

# Yearning for Yesteryear: Cal Ripken, Jr., The Streak, And the Politics of Nostalgia

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In early September 1995, when Cal Ripken, Jr., of the Baltimore Orioles played in his 2,131st consecutive baseball game to break Lou Gehrig's 56-year-old record, most of the sports world paid its respects and cheered. Presumably due to his remarkable endurance, the media catapulted Ripken—then 35 years old, a veteran of thirteen major league seasons, and a perennial all-star short-stop—into the national limelight and hailed him as an exemplar of all that was right, and frequently conspicuously absent, in professional sports. He was often portrayed as a “throwback” ballplayer who evoked an earlier era of baseball history. Because Ripken bested a record few thought was approachable, observers described him as a synonym for durability and a symbol of reliability. The media represented Ripken as self-reliant, hard working, responsible, stoic, humble, and family-oriented. It heralded him as someone who could symbolically revitalize sports, and by extension the nation.

*Sports Illustrated* offered a particularly vivid example of this cultural narrative by memorializing the occasion of Ripken's 2,131st consecutive game with a cover representing Ripken as a Norman Rockwell figure. Critic Carol J. Pierman suggests that the message of this image is: “Down on one knee, bat on his shoulder, the Rockwellian Cal who waits his turn on deck is emblematic of the small-town hero of an earlier generation, a man who must embody the qualities of life we think we have lost.”<sup>1</sup>

This essay analyzes how the media constructed Ripken and the streak. More specifically, we interrogate how Ripken and the streak elicited historical parallels and analogies, and how they provided the media with opportunities to revitalize interest in Major League Baseball by constructing a nostalgic and culturally conservative vision of the past. Put differently, we examine how the media transformed an event into a narrative, one that summoned a highly romanticized version of history and reinforced dominant ideologies of masculinity, race, and class. Although Ripken is an impressive athlete—he was the American League’s (AL) Rookie of the Year in 1982, the AL’s Most Valuable Player twice (1983 and 1991), has been on seventeen straight all-star teams, and has set numerous major league records for his power hitting and fielding—we are not interested in his accomplishments, *per se*.<sup>2</sup> Rather, we link the Ripken phenomenon to wider cultural, historical, and political concerns.

By pursuing interconnected themes (such as the politics of representation and nostalgia, and the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity), we describe the media’s role in promoting the interests of major league baseball through the construction of Ripken’s old-fashioned masculine persona. Of course, the mutually beneficial entanglement between professional sport and the media has a long history dating back to the formation of professional baseball itself. Yet by the beginning of Ripken’s baseball career in the early 1980s, professional sport leagues, including major league baseball, were increasingly dependent upon media exposure, rights fees, and advertising revenues for their survival and expansion. Communication studies scholar Sut Jhally suggests that the association among professional sport industries, the media, advertisers, and individual athletes is a mutually beneficial economic relationship known as the sport/media complex.<sup>3</sup> Newspapers and radio and television networks use sport to fill print space and air time while delivering presumably male audiences to advertisers. Mark S. Rosentraub puts it bluntly when he describes sports as the media’s “bread and butter.” Rosentraub correctly notes that a “never-ending and mutually reinforcing network or linkage exists between sports and the media.”<sup>4</sup> This symbiotic relationship is an emotionally powerful union because most Americans experience sport as spectators: the cultural experience of sport is largely a mediated one. Within this relationship, media workers often serve as “the definers of the subculture of sport, the interpreters of its meaning,” argues sociologist George Sage.<sup>5</sup>

To illuminate the larger cultural, historical, and ideological implications of the ways in which the media represented the streak, we offer a critical reading of Ripken as a popular icon at a particular moment, *fin de siècle* America.<sup>6</sup> In an era marked by backlash sentiments, nostalgic images such as those connected to Ripken and the streak suggested a return to an era prior to the civil unrest and progressive gains made by the political and cultural movements of late twentieth-century America, including those espousing civil rights for people of color and women. Nostalgic constructions of the past obscure the conflict, violence, and intolerance that have existed throughout U.S. history and continue into the

present. While often contradictory, the nostalgic visions linked to Ripken and the streak represented an opportunity to reassert the superiority of a past in which rigid gender role conformity and structured racial segregation were locked firmly in place. Ultimately, then, our essay critiques and contextualizes media representations of Ripken; it argues that they were responses to contemporary cultural anxieties, and that they buttressed the interests of major league baseball and the political status quo. In short, we use Ripken and the streak to engage the politics of nostalgia, and to illustrate how social context contributes to meaning.

## Pre-Game Warm-Ups

### *Understanding Nostalgia*

Before we consider the cultural meaning of Cal Ripken's public persona and how representations of the streak evoked a particular version of the past, it is important to outline a few of the presuppositions at work in this essay. First, we acknowledge that there is a politics of representation; that is, regardless of anyone's intentions, the ways in which narrators portray people and events inevitably have ideological subtexts and political and cultural implications. The process of transforming an event into a narrative necessarily requires choices rife with political meanings: on a relatively basic level, for instance, someone must decide who and what to include and exclude. This is not to suggest that all is merely rhetoric or that the past is irretrievably lost (though clearly some pasts are) or that we are advocating some form of radical relativism. Rather, we believe that in the struggle for cultural hegemony, certain images, ideas, and practices appear in media discourses as natural, authentic or inevitable and that this tends to reinforce dominant social relations. Therefore, the narratives that construct social reality need to be read critically *as narratives*, created and written by and for people at specific socio-historical moments.<sup>7</sup>

We also assert that there is a politics of nostalgia. Used here, nostalgia refers to a kind of temporal homesickness, a bittersweet, sentimental way of thinking about or yearning for the past. It is a cultural sensibility, perhaps even a state of consciousness, both private and, more significantly, collective.<sup>8</sup> A variety of critics and historians have considered the nature of nostalgia—a subject which seems to be increasingly recognized by scholars and the media as an influential cultural force—and have informed our understanding of it.<sup>9</sup> Historian and geographer David Lowenthal argues that nostalgia is the current “catchword for looking back,” and that it is a way of remembering with the pain removed.<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, historian Michael Kammen writes, “nostalgia, with its wistful memories, is essentially history without guilt.”<sup>11</sup> Put differently, the late cultural critic Christopher Lasch belittled nostalgia as “the abdication of memory,” and suggested that it was a way of looking at the “past cut off from the present rather than entwined with it.”<sup>12</sup> Cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson further suggests that nostalgia “is colored memory. It is romantic remembering. It recreates as much as it reveals.”<sup>13</sup>

But more so than anyone, sociologist Fred Davis has advanced our understanding of nostalgia. In *Yearning For Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (1979), which remains the best work on this subject, Davis contends that nostalgia's sources always "reside in the present, regardless of how much the ensuing nostalgic experience may draw its sustenance from our memory of the past"<sup>14</sup> and that "nostalgia tells us more about present moods than about past realities."<sup>15</sup> In this way, Davis continues, nostalgia "occurs in the context of present fears, discontents, anxieties, or uncertainties, even though they may not be in the forefront of awareness," and that it often becomes a way of "holding onto and reaffirming identities which" have "been badly bruised by the turmoil of the times."<sup>16</sup> Often fueled by an underdeveloped sense of history or the fallacy of the innocent past, nostalgia is sometimes contradictory. And although nostalgia has (always?) existed in America, as in many societies, we think that its pull was particularly powerful in America during the 1980s and 1990s, in large part a consequence of demographic, social, economic, and technological transformations that many Americans experienced.<sup>17</sup>

### *Cultural Contexts*

When Cal Ripken, Jr.'s, consecutive-game streak began in 1982, political and cultural conservatives, espousing what they characterized as "traditional" values, had already exerted a powerful—some would argue, dominant—voice in American culture. It was a powerful political and cultural backlash against 1960s- and 1970s-style liberal activism and activists, most notably women and people of color. "The Reagan revolution gave political voice to the mood of reaction and backlash that had gripped middle America in the troubled 1970s," according to historian Paul Boyer. "The individualistic, acquisitive, and socially conservative outlook that Reagan personified influenced America culture no less than American politics."<sup>18</sup> While always challenged and resisted, the Reagan-Bush and Clinton years were a time of zealous patriotism, corporate conspicuous consumption, and scapegoating. New Right initiatives (such as the drive for a constitutional amendment requiring school prayer, the deregulation of big business, an obsession with military spending, and the dismantling of the welfare state) sought to restore a mythic postWorld War II golden age. In the process, some conservatives (and liberals) encouraged nostalgia for a simpler, more innocent time—one when families were seemingly stable and self-reliant, fathers knew best, married women were happy homemakers, class and racial divisions were out of sight and mind, and the United States dominated the world economy. These neoconservative actions and ideals were not only regressive but were also fraught with contradictions and ironies.

