

Sports Illustrated

American Idols

The U.S. as a whole rarely adopts a sports hero

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The reincarnation of *Seabiscuit* has been so special not only because of **Laura Hillenbrand's** terrific tale of the underdog, but also because we are reminded of how our whole nation came to idolize that one homely little horse.



There's a great irony inherent in that. As much as we Americans cheer for the sports hero of the moment, it's really very seldom that athletes become our *national* idols. That happens much more in smaller countries, where almost any champion becomes a love object for the entire population. Think **Goran Ivanisevic** returning to Croatia after winning Wimbledon in 2001, standing on a balcony like a king, a whole nation's mob cheering below.

The hugeness of our country combined with the fact that we concentrate so much on domestic rivalries really makes it quite difficult for any one athlete to earn the undivided affection of this great sprawling stew pot that is the United States.

Oh sure, somebody wins a gold medal or is the star of the Super Bowl and off they go to Disney World and the White House, but that doesn't mean all Americans welcome them into their hearts. Probably, in fact, the one athlete who was most loved by our whole nation, ever, was another horse, from a century ago -- the great pacer, **Dan Patch**. That was a time when most Americans still were very familiar with horses, and Dan Patch struck a chord. Even then, he had more endorsements than any current human star.

And yes, although many Americans hated the Yankees, **Babe Ruth** did gain a special place in the hearts of all 48 states. But has any other team athlete? Well, maybe **Mark McGwire** and **Sammy Sosa** when they were going for the home run record in '98. (OK, Sosa is Dominican, but he became a surrogate American that summer.) But our affection for the home team precludes our embracing even the greatest stars. **Michael Jordan** was a special effect, admired more as a technological marvel than as a love object.

Well, let's see now. Among individual sports stars, **Arnold Palmer** was everybody's Valentine when he first came to prominence. And when **Jack Nicklaus** won the Masters in 1986 at age 46, at least for a moment, the whole nation loved the old man. **Arthur Ashe** gained the same sort of burst of endearment when he upset **Jimmy Connors** at Wimbledon in 1975. And pretty little gold

medalists such as **Peggy Fleming**, **Dorothy Hamill** or **Mary Lou Retton** became the real Miss Americas for a while.

Still, the only time the U.S. really acted like a small town that had just won the state championship was at the 1980 Olympics, where our hockey team shocked the world. What did it matter that most Americans had never seen an ice hockey game? For once, the monster United States was an underdog at something, as **Herb Brooks'** kids beat the big bad Communists. By contrast, the great basketball Dream Team of '92 was more like a rock group on tour, just playing its greatest hits.

Athletes, too, are invariably short-lived creatures. We forget them. When showbiz icons -- like, say, most recently, **Bob Hope** and **Katharine Hepburn** -- die, there is much more of a national outpouring than when even some genuinely great players like **Ted Williams** or **Johnny Unitas** pass away. We keep on growing up with movie stars, but with sports stars, there's a disconnect, and we can't bring them along with us. With time, they fade.

The athletes we always love are the ones who played for *our* team, for *our* college. The other great ones we admire, but unlike the national heroes in other countries, really, rarely, are any of our athletes truly All-American. Only Herb Brooks made that happen to a whole team, once.

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