowest common denominator by reducing everything to vulgarity. By making vulgarity the benchmark, it is, by definition, no longer vulgar. Sure, kicking a ball can be stirring stuff, but is this a hallmark of great character? I think not. It's media hype, and we've swallowed it because we'd like to be rich and famous, too.

The psychological explanation for this has to do with primal urges. "The game awakens in us some dormant aspect of our personality that the dullness of normal everyday life tends to gloss over," notes US sports psychologist Thomas Tutko. "It excites our dominant personality features."

Let my busted fingers and trick knee bear witness. I got them playing co-ed basketball in Sydney against a team that had rugby players in it who didn't like the fact they were losing. We only got through most of those games because the women kept taking the ball off court and wouldn't give it back until the men reset their thumbs and shook hands. In sport, the vaunted male aggressive instinct is not merely admired, it's used as a

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can't fail
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way to win illegitimately – if you can't do it through talent.

Sports heroes can't fail even when they lose, for at the bottom of every fan's heart is the subconscious belief that the players win or lose *because* of us. They are us, and more important, we are them. That's why we aren't outraged by some of the horrific stuff reported in the tribunals and judiciaries, for example. We already saw it on TV and went "arrgh" in sympathy, as if it were us.

What character. What heroism.

It's time we stopped identifying with professional athletes and stopped pining after their gloss. Only a vulgar society fashions a cult of personality around sports stars, making them its ultimate heroes – and our future could suffer for it.

Let's continue to enjoy athletic performances as those of gifted entertainers, but realise that these aren't necessarily the sorts of people every kid should aim to become.

The best sports – recreational or professional – will always deserve our attention, for indeed it's possible to find in them the essence of humankind at its best. But nowadays, we under-estimate too many of the other avenues to such traits as discipline, persistence and courage that don't follow the spotlight, or the lane of a swimming pool. •

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