

Celebrity, Redemption, and a Tale of Two Teds

Ted Williams Last At Bat

Contemporary Ted Williams

Both Ted Williams worked at their craft. Both were very good. You rely on an audience though. That's the way fame works.

Both Ted Williams longed to be accepted by a world that had somehow had failed to begotten them. And both were somehow redeemed by a society that itself, infused their own mea culpas within the failings of the famous. That's the way celebrity works.

But there's more. Of fame, celebrity, and redemption, once can never be satiated.

Ted Williams the Splendid Splinter, 21 seasons, left fielding thumper of the Boston Red Sox, famously disquieted the media and the Boston fans for their lack of unconditional loyalty. Love me through thick and thin, he seemed to be asking, because if you earn my trust, I will return in kind.

But even until his final Fenway Park at-bat in 1960—that lovely, arcing homer to the RF bullpen—The Kid was true to his convictions. Take all of me, folks, or none at all. You had your chance. Now go find another.

The other Ted, one Mr. Williams formerly of Flatbush, Brooklyn, NY, formerly of a clump of bushes near a Columbus, Ohio freeway off ramp, is presently situated where his more famous namesake was perhaps on day one of his MLB career. I need to be famous to somehow live in this place without suffering. He must be thinking. I'm an entertainer, a pitchman with God-given pipes. Let me work.

Ted-the-Voice seems smart enough, realizing that he's a meteoric story. Gotta get to earth before I burn up. I have about 30 something hours to milk my 15 minutes. Get an advance, get it in writing, and play along with the game, man. It's cold in those bushes at night.

In a what-have-you-done-for-me-tomorrow world, it only took perhaps the greatest hitter in baseball 31 years to understand that fame and futility, celebrityness and security, loyalty and body language intersect in places that even the top culture and media scholars can barely wrap their blogs around. The sometimes moody and brooding Ted Williams, who was generous with the needy and stumped for the inclusion of Negro League players during his Hall of Fame induction speech, would finally tip his hat to the Boston crowd at Ted Williams Day in 1991.

The other Ted Williams, the once and future radio voice whose viral arc of rediscovery has been reduced from decades to hours, must feel as tectonically-shifted as our left fielder. Reversals of fortune, something happened and I will never, can never and should never look upon my world in the same way. Difference is in how long it took. And can you make it stick?

Couple of 31s, years and hours. But it's the same idea—sooner or later the give and get of redemption runs roughshod over everything. It started with Adam and Eve, or even before them. Root cause, Man. People want a second chance and are pretty damn ready to offer it because they know they'll. Human bloody nature. Pure pathos running the gamut from Jimmy Swaggart to Tiger Woods. Let me make it up to you. I'll be good this time. I've found something of a higher order.

Ted 'the voice' Williams seems authentically-moved by the fate that placed him in front of more people in 3 days than our other Ted might've played for in 30 months. Even the die-hard cynics exhuming his legal records cannot be unaffected. Something very, very spontaneous happened and then it became very, very mediated. But along the way, something larger than our two Teds must be dusted off and rolled out for examination.

According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), there exists nearly three quarters of million people, many of them children, who have no permanent home and live in temporary shelters, underpasses, and freeway off ramps. The problem has gotten worse, not better.

According to Ted Williams of baseball fame, in his 1966 induction speech, "someday Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson in some way can be added as a symbol of the great Negro players who are not here

(baseball's Hall of Fame) only because they weren't given a chance." The problem of inclusion in sport has shifted from color of skin to depth of pocket. Homelessness and discrimination, linked in their need for elimination.

Ted the Voice won the lottery of chances. And everyone it seems is rooting for him. Sadly, the chink in the feel-good narrative is a mother who feels "embarrassed" by her son's fall from grace. C'mon, Julia. Ever read the parable of the Prodigal Son?

