Sports Heroes:
An Extension of Leadership

Virtually every field of human endeavor has produced its share of heroes, both for the benefit of those aspiring to success and for those who merely wish to admire or relive their heroes’ past glories. The sports world in particular has historically demonstrated an ability to create heroes instantly and/or keep alive the exploits of those from an earlier era. Given the fleeting nature of fame, it is not surprising that institutions have been established in most sports designed solely to perpetuate and keep before the public the flickering memories of past achievements.

Lewis and Redmond (1974) observe that halls of fame are peculiarly an American phenomenon and have multiplied at an astonishing rate since World War II. In addition to serving as quasi-religious shrines to honor the past, halls of fame fulfill other important social functions. Frequently, they provide a boost to tourism and serve as a repository for archival information. Perhaps equally important, they provide a setting that allows visitors to experience collective and individual nostalgia (Snyder, 1991).

However, it is not only sports officialdom that shows an interest in preserving the memories of great achievements. Many outstanding athletes are themselves mindful of their opportunities for a place in sports history. As a consequence, some will persist, often in the twilight of their careers, in pursuit of even more records simply to ensure that their mark in a sport will not be lost to future generations. Their interest in the postself, that is, “the concern of a person with the presentation of his or her self in history” (Schmitt & Leonard, 1986, p. 1088) manifests itself in the athlete’s striving to surpass past performances with a view to extending her or his name into the future. A question to be asked once an individual is established as a contemporary hero or enshrined in a hall of fame is the extent and quality of their influence on those who elevated them to their position of social prominence.

The Impact of Heroes

As noted in the previous chapter, nearly all definitions of leadership include a notion of influence. The case in support of the common assumption that heroes similarly influence their admirers in significant ways is best illustrated by Wolfenstein and Kliman’s (1965) comprehensive assessment of children’s reactions to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. For many of these children (and their parents) the president was a personal hero. Kennedy’s widespread popularity is seen in the results of a 1961 Gallup poll in which 41% of respondents with a grade school education and 17% of those with a college education chose him as the person they most admired (cited in Hyman, 1975, p. 282). Among the diverse
reactions observed in the aftermath of his death, perhaps the most important was a loss of the children’s motivation to achieve. The effects were far from transitory. Wolfenstein and Kliman collected their data several months after the tragedy. One can only speculate on the longevity of this and other residual influences, both positive and negative, arising from the loss.

Certainly, there is a wealth of testimonial and anecdotal evidence suggesting that deceased and living heroes are frequently credited with serving as an inspiration to others who strive for life goals. Be that as it may, the important and basic point to be established here is that heroes have the capacity to influence their admirers in fundamental and profound ways. The extent and quality of the influence exerted by prominent sports figures is a central theme of this chapter.

I would stress at this point that the act of choosing an exemplar is considerably more than a lighthearted exercise having few real-life consequences. Rather, a serious choice may reveal a great deal about a person. One possibility is that the values, traits, or behaviors that an individual sees displayed by a heroine/hero may be the very ones to which that person aspires and that motivate and guide his or her behavior. While the crash course on correlation (chap. 7) reminds us that we cannot infer causality, let alone any direction of influence, still links have been established between exemplar choices and attributes of their admirers. These relationships will be highlighted later in this chapter. In the meantime, let me underscore the central role of exemplar choices by reference to behaviors that often have serious, far-reaching social consequences. An example from the literature on wife battering will hopefully illustrate the point. Don Dutton (1988) has developed a comprehensive theory of spousal violence that profiles men who batter their female partners. A central component of the model that is predictive of assaultive behavior is “exposure to violent role models” (p. 68). Notwithstanding the question of whether all such models serve as personal heroes for batterers, the models’ violence is presumed to legitimize and provide scripts for men to enact similar tactics in their own relationships with women.

The importance of exemplar quality is also suggested by an early study that compared U.S. high school graduates to dropouts (Cervantes, 1965). The study revealed that both graduates and dropouts cited parents (followed by relatives) as the principal influences in their lives. A critical difference between the groups was seen in the nomination of peers. Almost twice as many dropouts (15%) as graduates (8%) indicated that peers were the most influential people in their lives. The percentage differences arose from the dropouts’ nomination of peers who did not meet with the approval of their parents.

Fortunately, the availability of prosocial heroes/heroines for children is not a matter that need be left entirely to chance. During the formative years in particular, parents, teachers, and others can actively expose youngsters to a wider circle of quality choices both on informal occasions and through the educational process. Perhaps of greater importance is the example that they themselves set.

A sidelight to the Cervantes (1965) study that should be of more than passing interest to those of us in the teaching profession was the almost total absence of