Calling for a return to a mythic past of communal harmony and morality, conservatives encouraged policies that further devastated communities and social formations through deregulation, the movement of capital, corporate downsizing, and rollbacks in public spending.<sup>19</sup> The era also witnessed a rapidly

globalizing economy, the movement toward an information, service-sector economy, and the beginning of a demographic shift which will (reportedly) eventually make white Americans a numerical minority by the year 2050.<sup>20</sup> These shifts were informed by and intertwined with complex racial, gender, and class dynamics. Deindustrialization resulted in the quest for cheaper labor via the transfer of many well-paying manufacturing jobs from the United States to recently industrializing, economically impoverished countries where labor costs are low. Concurrent assaults by big business on union organizing and the minimum wage were deployed as inevitable and necessary to keep the United States competitive in the global economy. Immigration hysteria encouraged a largely white obsession with the ways in which illegal immigrants allegedly put a strain on public social services and dominate the service sector of the economy.<sup>21</sup> Media representations of Ripken as a traditional masculine hero and a relic from a simpler time reflected and contributed to this conservative world view.

It is important to mention that both American masculinity and major league baseball—which, are intricately bound, although that link is infrequently noted—suffered crises during this period. As many social critics and historians have noted, American masculinity was in crisis for much of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> In the late 1960s and 1970s, however, a faltering, de-industrializing economy produced economic insecurity in millions of men. In particular, the status of middle- and working-class men as breadwinners became more tenuous as men's median weekly earnings in the 1990s fell below levels in the 1970s.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Second Wave feminism and critiques of patriarchy challenged male hegemony.<sup>24</sup> As a result, many American men experienced acute anxiety about their gender identity and the privileges historically associated with masculinity. With continuous challenges to male economic and cultural power and privilege, many men were (and remain) uncertain and anxious about what it meant to be a man.

Similar to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when various social commentators decried the feminization of young men and society itself, countless coaches and commentators during the late twentieth century lauded sport as a character building, healthy, and masculine activity. According to sociologist Michael A. Messner, elite sport serves as a site linking men to a more patriarchal past. Via the glorified mass media spectacles of sport, men, regardless of their backgrounds, are encouraged to identify masculine physicality with presumed male cultural and social supremacy. Thus Messner writes, “organized sports have come to serve as a primary institutional means for bolstering a challenged and faltering ideology of male superiority in the 20th century.”<sup>25</sup> By extension players like Cal Ripken, Jr., a quietly confident man with a strong work ethic, served as idealized symbols of what it meant to be a man.

While Ripken played his way to 2,131 games, major league baseball was probably most notable for its labor disputes, strikes, threats of strikes, owner collusion scandals, to say nothing of numerous revelations of substance abuse and the lifetime suspension of major league baseball's all-time hit leader Pete

Rose for betting on baseball and damaging the integrity of the game.<sup>26</sup> Baseball, however, was resilient. Public relations and image problems notwithstanding, major league baseball remained popular, in part to its historic linkages to heroic masculinity. In 1980, a record 43 million people attended major league baseball games, income from baseball-television contracts accounted for a record 30 percent of the game's \$500 million revenue, and television ratings for the World Series had never been higher. During the 1980s and the early 1990s, all of these leading indicators continued to rise. Reflecting on the period, historian Charles C. Alexander observes in *Our Game: An American Baseball History* (1991) that "profits, salaries, attendance, and general excitement over things baseball would be greater than ever, but it would be an unprecedentedly strife-filled period."<sup>27</sup>

One of the ways major league baseball was able, despite its problems, to maintain its hold on the U.S. public was through the use of nostalgia. Of course, baseball has been embedded in nostalgic discourses since the nineteenth century. As cultural critic Gerald Early puts it, baseball is commonly perceived to be "a 'pastoral' sport of innocence and triumphalism in the American mind, a sport of epic romanticism, a sport whose golden age is always associated with childhood."<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, John Bloom argues in *House of Cards: Baseball Card Collecting and Popular Culture* (1997) that the "decade of the 1980s might be seen as a watershed for baseball nostalgia."<sup>29</sup> Bloom contends that contemporary images of baseball's past provided a social and psychological retreat for those middle-class male "baby boomers" searching for more authoritarian and presumably "authentic" images of (white) masculinity grounded in the patriarchal past. Baseball nostalgia took many forms in the 1980s and early 1990s, from novels like W. P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe* (1982) and Eric Rolfe Greenberg's *The Celebrant* (1983), to films like Barry Levinson's *The Natural* (1984) and Phil Alden Robinson's *Field of Dreams* (1989), to ballparks like Oriole Park at Camden Yards in Baltimore (which was completed in 1992) and Jacobs Field in Cleveland (which opened in 1994).

Nostalgic images associated with baseball held particular sway after the 1994-95 Major League Baseball strike—which lasted 232 days and caused the cancellation of 921 regular-season games, not counting the World Series and other postseason games.<sup>30</sup> It was by far the longest, most bitterly contested, and costliest work stoppage in sports history. For much of the public, the work stoppage was insignificant. To many people, however, the strike mattered a great deal. "The players and owners can both go to hell," said one former baseball fan. "I'll find other outlets for my time and money."<sup>31</sup> Others were less concise and more melodramatic. "This most recent stalemate between players and owners suddenly feels as grim and tragic as Verdun—irrational as that seems," wrote journalist Bill Gallo, two months before the strike ended.<sup>32</sup> "Never again will baseball occupy the cherished place in the American imagination that it once held. Never again will we believe. No matter what the loudmouths in Washington proclaim, or how the owners backpedal, or what concessions the players

now make, the essential joy of the game is gone.” Admittedly hyperbolic, Gallo nonetheless articulated the way numerous baseball fans felt about the labor dispute. Public opinion surveys, lagging ticket sales, and depressed television ratings—not to mention a few acts of protest and civil disobedience—indicated that many fans were deeply resentful about the ways in which they were treated by the owners and the players, and that they were wary of re-investing—financially and emotionally—in the game.<sup>33</sup> The mythic appeal of baseball as pastoral national pastime seemed to be shattered once and for all.

The cancellation of the World Series was another significant source of fan discontent. “For a lot of people,” said Bill Giles, the owner of the Philadelphia Phillies, “taking away the World Series was like taking away the American flag.”<sup>34</sup> A showcase of American masculinity, the World Series has come to symbolize qualities which baseball and the nation purportedly embody: competition, excellence, fair play, and hard work—in short, democracy and meritocracy. It is an annual event that encourages men to pass along these values to their own children, especially their sons. Many Americans simply found it inconceivable that the owners and the players would tamper with and despoil baseball’s most revered event and ritual of masculinity, but they did. At the beginning of the 1995 strike-shortened season, Charles Krauthammer of the *Washington Post* argued that the “great blow to baseball, the crucial alienating event, was the cancellation of the ’94 World Series. From that baseball will never recover.”<sup>35</sup>

The 1995 baseball season concluded with the World Series. But that alone did not ennoble the season (except perhaps to Atlanta Braves fans). Rather, many observers noted that the 1995 baseball season was given an imprimatur of integrity when Ripken broke Gehrig’s consecutive games played record. More than anything else, the media claimed, the streak gave the 1995 season meaning and helped to restore the game’s battered image and its link to the past. For as Krauthammer observed in May, many in baseball were “counting on Cal Ripken’s consecutive games streak to revive the game, some say, as Babe Ruth did after the 1919 Black Sox scandal.”<sup>36</sup>

## 2,131: A Nation Turns its Eyes to Cal

Conventional wisdom has long maintained that George Herman “Babe” Ruth (1895-1948), with his brilliant power hitting and exuberant and flamboyant life style, rejuvenated—indeed, transformed—baseball after the Black Sox scandal, in which several prominent Chicago White Sox ballplayers allegedly conspired with gamblers to “throw” the 1919 World Series to the Cincinnati Reds.<sup>37</sup> It is commonly held that, having slugged a record-shattering 54 home runs the year that the World Series scandal was revealed, Ruth galvanized popular interest in the game the following season. To the delight of the baseball establishment, argues writer Ken Sobol, it turned out that most fans “were more interested in speculating about what the Babe would do for an encore in 1921 than they were in rehashing the delinquencies of the White Sox.”<sup>38</sup> To put it

mildly, the public loved Babe Ruth, in part because he represented the realization of the American dream and in part due to his rambunctiousness. While Kenesaw Mountain Landis, a stern jurist and moralist hired as commissioner in 1920 in the wake of the Black Sox scandal, imparted an appearance of rectitude, propriety, and stability, it was Ruth who revitalized professional baseball. "If Landis was the image of its new purity," argues writer Eliot Asinof, "it was Babe Ruth who gave it excitement."<sup>39</sup> Many historians and critics have identified Ruth as a vibrant cultural symbol for his era.<sup>40</sup> According to the late historian Warren Susman, Ruth "was the perfect creation for an increasingly mechanized world that still hungered for the extraordinary personality, that tired of the Model T automobiles and yet was also appreciative of their virtues—wanting only something more, something bigger than life."<sup>41</sup> Ruth was certainly that. Yet in terms of baseball history and mythology, he was (and remains) the game's savior.

