

Doing it the 'right way'

by Cal_Thomas

In the reporting and commentary that preceded Sunday's Baseball Hall of Fame induction ceremony for San Diego's Tony Gwynn and Baltimore's Cal Ripken Jr., one ESPN sports journalist observed: "They did it the right way." That is a foreign concept in our day: the "right" way. Why? When I was growing up - and until recent years - most athletes played by the rules and did things the right way. Their only "enhancement" was hard work, which refined natural talent. At the start of the week, Barry Bonds was preparing to equal and surpass Hank Aaron's record of 755 career home runs. Bonds will deserve more than the asterisk baseball attached to Roger Maris, whose only "enhancement" was playing in more games than previous record holder, Babe Ruth. Bonds is alleged to have been helped along with steroids. Last week, Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick emerged from a courtroom following indictments on federal dogfighting charges. Vick promised that the coming trial will help him get his "good name" back. One must first have a good name, which increasing numbers of sports celebrities do not. Professional basketball and cycling are other sports recently tainted by rule infractions, even lawbreaking. And then there are Gwynn and Ripken who did it "the right way." I saw Gwynn play only on television, and have read that he is a strong family man and humanitarian. Living closer to Baltimore than to San Diego, I saw Ripken play a lot. On and off the field, Ripken conducted himself as a gentleman, a word that began to fall out of fashion in the '60s. He would sign autographs before games and waited after games to sign even more until the last child (or adult) was satisfied. There was never a story about Ripken that involved drugs, alcohol, extramarital affairs, boorish behavior, gambling, conceit or anything else that would discredit Ripken, the game, the city of Baltimore, the Orioles, or disgrace his family. On Sept. 6, 1995, when Ripken broke Lou Gehrig's record for consecutive games played, the outpouring of emotion in Baltimore and in the voices of the announcers calling the game (even I teared up) was heartfelt. It was as if America was lamenting what it had lost when it traded real accomplishment for celebrity and false glory. What do we celebrate today? Upon whom is our attention fixed? It is the likes of Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears. And if one turns to tabloid cable TV, it is also missing women, murdered women and their daughters, missing daughters who disappear with men who murder them and other sensationalized and violently gratuitous tragedies. Do we teach, encourage and practice "the right way" in our personal lives and relationships, schools, politics, or anything else? We do not. That would require imposing a moral code, which is less acceptable than the immorality that inevitably fills a culture trapped in a moral vacuum. Instead we adopt the philosophy behind the Frank Sinatra song "My Way." Whatever feels good at the moment and helps us make it through the night is all we want. We crave the immediate over the eternal, the base over the noble, the cheap over the valuable and the tawdry over the wholesome. And then we are surprised when we get fewer Gwynns and Ripkens and more Bonds, Vicks, Lohans and Spears. Not so long ago when a child got in trouble with the law, or just behaved badly, parents would consult a priest, rabbi or minister and the family would go into seclusion. Now they bypass all of that, preferring to talk about it on "Larry King Live," as Lohan's father did last week. Have they no shame? Why should they when the rest of us appear to have none? At Cooperstown, the chairman of the Baseball Hall of Fame, Jane Forbes Clark, said that the 53 living members who joined Ripken and Gwynn had demonstrated "character, integrity and sportsmanship." They didn't catch those qualities like an unwanted virus; they had to be drummed into them. Why don't we learn from them instead of denying the very qualities we claim to want reflected in a new generation? (Direct all MAIL for Cal Thomas to 2225 Kenmore Ave., Suite 114, Buffalo, N.Y. 14207. Readers may also e-mail Cal Thomas at tmseditors@tribune.com.) (c) 2007 Tribune Media Services, Inc.

Doing it the 'right way' by Cal_Thomas