

Last February, during spring training, Derek Jeter, who excelled as the New York Yankee shortstop for 20 years, announced that he would retire after the 2014 baseball season. Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig responded by lauding Jeter as “an exemplary face of our sport” and by noting that Major League Baseball looked forward “to celebrating his remarkable career throughout the 2014 season.”

Baseball did indeed celebrate Jeter’s stellar career with gusto, drawing the attention of sports fans and others around the country. Throughout the season, nineteen teams honored Jeter when they hosted the Yankees for the last time, including an early season tribute by the Los Angeles Angels, who showed a video of Jeter highlights before the game, much to the delight of an appreciative sellout crowd. In a May game at Cellular Field, the Chicago White Sox honored him with gifts before the game, including a check for his *Turn 2 Foundation* that provides programs to help young people avoid drugs and adopt a healthy lifestyle. During the game, another sellout crowd gave him a standing ovation before each of his plate appearances. Jeter, who was raised in Kalamazoo, Michigan, played his last game in Detroit on August 19th. Over the years, the Detroit fans have been fairly hard on him, perhaps because he left the state and played for the hated Yankees. On this night, however, in a pre-game ceremony, the capacity crowd cheered him, along with his immediate family and 28 high school students (*Jeter’s Leaders* from Kalamazoo) who have participated in his *Turn 2 Foundation*. In his comments, Jeter thanked the Tiger organization for including in the celebration the young people who are so close to his heart. In most of the nineteen cities, the pre-game tribute to Jeter included a donation to his Foundation.

All this public display of respect and even affection led up to Jeter’s final home game at Yankee Stadium. Before the game started, the Yankees showed a video tribute that brought prolonged cheers from the overflowing crowd, some of whom had paid over \$2,000 to be part of the historic event. As the game unfolded, Jeter drove in a run with a double and scored a tying run. In the eighth inning the Yankees took a three run lead, and the plan was to take Jeter out of the game in the top of the ninth and have some of his close Yankee teammates escort him off the field. But, improbably, the Yankee closer gave up three runs, leaving the score tied going into the bottom of the ninth inning, thus thwarting the plan. In the bottom of the ninth, the Yankees got the winning run to second with Jeter coming to the plate. The Tiger players who were watching the game on television all said they just knew he would get the clutch hit as he had done so often throughout his brilliant career. And so he did with a single to right, scoring the runner on a close play at the plate. Jumping for joy, Jeter was mobbed by his teammates and the crowd went crazy one more time. The well-planned exit of Jeter from the field gave way to the more remarkable wild celebration of one last thrilling baseball highlight for the Captain of the Yankees.

How are we to understand the remarkable Jeter phenomenon? ESPN’s Keith Olbermann thinks it is all horribly overblown, nauseously exaggerated. In an extended rant, Olbermann insisted: Jeter is not “the greatest person in human history,” “did not invent baseball,” and “is not the greatest shortstop who ever lived.” He is not even one of the top ten Yankees of all time and “nowhere near an immortal,” like Ruth, Gehrig and DiMaggio. Jeter never won a batting title or an MVP award and was not a very good defensive shortstop, according to Olbermann. In short, all the hype is out of proportion to the actual baseball talents and accomplishments of the Yankee captain.

Many analysts have come to Jeter’s defense, noting a whole series of accomplishments: most impressively, he ranks sixth all time in hits just ahead of the great Pittsburgh Pirate shortstop Honus Wagner, and behind Rose, Cobb, Aaron, Musial and Speaker. Furthermore, he helped the Yankees win five World Series titles; played in 13 All-Star Games; won five American League Gold Glove awards; and finished with a .313 lifetime batting average. The statistics are impressive, but they do not explain the Jeter mania.

My own personal baseball hero, Al Kaline, played 22 years for the Detroit Tigers, hit 399 home runs, got over 3,000 hits, won 10 Gold Gloves and played in 18 All-Star games, all numbers better or comparable to Jeter’s stats. On October 2, 1974, my father and I were in Tiger Stadium to pay tribute to Kaline as he played his final major league game. It was a cold, dreary afternoon with an announced attendance of over 4,000 but about half that many in the stands. I was desperately hoping that my hero would hit a home run giving him 400 and making him one of the few players with 3,000 hits and 400 home runs. After two unsuccessful at bats, Kaline, the designated hitter, was replaced with a pinch hitter. No home run, no final curtain call, no special moment to honor the future Hall of Fame player, just a couple thousand disappointed fans. The contrast with Jeter’s last game could not be greater and may be instructive.

Derek Jeter is a product of the media-driven celebrity culture. Playing for the Yankees in New York gave him great media exposure unavailable in smaller markets like Detroit. As a star player in the TV era, he made hundreds of millions of dollars, far more than Kaline, who had a top salary of \$110,000. Television made Jeter a familiar face and created interest in his private life, while Kaline enjoyed a private life remote from media attention. Jeter did some lucrative TV commercials (for example, a recent one where he greets ordinary people in the Bronx as he walks to Yankee Stadium for a game) that enhanced his image as a good guy who loved his fans. I do not recall Kaline ever doing a commercial. He was an

outstanding baseball player who played in relative obscurity; Jeter was also an outstanding player who enjoyed a spectacular farewell tour reserved for a celebrity.

For some of us serious baseball fans, Jeter represents the fulfillment of childhood dreams of playing major league baseball. Growing up, I had a great love for baseball inherited from my father, along with a hope of playing shortstop in the big leagues someday. By the time I was a senior in high school, I realized, even if others didn't, that my skills fell far short of my dreams. I recalled those dreams one sunny afternoon in late September 1968 when I joined about 5,000 fans for Mickey Mantle's last game at Yankee Stadium, which at the time drew very little attention. Taking advantage of the old Yankee Stadium tradition of allowing fans on the field after the last game of the season, I walked out to the shortstop position and tried to absorb the ambiance. The long forgotten boyhood dream came back. I go deep in the hole, backhand the ball, plant my right foot, and make a strong throw just nipping the runner at first. And then back to reality, but still grateful for the experience. My guess is that Jeter generated enthusiasm among some fans because they resonate, in some way, with his fulfilled dream of playing shortstop for the New York Yankees.

Finally, the Jeter phenomenon gained energy from his own character and value system. Baseball celebrates consistently high performances over a long period of time. Whole career statistics are used to measure a player's place among the all-time greats. Recently, the great statistical accomplishments of individual stars, like Roger Clemens and Barry Bonds, have been tainted by the charge that they used performance-enhancing drugs. With Jeter, there has never been any hint that he cheated by using drugs. Furthermore, he lived for twenty years under the intense scrutiny of the New York media without being linked to any credible scandals. He said he never wanted to do anything to embarrass his parents and it seems he kept that minimum standard of morality. His admiral efforts to help at-risk kids through his Foundation represents a higher stage of moral development and deserved applause. Fans weary of drug scandals and disappointed by the behavior of star athletes needed and wanted a star they could respect, and, in Derek Jeter, they found not only a great player who put up impressive career numbers, but also a good man who respected the game, honored his parents and served the community.