By the spring of 1995, Major League Baseball once again desperately needed redemption. It was in obvious disfavor with the public because of the strike. "Yes, there was a certain amount of joy over the return of the game," wrote Tom Verducci of *Sports Illustrated*, after the first week of the season. "But in ballparks all across the country people spit on the flag of baseball. The return of the game was greeted with anger, derision, mockery and—the worst insult of all—indifference."<sup>42</sup> Considering Major League Baseball's public relations problem, as early as spring training some observers were positioning Cal Ripken and his endurance record as the focal point of the upcoming season.<sup>43</sup> The *Washington Post*, for example, wrote that Ripken's "pursuit of Gehrig is *the* story to which baseball people can point these days as a positive while their ravaged sport tries to put the pieces back together following the strike."<sup>44</sup>

Ripken did not eschew media attention, but he was publicly uncomfortable with it. "In some ways, I wish I wouldn't receive so much attention for this," Ripken said. "But I guess I understand what the importance is, and I accept it."<sup>45</sup> As one writer put it, Ripken was "Baseball's Reluctant Messiah."<sup>46</sup> Ripken was cast in the role because he had been in the Orioles' line-up every day since May 30, 1982. For over thirteen years, Ripken slowly but inexorably wound his way toward September 6, 1995. Unassuming and seemingly unflappable, Ripken was a superb candidate for the task at hand. To many, he appeared to be a throw-back to an earlier era when baseball players seemed more dignified and humble, and less motivated to perform for financial rewards than for the joy of the game. Veteran observer Heywood Hale Broun mused, "Ripken seems like some figure emerging from a time machine. You half expect him to be wearing a baggy flannel uniform and using a skimpy glove."<sup>47</sup> Of course, the post-strike timing of his final assault on Gehrig's record contributed to the sense that Ripken was a living relic from a more innocent, less contentious bygone age. "At a time when the game is in serious rehab," wrote Curry Kirkpatrick of *Newsweek*, "Ripken stands out as the ideal role model—an anti-[Mickey] Mantle who, rather



than abuse his family and body over the span of a distinguished career, has held them aloft as the twin citadels of his success.”<sup>48</sup> Unlike so many of his colleagues, Kirkpatrick continued, Ripken is “a quiet, serene hero so gracious that he actually respects the integrity of the sport. He also signs autographs for hours for no charge, and drives and drinks what he endorses (Chevy Suburban, milk).”<sup>49</sup> Hailed by the media nationwide as a paragon of steadiness, hard work, determination, and decency, Ripken was transformed from an All-Star ballplayer into an icon of All-American homespun masculine virtues.

Ripkenmania reached a crescendo on the evening of September 6, 1995, in Baltimore when the Orioles’ shortstop officially broke Gehrig’s record in the fifth inning of a game against the California Angels.<sup>50</sup> To commemorate the historic moment, play was interrupted, fireworks exploded, and balloons were released. Major League games all over the country stopped so that fans and players alike could watch the celebration.<sup>51</sup> Millions more watched on television in what turned out to be the highest-rated baseball game ever broadcast by ESPN.<sup>52</sup> Back in Baltimore, after more than ten minutes of cheering by the 46,000-plus fans in attendance, Ripken was pushed out of the dugout by his teammates for an impromptu goodwill lap around the ballpark. All told, the game was suspended for 22 minutes. “If there was a more joyful 22 minutes in baseball,” wrote sportswriter Tim Kurkjian, “no one could remember it.”<sup>53</sup> Applauded wildly throughout the evening, Ripken retained his composure, so much so that he subsequently hit a home run. At the conclusion of the game, the Orioles held an hour-long ceremony to honor Ripken and his achievement. Hall of Fame outfielder Joe DiMaggio offered congratulations: “wherever my former teammate Lou Gehrig is today, I’m sure he’s tipping his cap to you, Cal Ripken.”<sup>54</sup>

Finally, Ripken spoke. He expressed his gratitude to Baltimore’s baseball fans and to fans all over the country for their kindness and support. He honored his parents for their guidance and love. He thanked his former teammate Eddie Murray for his example and friendship. And he acknowledged his wife, Kelly, for her advice, support, and for enriching his life. Ripken concluded:

Tonight I stand here, overwhelmed, as my name is linked with the great and courageous Lou Gehrig. I’m truly humbled to have our names mentioned in the same breath.

Some may think our strongest connection is because we both played many consecutive games. Yet I believe in my heart that our true link is a common motivation—a love of the game of baseball, a passion for our team, and a desire to compete on the very highest level.

I know that if Lou Gehrig is looking down on tonight’s activities, he isn’t concerned about someone playing one more consecutive game than he did. Instead, he’s viewing tonight as just another example of what is good and right about the

great American game. Whether your name is Gehrig or Ripken; DiMaggio or Robinson; or that of some youngster who picks up his bat or puts on his glove: You are challenged by the game of baseball to do your very best, day in and day out. And that's all that I've ever tried to do.<sup>55</sup>

Like the man himself, remarked many observers, Ripken's speech was respectful and gracious; it lent dignity to The Streak and to the game itself, which was still suffering from the post-strike doldrums. At the same time, by evoking names from baseball's past like Gehrig, DiMaggio, Robinson, it explicitly tapped into the nostalgia upon which the game thrives.

Immediately after game 2,131, numerous fans, ballplayers, and journalists described the streak as a vehicle to restore interest, respect, and faith in Major League Baseball. At the conclusion of the record-breaking game, for example, one fan held a sign that read: "CAL, THANK YOU FOR SAVING BASEBALL."<sup>56</sup> President Clinton, who usually kept close tabs on popular sentiment and who was at Camden Yards that night, remarked: "I think the games last night and tonight are going to do a lot to help America fall back in love with baseball."<sup>57</sup> Some of Ripken's colleagues concurred. According to the *Baltimore Sun*:

Fans were angered by the strike, and they've taken out some of their frustration on the players. But, some players say, Ripken and his streak have served as a salve. "With everything that baseball went through last year with the strike, the loss of fans and some of the loss of popularity for the sport, things like this are nice to see," [Orioles catcher Chris] Hoiles said.<sup>58</sup>

Orioles pitcher Mike Mussina observed that, if one were to choose a year to break a major record, "you couldn't have picked a better year, under better circumstances, in a better period of time for baseball."<sup>59</sup> When asked about the streak and its possible salutary effects on the game, first baseman Rafael Palmeiro noted: "We—baseball—really needed this, and Cal came through."<sup>60</sup> Many members of the fourth estate (especially in Baltimore) lauded Ripken and the streak. More than a few connected the streak and the strike. Long-time *Baltimore Sun* sports columnist John Steadman argued that Ripken, "whether he knows it or not, stands as an animated monument to all that's good about America's most revered but too often beleaguered pastime."<sup>61</sup> The *New York Times* sports columnist Murray Chass described Ripken's feat as "the brightest, most dramatic development of a season damaged by an unresolved labor dispute."<sup>62</sup> And Bob Verdi of the *Chicago Tribune* opined: "The Streak was years of hard labor. The Lap was a spontaneous love-in. Cal Ripken did everything Wednesday night

but restore peace to his embattled industry. He took a run at it, though. Maybe baseball will take the hint."<sup>63</sup> It did not, for the players and owners took another fourteen months to reach a collective bargaining agreement.<sup>64</sup>

To Ripken's apparent discomfort, some journalists viewed The Streak as a remedy for their strike-induced baseball blues. "If the owners and the players had wanted to invent an antidote to their image problems," columnist E. J. Dionne, Jr. quipped, "they would have invented Cal Ripken."<sup>65</sup> For some, the streak seemed to be a baseball tonic. Indeed, some observers viewed Ripken as a blue-collar healer, as someone who had nursed the wounds baseball sustained during the strike. As Tony Kornheiser of the *Washington Post* put it: "Baseball was ailing, and Cal became its Florence Nightingale."<sup>66</sup> Thanks to his relentless, self-effacing pursuit of excellence, Ripken somehow made a great many people care about baseball again. Still, Kornheiser reflected, Ripken

couldn't rescue baseball by himself; not even Babe Ruth could after what [baseball commissioner] Bud Selig and [union leader] Donald Fehr did to the game. But Cal saved it from disappearing down a rat hole. Baseball has become passe lately. Football has surpassed it as the national pastime, and basketball has all the younger demographics. But baseball is still the sport of fathers and sons and myth in this country, and it is no small cultural accomplishment that Ripken was its life preserver.<sup>67</sup>

