

GOD
SAVE THE
FAN

**HOW PREENING SPORTSCASTERS,
ATHLETES WHO SPEAK IN THE THIRD
PERSON, AND THE OCCASIONAL
CONVICTED QUARTERBACK HAVE
TAKEN THE FUN OUT OF SPORTS
(AND HOW WE CAN GET IT BACK)**

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INTRODUCTION

In which your intrepid narrator attempts to use Michael Vick as a metaphor for a new age of sports journalism while spending only fifty words on that whole dogfighting business. Includes the phrase “Feed the donkey.”

In April 2005, The Smoking Gun—the investigative journalism Web site devoted to uncovering public documents that get lost in our nation’s labyrinthine legal system—posted a complaint from a woman named Sonya Elliot. A twenty-six-year-old health care worker with difficulties keeping her own health care in order, Elliot had sued a man for giving her herpes simplex 2. (That’s the herpes that, according to our friends at Wikipedia, is characterized by lesions “on the shaft of the penis, in the genital region, on the inner thigh, buttocks, or anus.” So you know.) She confronted the man at his Georgia home, telling him, “I’ve got something to tell you. I’ve got it.”

The man, as any man in his position might have done, lay before her and begged for forgiveness. Elliot claimed “[the man] had not known how to tell her about his condition, and that it was not something that he liked to talk about.” (Understandable.) The man, worried about his standing in the public eye, asked her not to reveal his condition but made no offer to make

amends, financially or otherwise. She researched the matter and learned that, to protect himself, he had undergone herpes “testing and treatment” under a fake name. His choice of moniker: “Ron Mexico.” This is one of those pseudonyms that is funny for an abundance of reasons, almost all of which are impossible to quantify. (Though it does conjure up images of sombreros, wispy mustaches, and, perhaps, a burro.) Had this man taken care of the woman to whom he had given herpes from the beginning, she would have never filed a lawsuit—and the name “Ron Mexico” would have never reached the public consciousness. And that, friends, would be a tragedy.

As just about everybody now knows, “Ron Mexico” is Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick. In 2008, Vick is known as the perpetually embattled former phenom who flips his home fans the (nonfoam) middle finger, carries marijuana onto airplanes, and enjoys watching dogs kill each other.

We could talk for hours about Vick’s dogfighting conviction, and what it meant in a cultural sense, but I’m going to claim the Nancy Grace Sports Rule on this one: The minute a sports story becomes fodder for cable talk shows—see *Lacrosse, Duke and Bonds, Barry*—it transforms into something that’s not the slightest bit of fun for real sports fans to talk about. We’re gonna focus on the pre-dogfighting Vick, the one who once seemed like the most exciting football player we’d ever seen, even though he was electrocuting puppies at the time.

Actually, now he’s pretty much *just* known for killing the dogs himself. Which is the type of “do it yourself” attitude we admire in our athletes. But in 2005, Vick was the face of the NFL, the most marketable athlete in the U.S.A.’s most marketable sport. He was young, charismatic, and blessed with extraordinary talent. He was a primary endorser of Nike and Gatorade. A commercial at the time featured Michael Vick: The Ride, in which a fan, at an amusement park, straps into a seat and is rocketed across a football field as if he is Vick. He darts to

and fro, flips about, and just misses landing in a group of large men with long hair before a final end-zone gyration. Four months before the lawsuit, Vick had signed a ten-year, \$130 million contract, the richest deal in NFL history. Michael Vick was the face of the NFL, the sport America reveres and obsesses over more than any other. He very well might have been on his way to becoming the most popular athlete on earth.

And here he was, accused of giving a woman herpes and attempting to hide it by using the most ridiculous alias imaginable. (I have tried to come up with one that's more amusing. The best I could do was "Harvey Guam." It doesn't come close.) The whole incident was a matter of public record.

