

THIS IS A ROLE MODEL: DON'T BE LIKE ME

During a school boy pick up baseball game in the steamy summer of 1961, I was mocking “Voice of Baseball” Yankee broadcaster Mel Allen while ragging Moose Tobin as he stood at the plate. Teammate “Chimp” Chimilewski was howling “schwing battah battah battah” with every scorching twenty five mph pitch

Maris and Mantle were in the run to break the Sultan of Swats’ record and kids from Kennebunkport to Klamath Falls poured onto playing fields, acting out every pitch. The next day my dad and I had box seats in heaven, the house that Ruth Built; Yankee Stadium. We had heroes then.

My father was from Hells’ Kitchen, NYC. In knickers filled with nickels he probably swiped to sneak in, he was there the day the stars of baseball aligned; Opening Day of Opening Days, April 18, 1923 when ‘The Bambino’ launched three into history.

Swimming in Pepsi and Cracker Jacks on the right field line, I had my \$24.95 “Shirt Pocket, Big Speaker, 6 Transistor Motorola Radio” frequency dial scotch taped to the legendary broadcast team of Mel Allen, smooth southern gentleman Red Barber and home jobbing “Scooter” Phi Rizutto. Punching my oiled Nellie Fox oversized Rawlings glove on my southpaw, I was raring to go

Mickey Mantle was up; bronzed biceps bulging and lighting legs ready to rocket- fire. Then, quick as a Sandy Koufax curve came “CRRaaack - the inimitable sound of seasoned maple smacking horsehide in chorus with Barber drawling “Oh Doctor!”, Allen harping “Going, Going,” and then Scooter Rizutto yelping “Holy Cow- he hit that kid!”

I was that kid. The ball hit my chair and then me. Pain was never so saah-weet.

I can still smell the blast of Ballantine beer breath from the usher guy and hear his Bronx baritone, “Geez Louise Kid, da Mick smacked one there, eh? Heh, kid, you okay?” Dad assured him I was, but I wasn’t. Catching a Mickey Mantle mauled ball was the stuff of legends. My moment came and I blew it. I don’t remember much more of the game; it’s tough when your ego has been red shirted.

I sat there disappearing in my seat long after the ninth inning. Then my dad did something spectacular. He didn’t say much, but he told me the way dads do that we were going somewhere; just us fellas, and it was gonna be swell.

He never explained how we got into the press box to meet Mel Allen and Red Barber or where he got the baseball they signed. I had to duck as the ceilings were too low for a kid floating ten feet off the ground. And then “The Mick” stepped in, took off his hat, said “Sorry, Kid”, put my blanched little mitt in his mighty claw and asked if it would be okay to sign “my ball”. I was treated like the world’s most important fan. If it weren’t for becoming a doctor, I may never have washed that hand

It was an innocent time and I would not have understood Mickey's personal issues, the rampant familial alcoholism, his infidelities or his expectation of dying young. I read his apology in the April 14th 1994 Sports Illustrated. As an oncologist and infielder of dreams, I wept when he correctly observed after his ill fated liver transplant, "This is a role model: Don't be like me,"

Soon, a boorish athletically gifted brute will smack some horsehide into history and drone once again, "There wasn't anybody better than me at any level"

We are all to be role models, heroes in our homes and communities. Tony Gwynn and Cal Ripken were just inducted in to the Hall of Fame and enshrined with them is their timeless message... "When you sign your name on the dotted line (in life) ... you've got to be responsible and ...show people how things are supposed to be done"

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