In recognition of Ripken's achievement, *Sports Illustrated* named him Sportsman of the Year for 1995, and the Associated Press selected his consecutive games-played streak as the sports story of the year.<sup>68</sup> Six months later, the streak still going strong, sports columnist Thomas Boswell maintained that Ripken broke baseball's endurance record "with such humility and generosity of spirit that he restored half the good name of his tarnished sport."<sup>69</sup> All of which suggests that, to many people, perhaps especially journalists, Ripken revived, perhaps even re-ennobled, major league baseball after the strike, somewhat like Babe Ruth did after the Black Sox scandal. As Buster Olney of the *Baltimore Sun* put it: Ripken may have done "more for baseball than any player since Babe Ruth in 1920 and 1921, when the Bambino's awesome power overwhelmed the cynicism created by the 1919 Black Sox scandal."<sup>70</sup> The analogy is not precise, of course. The two men obviously embody radically different (even antithetical) versions of baseball heroism: one appears to be the quintessential self-made man, disciplined and modest, while the other seems to be the ultimate natural man, hedonistic and brash. (In this way Ruth and Ripken illustrate the truism that different historical moments demand and produce different types of heroes.) But Ruth and Ripken both provided the baseball crises of their day with (the appearance) of narrative closure that they so desperately needed. Both

ballplayers re-focused popular and media attention on the game itself and projected cultural values that many Americans esteemed and apparently yearned for in themselves. Like Ruth, a fellow Baltimorean, Ripken seemed to provide baseball with redemption when it needed it most.

The streak—a genuinely impressive accomplishment rather than a mere pseudoevent—became a media-created cultural commodity eagerly consumed by hungry fans. One way of illustrating this is to note the myriad products—T-shirts, hats, bumper stickers, posters, videos, “limited edition” collector plates, newspaper and magazine articles, and books, including Ripken’s autobiography, *The Only Way I Know* (1997), as well as the actual game broadcast on ESPN—sold to commemorate Ripken’s feat before, during, and after the record-setting game. In fact, ESPN’s broadcast of Ripken’s 2,131st consecutive game articulated many of the themes examined here.<sup>71</sup>

### **The Cultural Work of Cal Ripken, Jr.**

The media’s construction of the Ripken persona and the streak evoked romantic remembrances of multiple pasts. Most frequently, the media linked Ripken to sanitized accounts of the 1920s and 1930s (the era of Ruth and Gehrig), Ripken’s own Ozzie-and-Harriet-like childhood in the 1960s, and baseball prior to 1970s free agency, collective bargaining, and work stoppages.<sup>72</sup> While each of these “pasts” offered distinctive narratives, the overall representation of Ripken projected an idealized family man from yesteryear.

The mythic pasts Ripken’s persona evoked were similar to other nostalgic impulses of the 1980s and 1990s. Through them, mainstream Americans were invited to return to a seemingly more stable, more innocent time. A conspicuous example of this type of nostalgia was found in appeals for a return to so-called “traditional family values.” Although never explicitly articulated, “traditional family values” suggested a link between morality and responsibility. It also encouraged Americans to hearken to bygone eras when family life was presumably more wholesome, purer, and the cornerstone of U.S. greatness.<sup>73</sup> The nuclear family of the past—with the breadwinner father, stay-at-home mother, and two children—was thus made to stand as the antithesis of the presumed moral and political decay of the present. Cultural critic John Fiske identifies the coded language and ideological role associated with images of the traditional nuclear family:

In this ultraconservative but loudly voiced imagination, the traditional family upon which U.S. society apparently depends for its stability is implicitly white, and the threat to it, therefore, is colored. Unsurprisingly, this imagination has made the single Black young mother on welfare stand for everything the all-American family is not.<sup>74</sup>

In this way, the responsibility for wholesale cultural tensions and transitions was diverted from deindustrialization, institutional racism, and the gendered division of labor to the backs of individuals and individual families, especially African-American and recent immigrant families. Here nostalgia focused blame for present disruptions on certain sectors of society that have supposedly undermined the coherence of a constructed, sentimental past.

Representations of Ripken's boyhood in the 1960s participated in this portrait of (white) family life as presumably superior to most contemporary families, which were allegedly in a state of crisis. The media often told the story of Ripken's childhood as a tale of family solidarity and male bonding. Cal Ripken, Sr., spent years coaching and managing in the Orioles organization and during Cal, Jr.'s, youth the family moved around the country before ultimately returning to its Aberdeen, Maryland home. Early on, Vi Ripken (Sr.'s wife and Jr.'s mother) took the young children—Cal, Jr., Fred, Billy, and Ellen—to the ballpark to watch Cal, Sr.'s, games. Later, as a teenager, Cal, Jr., accompanied his father to baseball clinics and games and mingled with professional players, like future Hall-of-Famers Brooks Robinson and Jim Palmer. In 1978, Ripken officially became a member of the Orioles "family" when he was selected in the second round of the amateur draft. Thomas Boswell notes, "Cal Ripken was raised by a strict family on the small-town values of rural Maryland. For him, the '60s and '70s might as well have been the '40s and '50s—when America was productive, self-confident, simplistic and not too hip to have heroes."<sup>75</sup> In the words of Ripken biographer, Harvey Rosenfeld:

very caring and loving parents insisted on discipline and order, courtesy, respect for elders, and hard work. Both mother and father eschewed all vices and strongly recommended that their offspring do the same. They taught their children always to ally themselves with what is right, to value the importance of family life, and to believe in themselves, doing the best in everything they tried.<sup>76</sup>

Ripken's wife, Kelly, and children, Rachel and Ryan, were represented similarly, but with a few notable twists. Whereas Cal Ripken, Sr., was often absent due to his baseball responsibilities, Cal Ripken, Jr., was commonly portrayed as a concerned, attentive husband and a doting father determined to maintain a close relationship with his family. Without drawing an explicit contrast to his own father, Ripken, Jr., said it is important to make "the best of whatever situation you have and having a good rapport with your kids and your family and letting them know you'll be there no matter what."<sup>77</sup> The media often represented the Ripken family as blissfully domestic, oftentimes at their sprawling suburban home, a result of Ripken's success as a breadwinner.

*Ripken: Cal on Cal* (1995), an oversized, fan-friendly, behind-the-scenes book which includes numerous photographs of Ripken's family, is emblematic

of this preferred portrait. In addition to depicting Ripken in action on the field, it features pictures of Ripken playing with his children in their pool and shooting basketballs with Kelly in their full-size gymnasium; it also shows Rachel and Ryan taking swings in a batting cage. These images are juxtaposed with text in which Ripken discusses his childhood, his mother's contributions to his development, and his father's meticulous attention to detail, duty, and work. It is clear from the text that Cal, Sr., had a tremendous influence on Cal, Jr.'s, baseball career ("I guess it's not surprising that my approach to baseball comes from being around my father," Ripken explained), but it is also plain that Cal, Sr., passed along desirable masculine traits as a family provider and caretaker.<sup>78</sup> These accounts suggested deference to and reverence for fatherly authority. Ripken put it succinctly, "I thought my dad knew the right way to do everything."<sup>79</sup> When combined with Ripken's image as a baseball throwback, this portrait conveyed an old fashioned kind of masculine icon. The focus on the Ripken families demonstrated that Cal Ripken, Jr., has realized the American dream due to hard work, perseverance, and familial love and support, qualities once commonly passed from father to son, but are now, according to some of those who espouse a return to "traditional family values," increasingly rare.<sup>80</sup>

Media representations of Cal Ripken, Jr., also recalled an era when professional athletes were commonly (and often mistakenly) perceived to be clean-cut role models—rather than over-paid, over-exposed, pampered celebrities—and professional sports teams were respected pillars of the community—instead of cold-blooded, corporate institutions only interested in the bottom line who frequently hold ransom their city with the threat of relocation. Despite a multi-million dollar a year income, Ripken was positioned apart from most contemporary ballplayers, who are often characterized as avaricious mercenaries. Ripken's behavior on and off the field suggests a (romanticized) pre-free agency temperament when baseball players made far less money for playing a child's game and were loyal to the home team (largely because they were forced to because of baseball's reserve clause).<sup>81</sup> In this way Ripken was notable because, as Steve Wulf of *Time* magazine put it, he "has turned down several opportunities to become a free agent, preferring to remain an Oriole and a Baltimorean. He has endorsement deals, to be sure, but his most famous one is for milk."<sup>82</sup> Another journalist described Ripken as "the new 'Iron Horse' because he has lived and played against the sorry trends of this era: laziness, transient loyalty and galloping prima donnaism."<sup>83</sup> Because he seemed to be the antithesis of these trends, Ripken appeared to be an anachronism, out of place in the present.

