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Spitzer: A stamp of approval for Ted Williams

By Bruce E. Spitzer/local columnist
MetroWest Daily News
Posted Aug 19, 2012 @ 12:44 AM

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The U.S. Postal Service just issued a new Ted Williams stamp that closely lines up with the recent (July 5) 10th anniversary of the baseball slugger's death. The commemoration of a death can be a sad affair, highlighted by still-lingering grief and "what ifs?" Pondering the death of San Diego native son and Red Sox legend Ted Williams is a lot like that.

Williams' death is still tinged with a bit of mystery due to the controversial family decision to have the remains of "The Kid" cryo-preserved (read: frozen) instead of, say, brought back to his hometown of San Diego, or sprinkled on the Fenway Park warning track where so many of his home runs passed, meteoric-like, on a destination to their own unpredictable place.

Writer John Updike, in his iconic essay printed more than 50 years ago in The New Yorker, described Ted's last game with literary splendor and forever branded Fenway "a lyric little band box of a ballpark." Like the "Splendid Splinter," Updike has passed, but, akin to the Williams' records, his prose and observations live on. None more noteworthy than this: In his last game on Sept. 28, 1960, even after hitting a home run in his final at-bat, Williams refused to tip his cap to the cheering crowd. "Gods," said Updike, "do not answer letters."

No one after that game, and the unceremonious refusal to take a curtain call, could have predicted how much Williams would be seared into our collective consciousness as the preeminent baseball hero. The lens of time can do that, bending, refracting and re-coloring the (high)lights.

The fact is Ted Williams was not as popular in his playing days as he is today. The U.S. Postal Service reported that advance sales of Major League Baseball All-Star Forever stamps of Williams were only beaten in the bottom of the ninth by sales of the Joe DiMaggio stamp after a big push in New York. The four-bagger of baseball stamp introductions also included likenesses of Willie Stargell and Larry Doby.

In the'40s and '50s Williams was alternately magnanimous and moody, profound and profane. He had the potential to offer up affection and offense in the same sentence. He feuded with friends and fans, and was never embattled with anyone more than the media in Boston, teeming with 10 newspapers, clamoring for controversy and competing for readers' attention. (Williams may have been the first celebrity to receive paparazzi-like treatment, as we know it today — and his response was positively Alec Baldwin-esque.)

Anger often drove Williams. But whatever his motivation, on the green grass of Fenway, and in American League ballparks all across the land, it worked.

Of course, Williams was a war hero as well, called away twice, perhaps giving up a chance to eclipse even the batting records of Babe Ruth, some speculate. His .406 batting average in 1941 didn't produce an MVP award, given instead to DiMaggio for "the streak," but now as the years progress without anyone coming close to the Williams' record, Ted's feat looks, arguably, more impressive.

Even in retirement, during his Hall of Fame induction speech, Williams surprised us by advocating for the Negro Leaguers to be inducted into the Hall and, partially erasing the segregation sins of the Red Sox' past, he lived to see it happen. Moreover, let's not forget the tireless Jimmy Fund work he did before and after it became the Red Sox' official charity.

And so, the Williams' flaws fade with time, and perhaps rightly so. But not so fast that they cannot be viewed in the same context as the records he set. Very few of us will ever reach his exalted status in the profession of our own choosing, but in his struggle to overcome (or ignore) those faults, he was like the rest of us. And, it is that authenticity that makes us admire him all the more 10 years after his death — especially his unique brand of independence.

Ted Williams was a genius, a virtuoso of hitting; and, often, a vortex of controversy. The greatness that goes hand and glove with a single-minded pursuit often comes with a price. Relationships, public and private, suffer. Those of us old enough to remember Williams, and the rest confined to historic accounts, have been the beneficiaries of the man's extraordinary dedication.

In his essay, "Hub Fans bid Kid Adieu," John Updike, using "Hub" as the local colloquialism to describe Boston, couldn't have foreseen how rare it would become for one player to spend his entire career with one ball club like Williams, DiMaggio, et al.

For this and not a little nostalgia for the game the way it used to be played, despite Williams' faults and, to a large measure, maybe because of them, today fans of the game happily bid The Kid "bonjour." And, thanks to cryonics, perhaps one day they may be able to do it in person.

As for the Postal Service? That would not be a problem. It recently changed a long-standing rule that one does not have to be dead to appear (and, presumably, to stay) on a stamp.

Bruce E. Spitzer of Hopkinton is the author of Extra Innings, a novel that imagines Ted Williams returning to life and baseball through the science of cryonics in the year 2092: www.ExtraInningsTheNovel.com.

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