I read *The Smoking Gun* with jaw agape. Vick had been an untouchable and smiling corporate beacon who could do no wrong. He stood as the future of athletics, the man who would be football's version of Michael Jordan, only with braids. And now *this*. I eagerly awaited the public reaction. Would he be mocked on ESPN talk shows? What would the *New York Post* headline be? ("MEXICO'S PROBLEMS SOUTH OF THE BORDER" was my guess.) How would his coaches handle the news? Would it cost him his endorsement possibilities? (I couldn't imagine Gatorade would like its spokesperson to gulp its beverage while sporting a lip sore.) Would his wide receivers suddenly be afraid to catch his passes? Would they wear an extra pair of gloves? I couldn't wait for the fallout.

I zipped over to ESPN.com, the Web site I checked twenty times a day and used as the alpha and omega of sports coverage, and found . . . nothing. Not a single mention. I went back and checked the date on *The Smoking Gun* story; it was actually three days old. Perhaps, however unlikely, I'd missed the story on ESPN? I headed back into the archive, on the Falcons team page, on Vick's personal page. As Ron himself might say, *Nada*. This simply could not be. Surely, ESPN, the arbiter of all that affected the world of sports, hadn't missed the whole story? Vick news had anchored half the SportsCenters of the previous

year, and he'd been featured on the cover of the network's magazine twice in the last six months. (Impressive, considering it comes out every two weeks.) Obviously, *somebody* over there had to have known. Right?

Two weeks later, my copy of *Sports Illustrated* arrived. Though the magazine had become conspicuously thinner in recent years, it was still all I used to parse a week's worth of sports news and to gain some perspective. I'd read *Sports Illustrated* since I was a boy; my first masturbatory experience was to its swimsuit issue. (At least I *hope* it was the swimsuit issue.) *SI* was the Mount Everest of American sportswriting, the magazine of record. With much joy, I noticed this particular week's issue had Michael Vick on the cover! At last: Someone had finally tackled the story I'd been trying in vain to talk to my friends about for the last fortnight.

I ripped open the magazine and flipped directly to the Vick story. It opened with an anecdote about Vick coming *this* close to reaching the Super Bowl, and rehashed all his teammates' tales of wonder at his amazing athleticism. The Falcons had a new coach that year, and insisted that Atlanta run the West Coast Offense, a system that would appear to be antithetical to Vick's particular skill set. The story detailed all the issues in Falcons minicamp, how Vick was working with his coach and trying to make the system work for him. This was all information I already had; *when were they going to mention Ron Mexico?*

And then I finished the story. There was nothing. I kept looking to see if I'd missed a section where the story jumped, or if I'd accidentally glossed over the Mexico mention. I reread this story three times. Michael Vick—the representative of all that is supposedly right about the world of sports, a man being sued for giving a woman herpes and using a bizarre name to hide the story—was on the cover of a national magazine . . . and the herpes business wasn't once mentioned. This was *the cover story*. And nothing. *Nada*.

This was *precisely* the type of story sports fans eat up, and

the two major sports media outlets had entirely ignored it. If they weren't going to talk about it, who would?

I found this all a bit odd.

LATER, after I'd started Deadspin, an independent sports blog I founded to discuss and ferret out stories like the Ron Mexico one, stories that real sports fans actually talk about, I asked one of my sources at ESPN why they had ignored the Mexico story. His response was telling:

“Will, there's no way ESPN is gonna touch that story with a ten-foot pole. You know how much money the NFL pays ESPN? You know how much money they have invested in Michael Vick? The minute we ran with that story, we'd have NFL PR jumping down our throats within a matter of seconds. They'd kill us, and we knew it.”

To this day, if you do a search for “Ron Mexico” on ESPN.com, the only results that show up are fans' fantasy team names. And yet, I understood ESPN's position. When you are the only game in town, and your business is staying in the good graces of the leagues that provide you with access, you can't exactly start raining firebombs on those leagues' sacred cows. But, I wondered, if ESPN isn't going to report that story, and *SI* wasn't going to report that story, who was? It was then that I decided to start Deadspin. The world has herpes to blame.