The previously mentioned Rockwellian portrait of Ripken is an excellent case in point. Here the sordid history of contentious race relations and Jim Crowism in sport and the wider culture is literally whitewashed via a romantic depiction of a benevolent small-town white hero. This portrait ignores the history of white supremacy which has and continues to structure white privilege.<sup>84</sup> As the modest hero of yesteryear, Ripken summons racial innocence, industriousness,

and self-assurance. The celebration of these characteristics gained further significance in relation to the negative attributes often assigned to people of color, and it obscured structured inequality and institutional racism. In contrast to representations of whites, people of color (particularly African Americans and Latinos) are more likely to be stereotyped as lazy, self-gratifying, and depraved.<sup>85</sup>

A particularly vivid example of the way Ripken was used to suggest racial dominance was a *Wall Street Journal* editorial which contrasted Ripken to multi-sport star Deion “Prime Time” Sanders, a perennial all-pro defensive back in the National Football League and middling major league outfielder. The *Wall Street Journal* editorialized, “it’s hard to think of two men who are more different—one the flashy ‘Prime Time,’ the other the no-nonsense ‘Iron-man.’ Their differences speak volumes about the challenges confronting not only professional sports but society in general.”<sup>86</sup> Through coded language and (not so subtle) implication, Sanders was portrayed as the stereotypical egocentric, brash, boastful, and mercenary contemporary African American athlete. Ripken, on the other hand, embodied “old school” athletic sensibilities. “Mr. Ripken has achieved renown for his steady hard work on the diamond, not for off-the-field theatrics,” continued the *Wall Street Journal*. “The ‘Ironman’ never sulks, never boasts, never insults opponents—and he never disdains the small jobs.” Although the *Wall Street Journal* never mentioned either man’s racial identity, the racial inference it raised is clear. The *Wall Street Journal* concluded on a wistful, cautionary note: “Sports used to be full of Cal Ripkens; now it’s full of Deion Sanderses. Can pro sports—or America in general—survive under those conditions?” Nostalgic depictions of Ripken and the past comforted whites and provided a sense of superiority in the wake of an increasingly multicultural (and thus supposedly inferior) America society. In short, Ripken represented the great white hope. Ripken’s All-American persona encouraged whites to escape the messy, contentious economic and political struggles resulting from America’s transformation from a country “organized around a relatively homogeneous, Eurocentric consensus to a more diverse multicultural social order.”<sup>87</sup>

Obviously these renditions were not absolute; they were subject to interpretation and existed with notable contradictions. Roger Aden’s observations concerning the polyvocal nostalgia surrounding the baseball documentary *When It Was a Game* (1991) illuminate the complex class-specific character of the Ripken phenomenon.<sup>88</sup> Aden notes that in an era of downsizing, outsourcing, declining blue-collar jobs, and increasing part-time work without benefits, discussions of a baseball icon as emblematic of America’s past partially reflected American workers’ desire for a time when working-class men presumably “possessed a strong identity and a perceived sense of collective power.”<sup>89</sup> Read from this perspective, Ripken, whose salary was \$6.3 million in 1995 and who made \$4 million more in endorsements, thus became a (surrogate) blue-collar hero, a laborer who has a job (to do).<sup>90</sup> The October 15, 1995 issue of *People* magazine articulated this theme by comparing Ripken’s consecutive game streak to the

productivity of other working Americans. Or as *People* phrased it: “Eat your heart out, Cal Ripken! These hardworking Americans started their on-the-job streaks before you were even born.”<sup>91</sup> The magazine featured six people whose consecutive streak of never missing a work day (save vacations) spans at least 35 years, including proofreader Audrey Stubbart (50 years) and Herb Christiansen, a purchasing agent (59 years). Of course, these durable workers share a common fortuitousness in that their jobs have not (yet) been eliminated by an increasingly global and multinational capitalist economy. In all of these ways, positioning Ripken as a blue-collar hero of a conflict-free past conjured up an emotionally-charged vision in which masculine strength was hailed as essential to the maintenance of the family and national life.

The multiple pasts associated with Ripken participated in *fin de siècle* American popular culture, which was awash with “retro” ideas and images that served as dubious antidotes to the anxiety created by large scale and exasperating cultural changes. Rather than engaging creatively and directly to ease these transitions, nostalgic discourses encouraged a conservative response by focusing attention backward and hailing a decontextualized simplistic past that never existed. Media representations of Cal Ripken, Jr., participated in this process and served to re-make history in a politically regressive way.

### **The Streak Ends, The Nostalgia Continues**

On September 20, 1998, after 2,632 consecutive games, Cal Ripken, Jr., ended the streak by sitting out the final home game of the season. (He had extended the streak by 502 games after eclipsing Lou Gehrig’s record.) Although Ripken was concluding a disappointing year, the streak’s end came as a surprise to virtually everyone in attendance (and soon thereafter, people nationwide), since he was healthy, he had been playing well of late, and his name was in the lineup before the game. Minutes into the first inning, when it was clear that Ripken would not play, the New York Yankees walked to the top step of the visitors dugout and applauded. Ripken emerged from the Orioles dugout, tipped his hat toward the Yankees, and returned to the bench. Soon thereafter, with the sellout crowd of over 48,000 giving him a standing ovation, Ripken came out again, waved, and took a bow. All told, he made three curtain calls. After the game, the 38-year-old third baseman explained why he pulled himself from the lineup: “The emphasis should be on the team,” said Ripken. “There have been times during the streak when the emphasis was on the streak, and I was uncomfortable with that. I reached a point where it was time to change the subject and refocus the attention on the team and move on.”<sup>92</sup> (For several years, some observers argued that Ripken would benefit from an occasional day off and that his exalted status due to the streak damaged the team’s chemistry and thus success.) Despite the contemporaneous hoopla surrounding the historic home run hitting of Mark McGwire of the St. Louis Cardinals and Sammy Sosa of the Chicago Cubs, when Ripken ended the streak he received a great deal of media



attention—much of which reiterated and consequently reinscribed the themes articulated three years earlier when he broke Gehrig's record.

Once again, journalists widely credited and celebrated Ripken as baseball's savior after the work stoppage of 1994-95. Peter Schmuck of the *Baltimore Sun* maintained that when Ripken broke Gehrig's record the major leagues "needed someone to heal its fractured relationship with the fans, and Ripken was in the perfect position to save the image of the sport. He was just a few months shy of breaking a record that previously was considered unassailable, and he was just the kind of squeaky-clean, all-American guy who could move gracefully past Gehrig and deliver Major League Baseball back into the heart of a nation."<sup>93</sup> Reflecting on the streak's end and meaning, Thomas Boswell wrote: "On the night of 2,131, baseball needed Ripken as its standard bearer more than the sport had needed any player at any time since Ruth saved the game with his home runs and his smile in the wake of the Black Sox scandal of 1919."<sup>94</sup> The *New York Times* editorialized that Ripken "helped rescue baseball from its funk after a strike shortened the 1994 season. Interest in the game revived as he began closing in on Lou Gehrig's mark of 2,130 consecutive games, and when he broke that record he inspired a celebration not surpassed until McGwire set a new home run record two weeks ago."<sup>95</sup> On this issue, even baseball commissioner Bud Selig and his arch nemesis Major League Baseball Players Association director Don Fehr could agree. "The recovery was much more difficult than we thought it was going to be," Selig said. "Baseball is forever grateful to Cal Ripken, because that moment played an enormous role in our recovery. We really needed something historical and positive. Sept. 6 was the event that did it."<sup>96</sup> Fehr agreed and suggested that Ripken's accomplishment "had a catalytic effect. It reminded people what this game can provide. Like McGwire's 62nd home run, it was a completely joyful event, something we had not seen in a long time. Something we really needed."<sup>97</sup> Nationwide, commentators declared that, while McGwire and Sosa were bringing people back to Major League ballparks, it was Ripken who had actually rejuvenated interest in the national pastime.

