THE NEW ATLANTIS
A Journal of Technology & Society

Our Asterisked Heroes

Douglas Kern

The future of heroism is an asterisk.

In 1961, Baseball Commissioner Ford Frick decreed that in the annals of baseball, an asterisk should appear next to Roger Maris's record of 61 home runs in a single baseball season. Frick contended that Maris's achievement could not be compared fairly to the record he broke—Babe Ruth's record of 60 home runs, established in 1927. Ruth struck 60 home runs in a season composed of 154 games; Maris struck 61 home runs in a season composed of 162 games. To award Maris the all-time home run record would suggest that his accomplishment wholly and unambiguously supplanted Ruth's, but it had not. So Frick announced that Maris's name should appear above Ruth's for the all-time record—but an asterisk next to Maris's record should direct the eyes of the admiring to the bottom of the page, where a small blurb would explain that Maris's achievement was not entirely the heroic feat it appeared to be.

The asterisk was never implemented; baseball has no official records in which such a notation appears. But the myth of the asterisk continues to this day. The asterisk has become an abiding symbol of attenuated heroism.

Attenuated heroism—in baseball and elsewhere—is our future. Performance-enhancing drugs already allow today's athletes to surpass the records of yesteryear, and the pharmacological and genetic enhancements of the future may one day make today's champions look average. But as our greatest athletes grow ever more capable, we may eventually look backwards for our examples of heroism. In the champions of old, we will find achievements born of something greater than science and personal choice; we will find a drama of heroism and tragedy that progress itself may now be flattening out of existence.

The Great American Game

Definitions of heroism are elusive; examples of heroism are plentiful. The heroes of myth—Perseus, Odysseus, King Arthur, and Hercules, to name just a few—were not always perfect exemplars of goodness, but all of them accomplished great deeds with noble purpose. Few would question

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the selfless heroism of soldiers who stand their ground in battle or firefighters who rush into burning buildings while everyone else is rushing out. But can we really speak of a baseball record as heroic? A sports accomplishment saves no lives, imparts no wisdom, and lends no timeless beauty to the world. It derives its sole merit from the drama that it embodies. Athletic competition commands our attention and excites our passions, and for that reason alone we should take it seriously.

Every spectator sport reflects back to the world symbols and portents of the drama inherent in all life. The drama inherent in baseball uniquely captures the drama of ordinary life in America. It is a drama of daily labor and ordinary toils, mundane in themselves but vital in their accumulation. It is a drama rooted in the certainty of failure: the best batter will fail to get on base more often than he will succeed, and the best pitcher will give up three runs for every nine innings pitched. It is a drama of repetition and domesticity, not martial grandeur. Youth is served in the spring; the old and lame depart in the fall; and man toils under the sun in the summer.

Unlike football, basketball, soccer, and hockey, baseball does not partition the playing field into "ours" and "theirs"; teams do not march up and down an imaginary battleground, seizing and surrendering territory. Unique among all team sports, baseball moves in a circle. The drama focuses on the home—leaving from it, defending it, returning to it, just as all men do in the paths of life. Baseball is bourgeois life, at once made smaller and grander.

But the real drama of baseball—the heroic dimension of baseball—is beyond bourgeois. To hit a single home run in a major league baseball game is to defy the edges of the expected; nearly all home runs fly past the boundaries of the baseball field, well outside the prescribed zone of play—outside of the realm that the stadium itself defines to be normal. One home run is a great victory. To surpass all men in all recorded history in home runs struck in a single season is beyond belief. And beyond belief is where heroism is found.

In the Fall 1990 issue of *The Public Interest*, Donald Kagan defends the heroic understanding of baseball from the allegedly anti-heroic vision extolled by George F. Will in his 1990 bestseller, *Men at Work: The Craft of Baseball*. Kagan argues that the appeal of baseball lies in the splendor of heroic accomplishments: the majesty of home runs and bat-splintering hits and acrobatic catches. He rejects Will's preference for careful, analytical, base-to-base baseball, speculating playfully that Will prefers plodding, anti-heroic baseball because Will detects in himself more of the gritty worker than the dashing, heroic champion.