Columbus Ted told reporters, "people would drive by and shout out, 'get a job.'" Boston Ted suggested that black ball players were disallowed from working at a job they were highly qualified to do. Give me a chance, man. Let me show you what I can do. Let me redeem myself through an honest days' work.

Interestingly, HUD is citing numbers and Williams is offering evidence. When you put a real name to a problem suddenly the mass-cultured minds think, "That could've been me."

That's right, Joe. It could've and can still be so. As is suggested in both Genesis and Revelations, there may be time.

The Bible opens and closes the same way, book-ended by the idea of redemption as Williams book-ended his final season in 1960; hitting the balls where they became more important in legend than in truth.

Sports are the perfect place to sell redemption; sometimes the cold truth of it and more often the myth. Erase a single err with a double to left. Baseball offers of a 3-out inning, football's Hail Mary pass, basketball's penance-by-foul count, hockey's penalty box; it's all about redemption from action and sometimes, an alteration of fate. Fate dealt me a bad hand. It's not religious or even spiritual. It's just human, the perfect imperfection of fate. So give me chance to mess with the muse.

The Kid from Boston has left us, for now. His own kids, John-Henry (died in 2004) and Claudia (strange Shakespearean references) opted to freeze Teddy Ballgame's head...just in case. Strange inhumane stuff, some will argue, genius skipping a generation. And our other new Ted contemplates six figure contracts while trying to sustain the fame that giveth while alive.

Classic redemptive narratives but also fraught with nuances. Sports marketers love this stuff. Put Ted 'the Voice' Williams on as color commentator and the elite team owners look positively egalitarian. We redeemed the man. Did you see that one, God? The cartel has a heart.

But like that other survivor of physical culture, Rolling Stone guitarist, Keith Richards suggests in his book, *Life*, that "Image is a long shadow. Even when the sun goes down you can see it." Baseball fandom has these images of how much humanness we have to redeem. Thus the contentious discourse on instant replay. And sport consumers have images of more than two Ted Williams. Why eat the same meal every time?

There is the focused student of hitting, the tactless and temperamental Kid who waged war against the "knights of the typewriter," the selfless patriot flying missions over Korea, and the aged, submitted figure who had little left to live or die for. And so he sold his autograph and tipped his cap. And his heirs become infamous for their father's fame. Corrupted celebrity maybe, but how many have used their fame in the primary service of other's fortune?

Radio Ted has been digitally linked to similar looking Teds with a police rap sheet. Image and reputation will follow you into the next world, even if you were a victim of circumstantial fate in this one. That wasn't the real me, man. How about a little redemption here? Sure thing, pal. And can you sign this for my kid?

But as Richards reminds us, "It's impossible not to end up being a parody of what you thought you were."

Our recent other Ted Williams must feel some very, very big weight on the gifted wings of accident. Can he leverage his vocal acumen enough to stay off the streets and off the dope? Does he owe anybody anything for this simple twist of fate? Is he a burdened messenger that necessarily forward some fleeting light on the homeless problem as the other Ted did in citing Paige and Gibson in his own crowning moment of glory? Or will he end up a parody of himself doing rags-to-riches skits on Saturday Night Live?

The America novelist, John Updike, whose October 22, 1960 story in the New Yorker about Williams' final at-bat, *Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu*, includes this piece of lyric genius.

"The papers said that the other players, and even the umpires on the field, begged him to come out and acknowledge us in some way, but he never had and did not now. Gods do not answer letters."

Perhaps they made an exception for the other Ted.

The thing about redemption and sport is that it's an easy one/two punch. The back story is always there just waiting for some journalistic fate, a thin night of reportage rehash. No sport hero autobiography is sewn up tight without the thread of confession. No digestible film pays for itself without our hero saving himself, saving the day, or dying trying.

But with redemption, in sport or in social programs, it gets a lot harder when some day, somewhere you find a swinging light bulb and a camera in our face.

Scott Tinley's latest book is *Things to Be Survived: Tales of Resolution and Resurrection*. Habitus Press (2007)