The Mick

In Memoriam

by James Como (April 2015)

Where imagination goes the rest of us must follow, so our interior landscape matters greatly. Take, for example, a boy (and more than a few girls) aged, say, eight to fourteen, at a time in history (the 'fifties) when football, basketball, and the opposite sex offered no competition: when a boy *played ball*, from early morning until after dark under whatever street-lamp there was. Hardball, softball, stickball (in-the-box and on-the-bounce), stoopball, slapball, catch-a-fly, and variations of these, by himself if necessary. Few were the moments when there was no spaldeen at hand, and a stickball bat of some sort. ("Spal-deen" was the term-of-art for a Spalding rubber ball, much preferred to a Pensy Pinky, let a alone the effete tennis ball.)

This boy tunes his imagination to an archetypal scene, Providentially composed. The greatest sports franchise in American history, playing our most deeply-*rooted* game, in our largest city, to our first mass television audience, proffers a successor to an icon (one Joe DiMaggio) of mythic proportions – a successor whose very name is somehow apt. The family name lends itself to wordplay – he sure did wear the mantle – and the first seems (but isn't) a familiar, and alliterative, nickname used among chums. It's as though Hollywood had changed it from something commonplace to something suitable to a marquee (like "Marilyn Monroe," resonating contemporaneously in the background).

The boy had never seen DiMaggio play, nor of course those earlier legendary New York Yankees who were no less than so many Zeuses and Apollos (because in those older days gods walked the earth). But he had Mickey Mantle, who even looked like another, slightly older boy, whose very grin seemed to say "c'mon, Jimmy, let's call for Eddie and Raymond and Russell and Demetria and play in-the-box, three-on-three! I got lots of time before I have to get to the Stadium." He had Mickey Mantle, who seemed able to walk on water, in fact run on water – faster than anyone ever had, even with two bad legs.

That boy – now grown, and realizing how easily that successor might have failed – knows that Mickey Charles Mantle, born October 20, 1931, in Spavinaw, Oklahoma, and elected to the Hall of Fame in 1974, in fact prevailed: twelve pennants and seven world championships; from 1953 to 1965 achievements that outstrip those of his superb contemporaries Aaron and Mays and rival those of DiMaggio himself; possessed of a ballplayer's two greatest assets, speed and power,

combined beyond the limits of anyone who ever played, and with leonine grace, under enduring physical duress, often in surpassingly dramatic fashion; and all this, finally, with *an absolute absence of preening*. This is how Mickey Mantle became, simply, *The Mick*.

When I was fourteen I watched him pinch-hit yet another game-winning homerun, this in his first at-bat back from a prolonged injury, and, in the presence of my father, made the mistake of referring to The Mick as a "hero." My father demurred. "Ted Williams is a hero," he said, "Coleman, Bauer, and Houk are heroes. The Mick" – whom my father in fact admired – "The Mick," he said, "has heart. Lots of heart. But he's not a hero." My father had been a medic in WWII, and the men he named, ballplayers all, were combat veterans, three of them decorated for valor. Thus the difference between a metaphor and the real thing. But to a boy, then and there, with life around him largely illusory, metaphor was real, and *that* reality (believe me in this) could be a very great refuge.

After his retirement the Mick once again became Mickey Mantle, not least because of what we learned about his off-the-field antics (which in those days did not make it out of the locker room and would not have mattered to the boy anyway) and beset by more failings than anyone could have thought possible. But at the end, after his liver was replaced and just weeks before he succumbed to a ferocious cancer on August 13, 1995, he once again became The Mick, his heart and his power intact even within a body which he himself laughed at for its depletion. After all, that power had always resided in his heart, not his muscle.

Here in the second decade of the twenty-first century two books have told us how troubled a man and how great a ballplayer he was, Jane Leavy's *The Last Boy* and Allen Barra's *Mickey and Willie*. Both authors (reluctantly but not grudgingly and using the complex combination of statistics now known as Sabremetrics) come to the same conclusion about The Mick's greatness as a player: he simply owned the 'fifties and early 'sixties, even beyond his preternaturally gifted contemporary Willie Mays. (Barra argues persuasively that each deserved *seven* Most Valuable Player Awards.) But I will rest my judgment on the testimony of his teammates. They were both in awe of his talent and baseball knowledge (he could learn the opposition pitcher's pattern by the second inning and more than once predicted his own homerun while waiting his turn on deck) and of his tolerance for pain, and they loved him dearly for his good cheer and generosity, especially towards rookies, who were generally ignored if not berated. (Once The Mick put his arm around you or victimized you with a harmless prank you were *in*, and it didn't take long.)

As for me, in my mind's eye I still see that right-handed swing, the most beautiful – in its speed, grace and ferocity – in the history of the game. And I still see him, at the end of a

long, ineluctably fleet dash into the great plains of left-center field of the old Yankee Stadium, lunging to his right to make a fully-extended. knee-high. back-handed catch of a laser-launched line drive to save Don Larsen's perfect game in the 1956 World Series, the only World Series perfect game in history. Ever. For me, and for millions just like me, *that*, folks, is really The Catch.

Not long before he died The Mick filmed a message to his fans. Ravaged to the point of emaciation, and not only by time, he told them that he had let so many people down and, above all, to look at him and to know that, at the end of the day, here was no role model at all. Will not ten thousand lives or more be saved by organs the donation of which will have been inspired by The Mick? And just as many lives on the verge of alcoholism brought back by his admonition not to do as he did? I wonder if my father would not have conceded that here, at last, was, if not heroism then certainly gallantry.

The great game goes on, as it always will, and just so does The Mick endure, in the imaginations and memories of those of us of a certain age, born and bred New Yorkers, in this twentieth year of his passing.

Where metaphor meets Reality may he continue to rest in peace.

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