Will dismisses these arguments in his rebuttal, noting that Kagan, as a professor of classics at Yale, is a man accustomed to the company of gods. (Kagan's article and Will's response also appear in Will's 1998 compilation of baseball essays, *Bunts*.) For men without gods for fathers, Will suggests, the modest baseball achievements that spring from thought, experience, and perception provide a sufficiently satisfying and heroic spectacle.

Will reasons carefully and intelligently, but Kagan wins the debate. We may watch individual baseball games to enjoy contemplative, strategic play, but unlikely heroic exploits inspire us to pass the tradition of baseball on to our children. Heroism cements the irrational attachment from which abiding love springs. Sturdy, determined players who make the most of their skills will always have a prominent role to play, but in the end they are the squires to the Lancelots and Galahads of the game. The four thousandth stolen base, the three thousandth game started—our minds tell us that these milestones are important. But a game-winning home run? A diving catch to save a perfect game? A headfirst slide into home? Those accomplishments speak to the heart of heroism.

Enhanced Heroism?

In light of recent developments in the fields of genetic engineering and performance-enhancing drugs, all professional sports are beginning to confront the problem of the asterisk. We already know about steroids, erythropoietin (EPO), and human growth hormone, but we are not fully prepared for the next age of technologies, such as genetically-enhanced muscle mass (already happening in mice) and genetic testing of human embryos for advantageous genes. Press reports recently told of an anonymous boy in Germany whose DNA was found to contain a code exceptionally favorable to the development of large muscle mass, according to German scientists who obtained a sample of the boy's DNA through random testing. If scientists can isolate a gene uniquely beneficial to sports performance, they may eventually be able to manipulate the genes of others into copying that favorable gene.

Surely, a lucrative market for such manipulation would exist among parents desperate to bring a future sports star into the world or teenagers desperate to become sports stars themselves. If that German boy grows up to be a professional weightlifter, how should his achievements be compared to those of athletes lacking the favorable gene? Should we celebrate athletes who are essentially freaks of nature? Are *all* great athletes freaks of nature, with genetic predispositions and thus phenotypic possibilities

unlike the rest of us? And if so, why not supplement the random advantages of nature with the deliberate advantages of science?

The speed with which new enhancements are created will probably outstrip the ability of science to detect their use. The desire of athletes to excel will propel the creation of novel enhancements—and the intensity of that desire will far outweigh the desire of sports authorities to detect such modifications. And what possible test could detect the presence of artificially-induced genes favorable to sports? Should such genes be "banned?" How? And what kind of screening ought to be done for individuals who possess such genes naturally? The answers to such questions have ramifications that extend far beyond the world of sports. Such questions cast a shadow upon the possibility of heroism itself.

An era that lacks unambiguous heroes is an era that lacks confidence in its own worth; it is an era prone to cynicism and the veneration of anti-heroes. And ours is certainly an age with an ambivalent attitude toward heroism. The foibles of our would-be heroes are trumpeted on television, and those who aspire to heroism find themselves the target of merciless scrutiny. Our world aches for great leaders to set it right, yet overflows with cynicism towards any man who volunteers for great leadership. And such cynicism is often justified, since public relations gurus create make-believe heroes as easily as the tabloids destroy real ones. In light of such self-defeating beliefs and realities, who can be surprised that our political, cultural, and artistic worlds are so divisive and fragmented? Contemporary culture is a graveyard for heroes of every kind.

The very idea of the heroic exists in tension with the egalitarian and libertarian impulses that now hold sway in Western society. We often resent the presence of those whose abilities and achievements hint at the presence of a natural aristocracy, to which some belong and others do not. How unfair that heroes alone should be heroic! This perception of unfairness is particularly ironic, for although genetic enhancements and chemical treatments offer ordinary people the choice to possess "heroic" qualities, it is the very *chosen* nature of such enhancements that dilutes the quality of future heroism.