And once again the media constructed and hailed Ripken as the personification of cherished and dominant national ideals and values. Predictably, the most prominent among them was the work ethic. "Cal Ripken Jr. proves a lot," opined sports columnist Douglas S. Looney. "He proves that the work ethic is alive and well."<sup>98</sup> Dan Shaughnessy of the *Boston Globe* added, "We all could use a dose of the Ripken work ethic. You do your job, you do it to the best of your ability and you do it every day."<sup>99</sup> Perhaps sportswriter Tom Verducci best articulated what the streak signified to many Americans: "The Streak wasn't just his identity; it was ours, too. This was America the way we wish it to be—blue-collar, reliable, built on an honest day of work, one day after another."<sup>100</sup> Widely portrayed and understood as a decent, diligent, hard working, humble, responsible, self-reliant, family man, as an athlete given neither to hyperbole nor selfaggrandizement, that is, as an All-American hero and role model, Ripken

was used, as Verducci aptly put it, as an “American allegory.”<sup>101</sup> Set amidst the McGwire and Sosa home run race which so captured the nation’s attention, media representations of the streak’s conclusion, like those of the streak itself, promoted a nostalgic, politically conservative vision of American culture, social relations, and history which celebrated hegemonic masculinity and reified the status quo.<sup>102</sup>

## Conclusions

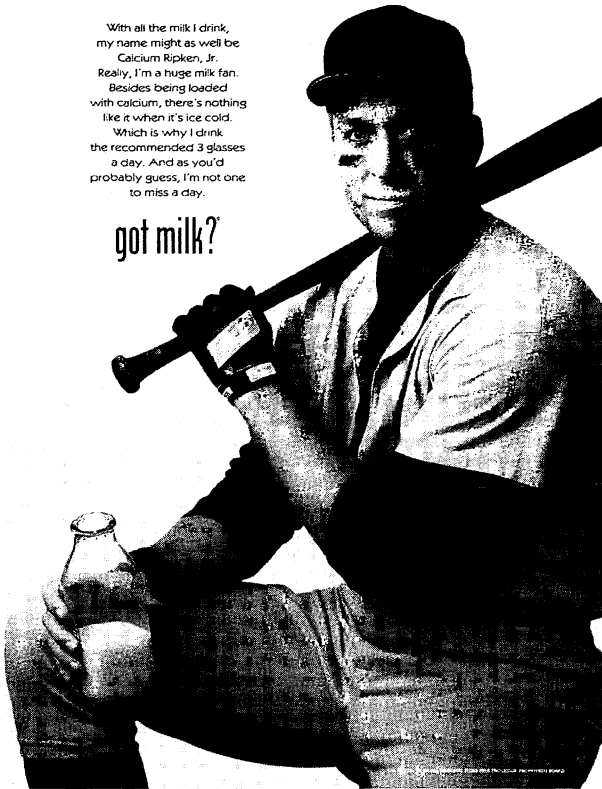
Immediately before and long after Streak week, Ripken’s image was ubiquitous. Besides the sportspages, its presence was particularly felt in the advertising world. His endorsements expanded to include deals with Nike, True Value Hardware, Franklin Sports batting gloves, regional milk and Coke distributors, Esskay meats, Adventure World, PowerAde athletic drink, Starter athletic wear, Wheaties, and Chevrolet Trucks. Virtually all of these advertisements accentuated Ripken’s dependability, durability, and wholesomeness.<sup>103</sup> Perhaps the most explicitly nostalgic was a photograph for a popular milk advertising campaign which features celebrities and prominent athletes—like Patrick Ewing, Jeff Gordon, Florence Griffith Joyner, Pete Sampras, and Steve Young, among many others—wearing milk mustaches. Unlike all the other athletes, however, Ripken evoked multiple historical contexts, for he is wearing a batting glove (a relatively recent development) and is attired in a generic old-fashioned uniform (witness the high stirrups), and is holding the type of glass milk bottle Americans used to have delivered to their front doors. This image signified Ripken as a healthy throwback. There was also an implicit morality to the image. After all, milk is nutritious, milk is pure, milk is white.

As we have argued, a similar morality pervaded representations of the streak and Ripken in general. More often than not, the media constructed the streak as a didactic American morality tale: its lesson, with old fashioned hard work, dedication, and a little luck anything is possible. “No other record in sports better exemplifies the most enduring of American values: hard work, steadiness, loyalty,” wrote Steven V. Roberts of *U.S. News & World Report*. “There’s no flash and dash to Ripken, no swagger, no earrings. He’s just there, every day, doing his job.”<sup>104</sup> Part of his job, it seems, was to fulfill what historian Benjamin G. Rader refers to as a “compensatory cultural function,” that is, the Ripken persona re-affirms and reproduces “traditional values,” like rugged individualism and the work ethic, believed to be in decline.<sup>105</sup>

In some ways, the media’s representations of Ripken and the streak remind us of historian John W. Ward’s representation of Charles Lindbergh’s 1927 solo flight across the Atlantic, specifically the kind of attention it received and the nostalgia it generated. As Ward observed in his essay, “The Meaning of Lindbergh’s Flight” (1958), Lindbergh’s accomplishment “provided an opportunity for the people to project their own emotions into his act and those emotions involved attitudes toward the meaning of their own experiences.”<sup>106</sup> Against

With all the milk I drink,  
my name might as well be  
Calcium Ripken, Jr.  
Really, I'm a huge milk fan.  
Besides being loaded  
with calcium, there's nothing  
like it when it's ice cold.  
Which is why I drink  
the recommended 3 glasses  
a day. And as you'd  
probably guess, I'm not one  
to miss a day.

got milk?



“Milk Where’s your mustache?” advertisement. *Courtesy of Bozell Worldwide, Inc.*

the backdrop of turbulent, anxiety-producing economic, political, and social change, Ward noted, “Lindbergh’s flight was the occasion of a public act of regeneration,” it was portrayed and widely understood as an act of heroism and self-reliance in uncertain times.<sup>107</sup> Ward maintained that until the media’s glorification of Lindbergh’s accomplishments, heroism and self-reliance, two mythic cornerstones of American greatness, appeared to reside entirely in the past.<sup>108</sup> Over sixty-five years later in yet another era distinguished by disconcerting economic, demographic, and social instability and change, for many Americans Ripken seemed to represent who and what they yearned to be. Ripken exhibited skill, stamina, and modesty and was cast by the media as a heroic model of middle-class virtue and manliness. In Ripken and the streak the media constructed and celebrated icons that spoke to the longings of many white, middle-class Americans (especially men), longings for a mythic time when fathers played catch with sons and the boys of summer reigned.

Numerous commentators have unproblematically noted and celebrated the nostalgia associated with Ripken; we have provided critical contexts to illumi-

nate the politics and culture of nostalgia and its relationship to the Ripken phenomenon. In addition to providing an alternative way of understanding Ripken's public persona, the streak, and the values they represented, we think that the media's construction of the Ripken persona and the streak are important for other reasons. First, they illustrate the process of transforming an event and a public figure into a narrative that serve present interests, in this case one that celebrated a mythic national past when American men were (supposedly more) hard-working, responsible, and family-oriented, when major league baseball was a game that stood alone as the national pastime (despite excluding blacks and women), and when the game's labor-management relations were not as openly contentious as they are today. That is, the narratives which constituted the Ripken phenomenon illuminated how a sports hero and an event can be used to deploy specific, if often implicit, political agendas.

The Ripken phenomenon also reminds us that media narratives, perhaps especially those depicting celebrities, tend to be flat and one-dimensional, if not formulaic. Ripken the man is more complicated than Ripken the media-created cultural icon. When speaking about his family, Ripken often gives his mother and wife, not just his late father, a great deal of credit for his success. Moreover, though the media did not make much of it, it was significant that the only ballplayer Ripken thanked by name on the evening he broke the record was longtime teammate and friend Eddie Murray, an African-American first baseman with a reputation for surly relations with the press. Journalists also tend to ignore Ripken's temper, which is most frequently directed toward umpires. Like most people in the public eye, Ripken is infrequently portrayed in all his complexity.

This analysis of Ripken also demonstrates how personal memories—especially those related to childhood—can intertwine with mediated nostalgic discourses. Throughout the streak, the media offered abstracted images of Ripken as a dutiful son and a doting father, thus offering a formula for fans, especially male “baby boomers,” to reenact. Reframing Ripken's childhood as idyllic, joyful, and free of conflict encouraged a similar model, perhaps even an invention of fond personal childhood memories among baseball fans. Emotionally charged representations of Ripken's youth encouraged aging “baby boomers” to try to recapture their own youth. They invited people to fantasize and idealize their own childhood and young adulthood, projecting them into the present.

Finally, the ways in which the media constructed Ripken and the streak did not just re-create a mythic national past; they also condition us for the future. Since they constitute a dominant or preferred reading of social reality, they will surely influence how Ripken and the streak will be re-told and remembered in the years to come. And although the writing of history is an inherently revisionist enterprise, and meaning is perpetually re-negotiated, once an event has been wrought as a specific kind of story, it is very difficult (but not impossible) to imagine it differently. In other words, there is inertia to narratives like the streak

that is hard to counteract. The media constructions of Ripken we have identified are now securely woven into the national memory. Cultural critic and historian George Lipsitz calls the production and circulation of this kind of mass mediated, sanitized, and decontextualized historical image “memory as managed misappropriation.”<sup>109</sup> The Ripken phenomenon demonstrates that historical remembering is always linked to the present and to issues of historical forgetting, that popular memory is always partial and political.

## Notes

We want to thank Kathy Frantz, Allan Winkler, Norman Yetman, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and criticism of this essay.

1. Carol J. Pierman, “Cal Ripken and the Condition of Freedom: Theme and Variation on the American Work Ethic,” *Nine: A Journal of Baseball History and Social Policy Perspectives* 7 (Fall 1998): 60.

