

Living Large

Why Michael Phelps reminds us of The Babe.

By Jonathan Lesser

Long ago, Babe Ruth could regularly be heard on the radio and seen in newsreel footage. It's safe to say that if he were playing in 2008, he would be a frequent guest on *The Tonight Show*, *Oprah* and the *Today* show, and one of the few athletes with a Q Rating high enough to host *Saturday Night Live*. Sounds sort of like a certain swimmer with a 6-foot-7 wingspan and a golly-gee smile who hosted *SNL* on Sept. 13.

Michael Phelps seems to be following in the steps of the Babe, the original sports celebrity. Watching Phelps compete at the Beijing Olympics this summer was like watching a man among boys, much the way the Bambino looked to baseball fans in the 1920s and '30s, when he was rewriting the record books year after year. Ruth transcended sports and become part of the culture of America.

Ruth came into baseball when it was a low-scoring game based on speed. His power turned the sport on its head, and it soon became America's pastime. But what attracted Americans to Ruth so much was not only his talent but his heart.

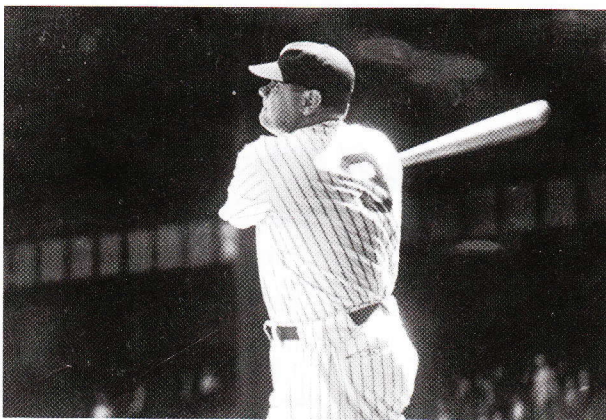
Heart is how you come through in the clutch. It's how you make generations of fans believe that you could point to the center-field stands before hitting a ball there in the World Series, how you hit a walk-off home run on the day named for you and the first home run at The House That You Built. Heart is also how you win eight gold medals in eight races in nine days with the world watching.

The reports of Phelps' diet also remind us of Ruth. "Each had/has a gargantuan appetite," says Bob Costas, who helped bring Phelps into American homes during NBC's Olympics broadcasts. "But in Ruth's case, the hot dogs and beer went straight to his gut. In Phelps' case, the pizza, Big Macs and pancakes seemed to be burned off by swimming a mere 500 or so laps a day."

Upon Babe Ruth's death in 1948, *The New York Times* wrote: "A figure unprecedented in American life ... he had an amazing flair for doing the spectacular at the most dramatic moment."

Sounds sort of like that guy with all those gold medals. ♦

Jonathan Lesser is a project assistant editor for Major League Baseball Properties.



FIGHTING BACK

For the time being, at least, Beijing marked the end of Olympic baseball and softball. And while MLB will undoubtedly continue to thrive, softball will have to work hard to overcome the loss of Team USA. The sport garners most of its popularity from the Olympics and high-profile NCAA teams like Arizona State and UCLA. But the stars of the sport, like Jennie Finch (above), understand the importance of cultivating more mainstream and international middle grounds through professional leagues, like the growing National Professional Fastpitch (NPF) league.

And for those who view the United States' upset loss to China in the 2008 gold-medal game as an unfortunate ending for Team USA, think again. The loss could represent an ultimately productive theme: No longer just an American sport, softball's accessibility and worldwide appeal is gaining speed. —Jodie Jordan

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