The Sources of Merit

Consider two men playing professional baseball. One man possesses a natural, unadulterated capacity for hitting home runs. The other man had a procedure performed on him *in utero* that gave him a genetic makeup favorable to batting; he has the genes for keen eyesight, lightning-fast

reflexes, and great upper-body strength. Both men hit eighty home runs in the course of a season. Whose accomplishment is more heroic? Would it matter if the surgical procedure in question were performed when the latter player was in college? Would it matter if his parents chose it for him? Would it matter if the former player possesses an effortless natural gift for batting, or if he obtained his batting skill through years and years of painstaking practice? Or both?

Neither man obtains his abilities entirely through his own merit. The former player owes at least part of his skill to the genes of his parents; the latter player, to the wonders of modern biochemistry. Neither player owes his abilities entirely to chance; good genes, however obtained, mean nothing without hard work and preparation. Nevertheless, we sense that the accomplishments of the unmodified man are somehow more heroic than those of the modified man; they spring naturally from who he is and what he does, not from what was done to him artificially by others.

Every person exists in tension between his chosen and unchosen qualities, between given possibilities and lived realities. It is that tension that makes us natural. Of course, not everything natural is good. Spina bifida is "natural," but if genetic manipulation one day eliminates it from the earth, no one will mourn its passing. And not every good thing is natural. Modern medical science makes use of a host of drugs, treatments, and surgeries that grossly distort the body's natural arrangements and states of equilibrium—all to stave off the ailing body's natural inclination to die. Nearly every person alive in Western civilization today owes his life and well-being to the intervention of unnatural medical acts. Such is the flattening that the unnatural brings—the tragic is destroyed, but so too, perhaps, is the heroic.

Society struggles to balance the tension between the chosen and unchosen aspects of natural selves. In the criminal justice system, a difficult upbringing or a genetic predisposition to anger may mitigate the penalty paid for committing a crime, but they do not mitigate guilt or innocence. On questions of culpability, we impute free choice and personal responsibility to perpetrators. And whatever the metaphysical ramifications of free will versus biological predestination, we know that if we fail to impute free will to criminals, we will get more excuses and more crime.

Similarly, in free markets, we richly reward citizens for employing their gifts in ways that benefit society—irrespective of whether those gifts were earned through hard work or simply obtained through advantageous birth. Consequently, our society sometimes rewards the talented

but lazy over the industrious but unremarkable. We accept the ensuing inequity as the price we pay for strong economic growth. We assign "merit" to the creation of wealth, knowing that such creation is often a product of luck or favorable genes rather than praiseworthy choices, but knowing also that the fiction of merit produces the creativity and industriousness that an economy needs to function.

We can sustain the partial fiction of such merit because the dividing line between genetic capacity and personal effort is so murky. Who can say with certainty what percentage of Michael Jordan's success sprang from his natural gifts, and what percentage sprang from his indomitable will to win? And who can say with precision just where his "will to win" came from or what exactly it is? Certain generalizations can be made, of course. Some athletes clearly possess talent that outstretches their capacity for hard work, while other athletes overachieve as a result of ferocious dedication, teamwork, and attention to detail. But it is difficult to apply these kinds of generalizations to specific cases. No one can know if any given achievement or failure sprang from will, genes, or the mysterious interaction of the two, so we credit the achiever for the full merit of the achievement. Much of our society is built upon the unspoken recognition and willful ignorance of such uncertainty.

Certainty and Heroism

Science threatens to peel away this uncertainty. In his 2000 collection of essays, *Hooking Up*, Tom Wolfe discusses a machine that can accurately gauge the I.Q. of any given person, simply by monitoring the subject's brainwave activity while staring at a tack on a wall. Despite the machine's proven accuracy, no one wanted to buy one. Why not? No one wanted to know his own I.Q. with such an incontrovertible degree of accuracy. A mediocre score on an ordinary I.Q. test can be attributed to any number of factors: an upset stomach, an inability to test well, family problems, math anxiety, and so on. But from the verdict of the machine, from the verdict of science, there is no appeal.