2. Baseball fans and journalists sometimes debate the significance of the streak in purely baseball, rather than culturally symbolic, terms. For some, Ripken’s consecutive game record pales in comparison to other kinds of major league (i.e., necessarily masculine) accomplishments, like Hank Aaron’s 755 career home runs, Joe DiMaggio’s 56-game hitting streak, and Nolan Ryan’s seven career no-hitters, in addition to Ripken’s own home run records for a shortstop (his 345 homers, among a career total of 402, is a record for that position) and fielding records (in 1990, he became the first shortstop in major league history to make only three errors in a complete season). As cultural critics, the debate does not interest us, except to the extent that it illuminates the notion that “significance” and “meaning” are always contested and debated, ever fluid and negotiated.

3. Sut Jhally, “Cultural Studies and the Sports/Media Complex,” in *Media, Sports & Society* (Newbury Park, Calif., 1989), 77.

4. Mark S. Rosentraub, *Major League Losers: The Real Costs of Sports and Who’s Paying For It* (New York, 1997), 50.

5. George Sage, *Power and Ideology in American Sport: A Critical Perspective* (Champaign, 1990), 129.

6. See Mary G. McDonald and Susan Birrell, “Reading Sport Critically: A Methodology for Interrogating Power,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 16 (1999): 283-300.

7. See Hayden White, *The Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, [1978] 1992).

8. It is worth noting that the word was coined in the late seventeenth century and is derived from the Greek *nosos* = return to native land, and *algos* = suffering or grief. See Fred Davis, *Yearning For Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York, 1979), 1-2.

9. See Fred Pfeil, *Another Tale to Tell: Politics and Narrative in Postmodern Culture* (New York, 1990); Christopher Hitchens, *Blood, Class, and Nostalgia: Anglo-American Ironies* (New York, 1990); Paul Starobin, “Politics of the Past,” *National Journal*, February 17, 1996, 354-358; Kelly Barron, “P.C. nostalgia,” *Forbes*, October 20, 1997, 48; Keith Naughton and Bill Vlasic, “The Nostalgia Boom,” *Business Week*, March 23, 1998, 58-64.

10. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, [1985] 1990), 4, 8.

11. “Kammen adds that there “is nothing necessarily wrong with nostalgia per se, but more often than not the phenomenon does involve a pattern of highly selective memory. Recall the good but repress the unpleasant.” Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991), 688, 626.

12. Quoted in Jackson Lears, “Looking Backward: In Defense of Nostalgia,” *Lingua Franca* (Dec/Jan 1998), 61.

13. Michael Eric Dyson, *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* (Reading, 1996), 117.

14. Davis, *Yearning For Yesterday*, 9.

15. *Ibid.*, 10.

16. *Ibid.*, 34, 107.

17. The politics of representation and nostalgia are often intertwined with one another. This is because they are influenced by the same phenomenon: presentism. With regard to representation, presentism is unavoidable. Indeed, it is a precondition of the process of telling a story, for all

storytellers exist in time. They/we cannot escape the limitations of time and place, nor the subjectivities that specific contexts produce. As historian Norman J. Wilson puts it, "we will always interpret the past from a perspective of contemporary knowledge." Obviously we always interpret the present from the perspective of contemporary knowledge and perceptions, too. The politics of nostalgia are likewise affected by presentism, for, as Fred Davis persuasively demonstrates, nostalgia is produced by the ways in which individuals and institutions understand and respond to contemporary situations, events, and relationships. Sometimes nostalgia is "invented" by those who have a vested (though occasionally unconscious) interest in remembering the past in a particular way. Sometimes nostalgia emanates from deep reservoirs of personal and collective memory and emotion. Either way, it is the present that causes those with specific kinds of political sensibilities to wax nostalgic. For those discomfited, frustrated, or threatened by the present, the sentimentally remembered past becomes a refuge. In this way present circumstances ignite self-serving and romantic conceptions of yesterday, rather than critically alert and historicized understandings of it. Norman J. Wilson, *History in Crisis? Recent Directions in Historiography* (Upper Saddle River, NJ, 1999), 9.

18. Paul Boyer, *Promises to Keep: The United States Since World War II* (Lexington, 1995), 444-5.

19. See Haynes Johnson, *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years* (New York, 1991); Walter LaFeber, Richard Polenberg, and Nancy Woloch, *The American Century: A History of the United States since 1941* (Boston, 1998).

20. Arturo Madrid, "Diversity and its Discontents," *Academe* (November-December 1990): 15-19.

21. John Fiske, *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change* (Minneapolis, 1994), 35.

22. See Michael A. Messner, *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity* (Boston, 1992); E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York, 1993); Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York, 1996).

23. Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York, 1999), 153.

24. Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press, 1989); Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York, 1991).

25. Michael Messner, "Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5 (1988): 198.

26. James Reston, Jr., *Collision at Home Plate: The Lives of Pete Rose and Bart Giamatti* (New York, 1991).

27. Charles C. Alexander, *Our Game: An American Baseball History* (New York, 1991), 311.

28. Gerald Early, "Performance and Reality: Race, Sports and the Modern World," *The Nation*, August 10/17, 1998, 11.

29. John Bloom, *House of Cards: Baseball Card Collecting and Popular Culture* (Minneapolis, 1997), 4-5.

30. Steve Wulf, "An Unwhole New Ball Game," *Time*, April 17, 1995, 48.

31. Quoted in *Sports Illustrated*, June 7, 1995, 7.

32. Bill Gallo, "Dead Ball Era," *Icon*, January 26-February 1, 1995, 4.

33. See Robert McG. Thomas, Jr., "Clubs May Just Have to Replace Fans, Too," *New York Times*, February 28, 1995, B9; Tom Verducci, "Anybody Home?" *Sports Illustrated*, May 8, 1995, 18-23; Claire Smith, "Plenty of Good Seats Available, Fans," *New York Times*, May 28, 1995, sec. 8, p. 1; David Greising, "America's Pastime. Yeah, Right," *Business Week*, June 5, 1995, 40.

34. Quoted in Greising, "America's Pastime. Yeah, Right," 40.

35. Charles Krauthammer, "The Trouble With Baseball," *Washington Post*, May 5, 1995, A25.

36. *Ibid.*

37. See Bill James, *The Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract* (New York, [1985] 1987), 124.

38. Ken Sobol, *Babe Ruth & the American Dream* (New York, 1974), 135.

39. Eliot Asinof, *Eight Men Out: The Black Sox and the 1919 World Series* (New York, [1963] 1987), 275.

40. See Richard C. Crepeau, *Baseball: America's Diamond Mind 1919-1941* (Gainesville, 1980); Benjamin G. Rader, "Compensatory Sport Heroes: Ruth, Grange, and Dempsey," *Journal of Popular Culture* 16 (Spring 1983): 11-22.

41. Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1984), 148.

42. Verducci, "Anybody Home?" 20.

43. Mike Lupica, "Let's play two thousand," *Esquire*, April 1995, 48-52.

44. Mark Maske, "Ripken's Streak of Burden," *Washington Post*, April 7, 1995, C1.

45. Quoted in *Ibid.*, C7.

46. Quoted in Mat Edelson, "Cal on the Verge," in *The Best American Sports Writing 1996* (Boston, 1996), 314.

47. Heywood Hale Broun, "The Twin Symbols of Baseball's Timeless Virtues," *New York Times*, September 3, 1995, sec. 8, p. 13.

48. Mickey Mantle, the iconic former New York Yankees centerfielder who died of cancer a month before Ripken set the record, was an apposite foil for Ripken due to his well-documented carousing. According to sports columnist Ira Berkow, late in his life Mantle discussed "how he could have played beyond age 36 if he had not 'wasted' the talents God had given him. He confessed to being an alcoholic, a poor father and husband, and to a profligacy wrapped in self-absorption." Curry Kirkpatrick, "The Pride of the Orioles," *Newsweek*, September 11, 1995, 79; Ira Berkow, "Much More Than Just a Hall of Famer," *New York Times*, August 14, 1995, C4.

49. *Ibid.*

50. The record was set in the fifth inning, rather than in the first, because by then it had become an official game.

51. In Arlington, Texas, for example, the Texas Rangers and the Chicago White Sox delayed their game to watch a live feed from Baltimore on the stadium's JumboTron screen. *Baltimore Sun*, September 7, 1995, 8C.

52. *Des Moines Register*, September 8, 1995, 2S.

53. Tim Kurkjian, "Touching 'Em All," in 2,131: *Cal Ripken, Jr. Stands Alone* (a Special Collector's Edition issue of *Sports Illustrated*, 1995), 15.