True self-knowledge is a terrifying thing. We crave uncertainty when it comes to our abilities—for the mystery of uncertainty makes room for miracles of achievement. Uncertainty allows for the possibility of heroism. No act would be heroic if it were wholly preordained. Great heroic acts—be they home runs, battles narrowly won, breakthroughs suddenly realized, sacrifices spontaneously made—all thrill us in part because the possibility of failure was so strong. We cannot know if the champion will

find within himself the resources to triumph *this* time, in *this* struggle, even if his will is strong, even if he has triumphed before. But genetic engineering reduces such uncertainty. In the future, to know a man's genes with scientific precision will be to know his propensities, limits, and intrinsic advantages with an accuracy that mere observation cannot rival. Ordinarily, we can only guess at the measure of a man. We can only examine a man's actions, words, and demonstrated abilities in the hope of understanding some small fragment of the enigma that is each living person. But in a world remade by genetic engineering, the mysteries of human nature and human ability are replaced with the irrefutable certainty of gene charts and case histories. The tension between success and failure is less compelling when the thumb of artificial improvement is placed on the scale. And so, for want of uncertainty, heroism is diminished.

We cannot take solace in the hope that, in an era of artificially-enhanced sportsmen, we will assign heroism to players with great will rather than natural ability. A strong will is insufficient for true heroism. The minor leagues of all sports are filled with competitors who show stupendous determination in pursuit of athletic excellence—an excellence that often leads no further than a working-class salary on a semi-pro team. However much we may admire the plucky underdog who scrapes by on the strength of true grit, the record books do not list those who tried the hardest to hit home runs or those who gave the most effort while trying to score touchdowns. Will is important to heroism—but magnificent achievement is essential. And if good genes favor the formation of a strong will, genetic engineering may allow us to conquer our capacity for hard work and perseverance just as surely as it allows us to conquer our physical inadequacies. Choice shall master will.

But the true hero cannot entirely choose greatness. Greatness also chooses him. We marvel at the spectacle of heroes, who through hard work, determination, and no small amount of luck, transform themselves into conduits through which extraordinary feats enter the world. Heroism shows us a glimmer of God's brilliance, refracted through a human prism into wondrous colors. To dilute heroic accomplishments through genetic refinement—through premeditated scientific choice—is to burnish the prism while diminishing the light.

In sports, the *practical* effects of genetic engineering may be small. Perhaps enhanced strength lends but a small advantage to batters. Perhaps gene therapy to enhance endurance will shave only a few seconds from the speed of runners. But who can help but feel differently about an

athlete who is genetically preordained for success? Who would not roll his eyes and whisper "of course" to himself, upon learning that a sports hero had been treated with performance-enhancing drugs prior to a competition? Even the slightest shred of artificial improvement diminishes the transcendent *otherness* of the athletic talent in question. And when ostensibly heroic achievement does not contain some hint of the *other*—when achievement is wholly human, bereft of the tantalizing touch of something greater than human—heroism must wither.

I do not mean to suggest that every heroic act must represent some form of collusion between the will of the achiever and the finger of God. I argue only that heroism tacitly entails the presence of some force greater than human choice. Human heroes must be or must seem to be more-than-human. Designing the latest performance-enhancing drugs is perhaps a new kind of heroism—an example of the transcendent greatness of man-the-engineer. But this is heroism of a very different sort: it is less available to ordinary human experience; it is less inspiring of the noble human passions; it is more premeditated and less majestic.

Courage and Chemistry

Sports is not the only endeavor in which heroism will be devalued. Consider, for example, heroism in a time of war. Every man who has ever fought—or even confronted the possibility of combat—knows that valor in the face of violent death is an unnatural thing. A small degree of courage can be attained through the deadening of thought and the power of repetition, but to hold one's fear in abeyance in order to subdue the enemy is nearly superhuman. In admiration of courageous feats, we esteem our most masterful warriors as heroes.

Genetic or pharmacological enhancement may improve the physique and dexterity of tomorrow's soldiers. But we should also expect that chemicals and treatments will be developed that deaden the future soldier's sensation of fear. The biology and chemistry of fear in the human body have been well-studied. If chemical treatments can still the mental chaos of schizophrenics, why can they not calm the fears of frightened soldiers? As most personality traits appear to spring at least partially from genetic influences, we should not expect fearlessness to be different. Biological engineers may learn how to craft men inherently predisposed to courage.

Fear is an element of nearly every human action worth undertaking. Without fear, human accomplishment would be enormous—and almost

bereft of admirable qualities. A soldier with a constricted sense of fear will surely fight like a demon in war. But such ferocity would be a certainty, achieved without any triumph over timidity and cowardice. Can we really compare the martial successes of artificially-brave soldiers to the victories of men who fought without such assistance?

Such is the paradox of genetic improvements and artificial enhancements. After obvious horrors and scourges have been eliminated, we are left with ever-expanding achievements but ever-diminished meaning to be derived from those achievements. And when meaning is diminished, achievement cannot be easily gauged.

Imagine if the wonders of genetic engineering had been available to our ancestors 500 years ago, and that all moral and cultural objections to the use of such technology were overcome. To be sure, our ancestors would have enhanced themselves and their progeny in ways that seemed universally desirable—eliminating fatal maladies, disfigurement, mental incapacities, and so forth. But their choices might also seem offensive and destructive to us now. Perhaps the distinctive features of race and ethnicity would have been abolished altogether. Perhaps our forebears would have discarded genes conducive to atheism and heresy, thus guaranteeing an artificially-induced religious tranquility. Perhaps genes favoring physical stamina and strength would have been favored over genes favoring intellect and creativity, the better to populate and farm the countryside for the benefit of the aristocracy. Such alterations seem absurd to us now—but the genetic preferences of 2004 will seem equally absurd in 500 years. The "improvements" of one era may be the bizarre self-inflicted curses of the next.

Worse, how could such curses ever be broken? If heterodox tendencies are suppressed, for example, how will anyone ever possess the desire to recover such tendencies? To whom would the recovery of such tendencies appeal, if genetic engineering extirpates the very possibility of desiring the abnormal? By altering our natural selves, we risk altering the means by which we gauge what our selves are and what they ought to be. We may become prisoners of a single era's vision of the good. The boundaries of the human field will be fixed; no ball will fly out of the yard.

The Post-Heroic Age

Since the beginning of time, man has been the master of his own technology. But when we bind the genes of our children to our vision of the good, we cease to create our technology; our technology creates us. Such a development will surely fulfill the age-old Promethean dream of self-

creation. But such "improvement" flattens the defining human drama of reconciling our chosen actions to our unchosen situation.

Perhaps it is too dramatic to claim that such a loss robs us of our humanity. Perhaps the more tragic elements of humanity are worth losing. And perhaps new dramas will replace the ones we abolish by manipulating our DNA.

But perhaps not. With genetic engineering, we embark on new human dramas before resolving the old ones. Eight thousand years of civilization have barely taught us how to live as we are. What will teach us to live as we choose to be? These questions, already difficult, grow only more painful when the possibility of heroism is foreclosed.

We need heroes as reminders of grace. We need heroes to show us that sometimes—for some people, possibly even ourselves—what we can do is more than the sum of our choices. What we can be is more than how other people have shaped us. As science expands the realm of human choice, it increases the distance we must travel to get away from the awful unyielding reality of being selves made only by choice. Great achievement may be begotten by science, but heroism is begotten by lightning. Achievement we will always have. But it is not so with lightning.

I do not doubt that a future of scientific self-enhancement will yield tremendous benefits in our daily lives. Greater intelligence will enrich us with extraordinary new experiences and sensations; greater health and physical ability will increase the pleasure we derive from the days allotted to us. We will run our bases faster; we will hit the ball farther and more often; and all the numbers and statistics that track a life well-lived will show steady improvement. But we will place an asterisk by these numbers. We will look back to yesterday's heroes, with their bad genes, with their unsuppressed fear and unenhanced intellects and untreated maladies, and we will wonder to ourselves: "How did they do it?" And we will reclaim our wisdom and our humanity when we rediscover the answer.