54. Quoted in Jerome Holtzman, "2,131—and counting," *Chicago Tribune*, September 7, 1995, sec. 4, p. 1.

55. Quoted in the *Baltimore Sun*, September 7, 1995, 6C. The Robinson Ripken referred to may have been purposefully vague; it may have referred to Hall-of-Famer and former Brooklyn Dodger Jackie Robinson (1919-1972), who broke the Major League's color line in 1947, Hall of Fame outfielder and former Orioles great Frank Robinson, the first African-American manager in Major League history, or former Orioles third baseman, Hall-of-Famer, and local legend Brooks Robinson. The latter two were in attendance that night. It is also worth noting that Earl Weaver, Ripken's former manager, is reported to have once said, "I want nine guys named Robinson."

56. Kurkjian, "Touching 'Em All," 8.

57. Quoted in the *Baltimore Sun*, September 7, 1995, 10C.

58. Buster Olney, "Players throw support behind streak," *Baltimore Sun*, September 7, 1995, 4D.

59. Quoted in *Ibid.*

60. Quoted in Harvey Araton, "Great Day For Baseball In the 90's," *New York Times*, September 7, 1995, B19.

61. John Steadman, "This sentimental journey for the ages," *Baltimore Sun*, September 7, 1995, 1C.

62. Murray Chass, "Orioles' Ripken Goes to Work And Steps Into History Books," *New York Times*, September 7, 1995, B19.

63. Bob Verdi, "A run for glory puts finishing touch on run for record," *Chicago Tribune*, September 7, 1995, sec. 4, p. 5.

64. See Murray Chass, "Reluctant Baseball Owners Approve Pact With Players," *New York Times*, November 27, 1996, A1.

65. E. J. Dionne, Jr., "Baseball's Ordinary Hero," *Washington Post*, September 5, 1995, A17.

66. Tony Kornheiser, "Sportsman of the Year: No Contest," *Washington Post*, December 7, 1995, B2.

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Des Moines Register*, December 27, 1995, 1S.

69. Thomas Boswell, "Quiet Cal Speaks Volumes," *Washington Post*, June 30, 1996, D1.

70. Buster Olney, "At crossroads, party is over for O's," *Baltimore Sun*, September 10, 1995, 10D.

71. See Ray Schuck, "Everything That is Good About Baseball—Theory of the Subject, ESPN, and Cal Ripken, Jr.," a paper presented at the Diamonds in the Desert International Baseball Conference, March 1998. Schuck observes that the broadcast's play-by-play announcer, Chris Berman, explained before the game that the contest celebrated "much more than just a major record." According to Berman,

We celebrate baseball the way it hasn't been celebrated for quite awhile. And we celebrate it the old-fashioned way—hometown boy playing for his hometown team in front of his hometown fans. We celebrate a work ethic that used to be a staple for baseball and, if you think about it, a work ethic that helped build America—you get up, you put in a hard day's work, and you go home to your family.

Schuck argues: "At a time when Americans voiced disillusionment with baseball due to labor dis-

putes and escalating player salaries—as well as at a time when Americans voiced concerns about what they perceived to be a loss of the value of community, a loss of the value of hard work, and a loss of the value of family—ESPN created a text to reaffirm these Americans' hope that their disillusionment could end and their lost values can be found again."

72. Free agency refers to the circumstance in which an athlete, after a period of time stipulated in his or her respective sport's collective bargaining agreement, can sell his or her services to the most attractive bidder. Economist Paul D. Staudohar puts it succinctly: "The players have been the chief beneficiaries from free agency." Paul D. Staudohar, *Playing For Dollars: Labor Relations and the Sports Business* (Ithaca, [1986] 1996), 37.

73. See Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York, 1992).

74. Fiske, *Media Matters*, xvii.

75. Thomas Boswell, "Focused on Greatness," *Washington Post Magazine*, March 22, 1992, 30.

76. Harvey Rosenfeld, *Iron Man: The Cal Ripken, Jr. Story* (New York, [1995] 1996.), 4.

77. Mark Maske, "One Man, Many Irons," *Washington Post*, July 6, 1997, D7.

78. Cal Ripken (photographs by Walter Iooss, Jr., edited by Mark Vancil), *Ripken: Cal on Cal* (Arlington, 1995), 49.

79. *Ibid.*, 64.

80. Cal Ripken, Sr. died of lung cancer on March 25, 1999, at the age of 63. Before retiring in 1992, he had spent 36 years in the Baltimore Orioles organization as a player, scout, coach, and manager. He was eulogized "by his close-knit family and hometown friends as a devoted father and tireless baseball man who would settle for nothing less than what he believed to be the right way of playing the game." William Gildea, "Ripkens, Town Say Goodbye to Cal Sr.," *Washington Post*, March 31, 1999, D1.

81. The reserve clause, a gentlemen's agreement codified in 1879 and overturned by an arbitrator in 1975, bound players to their teams indefinitely by giving the team for which he played exclusive rights to his services. For a useful discussion of the reserve clause's history, see Robert F. Burke, *Never Just A Game: Players, Owners, and American Baseball to 1920* (Chapel Hill, 1994), 62-63.

82. Steve Wulf, "Iron Bird," *Time*, September 3, 1995, 70.

83. Harrison Rainie, "Chasing Lou Gehrig and Immortality," *U.S. News & World Report*, December 26, 1994/January 2, 1995, 87.

84. For us, whiteness is not an essentialized racial identity, but a strategic deployment of power. As the dominant norm, whiteness remains invisible, rarely explicitly interrogated in mainstream accounts. Yet whiteness is omnipresent, almost always constructed in positive terms which seek to maintain the racial status quo. See George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment of Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, 1998).

85. See Philip M. Hoose, *Necessities: Racial Barriers in American Sports* (New York, 1989); Richard Lapchick, *Five Minutes to Midnight: Race and Sport in the 1990s* (Lanham, 1991); Kenneth L. Shropshire, *In Black and White: Race and Sports in America* (New York, 1996).

86. Max Boot, "Cal, Deion—And Us," *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 1995, A17.

87. Fiske, *Media Matters*, 13.

88. Roger C. Aden, "Nostalgic Communication as Temporal Escape: *When It Was a Game's* Reconstruction of a Baseball/Work Community," *Western Journal of Communication* 59 (Winter 1995): 20-38.

89. *Ibid.*, 26.

90. Randall Lane and Josh McHugh, "A very green 1995," *Forbes*, December 18, 1995, 219.

91. *People Weekly*, October 16, 1995, 140.

92. Richard Justice, "It's Over: Ripken Sits After 2,632 Games," *Washington Post*, September 21, 1998, A11.

93. Peter Schmuck, "Credit him with a big save," *Baltimore Sun*, September 27, 1998, 7S.

94. Thomas Boswell, "For Timeless Player, It Was Time," *Washington Post*, September 21, 1998, A10.

95. *New York Times*, September 22, 1998, A30.

96. Quoted in Hal Bodley, "One man's integrity restored fans' faith," *USA TODAY*, September 22, 1998, 3C.

97. Quoted in Schmuck, "Credit him with a big save," 7S.

98. Douglas S. Looney, "Baseball's Mr. Reliable and the Virtues of Just Showing Up," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 23, 1998, 3.

99. Dan Shaughnessy, "Iron man streak comes to an end," *Boston Globe*, September 21, 1998, A1.

100. Tom Verducci, "Endgame," *Sports Illustrated*, September 28, 1998, 11.

101. *Ibid.*

102. McGwire, for example, was constantly hailed as a hard worker (it was frequently noted



that he rebuilt his body in the weightroom) and as a family man through his relationship with his father, his son (who sometimes served as the Cardinals' bat boy, and who met his father at home plate after he hit his record-tying 61st home run), and even his ex-wife (who extolled his love and commitment to their son). At the same time, the media clearly marginalized Sosa in comparison to McGwire, arguably because he trailed McGwire in the home run chase for most of the season, and because of his African-Caribbean racial identity and Dominican Republic citizenship. The ways in which McGwire was celebrated for his home run hitting exploits led some to refer to him as the Great White Hope *de jour*.

103. See Jon Morgan, "Marketing Cal Ripken," *Baltimore Sun*, June 24, 1995, D4; Raymond Serafin, "Cal just a short stop from making history," *Advertising Age*, September 4, 1995, 4; Randall Lane, "Nice Guys Finish First," *Forbes*, December 16, 1996, 236-242.

104. Steven V. Roberts, "'Remember, baseball is a great game,'" *U.S. News & World Report*, August 14, 1995, 6.

105. See Benjamin G. Rader, "Compensatory Sport Heroes: Ruth, Grange, and Dempsey," *Journal of Popular Culture* 16 (Spring 1983): 11-22.

106. John W. Ward, "The Meaning of Lindbergh's Flight," *American Quarterly* X (Spring 1958): 15.

107. *Ibid.*, 7.

108. *Ibid.*

109. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis, 1990), 80.