The notion of Deadspin was to speak to the average sports fan, the guy (or lady) who plunks down \$40 for a game and wants to shoot the shit with his/her buddies in the upper deck. An easy populist position, I grant you—but that was the plan. I had the advantage of having once worked as a sports reporter and realizing that it's a soul-crushing job that sucks all the fun out of sports. I had seen the sunken eyes of those who once dreamed of a career in sports and later realized that “career” meant sitting in a cramped box with bitter middle-aged bald men trained not to react with joy to the sports they once revered. When you cover

sports on a regular basis, you don't cheer for something revelatory to happen; you root for the game to be over quickly so you can get back to the hotel. Sports becomes a *job*. And sports should never be a job. I had no desire to work for ESPN, or as a full-time sports reporter, so doing Deadspin—which had no connection to any team, league, or sports organization—allowed me to stand aside and observe the world of sports the way a fan does; that is, the way a normal person does. I wanted fans to be involved in the sports world, to shape their own experience of the games. I wanted to write about sports the way we talk about sports. And I wanted Deadspin to be about all of us, to be a place where sports fans could talk to one another without the barricade that decades of sports coverage has placed in our way.

I've been fortunate enough to see that happen; it was clear that sports fans had been hungering for a place to congregate without all the clutter that had weighed them down for years. I take no particular credit for this. I never wanted the site to be some sort of "Hey, everybody, I'm Will, here are my opinions on sports, now react to me" site, the way most mainstream sports media corporations had patterned their new media endeavors. I never felt that Deadspin sparked a movement because of my wit and wisdom. What makes Deadspin fun, and what makes every day I work on it better than the last, is that everyone takes part. It's not my site; it belongs to the readers who contribute and comment as a means to take some time away from their day jobs. No longer would a story be kept from us fans because it was financially advantageous for someone to do so. We could take charge and write our own script for the sports world. They're our games, after all.

Years of major media inertia has fomented a culture of complacent hero worship, bland game recaps, and stale "up with people" soft focus features that are meant to humanize the athletes—but in fact only reinforces the Athletes Are Different from You and Me maxim that has defined sports coverage for decades. But that's not why we, the fans, watch sports. We watch sports to be entertained. Life is hard, man; every day, we are

faced with the crippling challenges of daily life. We worry about our job, our family, our friends, our careers, our mortgages. We worry that if we don't keep constant vigilance, it will all come crashing down on us. We worry that we'll always be at war; we worry that someone's gonna show up at the mall with a dirty bomb and destroy everyone. We just try to stay on top of it all. And we need something to take our minds off all this shit that keeps us up at night. We need sports. Sports are what we watch when we just can't look at another spreadsheet. They're what we use when we need to get away from our lives for a little bit. Every human needs the escape, and sports provides this splendidly.

By definition, anyone who works in the world of sports, whether as a player, a coach, a broadcaster, a reporter, the guy who rubs Kobe Bryant's calves after every game, whoever . . . by definition, they all believe sports are more important than they actually are. Why wouldn't they? *Sports are their lives*. When you take sports so seriously, when your very livelihood depends on it, you by definition cannot relate to the way that the average sports fan connects to sports. Sports are what we fans invest ourselves in to get *away* from life; when it is your entire life, you end up writing stories only for those who also write, broadcasting only for those who also broadcast.

It is natural that those whose entire lives revolve around sports would be threatened by fan empowerment; after all, we're the ones who pay for all this. If we all realized that, hey, we don't need to listen to these idiots on television screaming at us . . . they'd be out of a job. But it's vital for sports fans to realize that we *don't* need them, that we can choose what we want now.

We just have to take charge and realize our power. Hopefully this book will help with that. And if it doesn't, hopefully it will at least be funny. Because if we cannot laugh at the ridiculous world of sports, we truly cannot laugh at anything.

So strap in, put on your protective gloves, and let's catch some Ron Mexico passes. Put on the sombrero, grow the mustache, feed the donkey. There's a whole new world out there: Let's go.



PLEASE, GOD, NO, NOT ANOTHER ESSAY ABOUT STEROIDS

Let's just say, hypothetically speaking, that you are not an accountant, a systems analyst, or one who lays pipe for a living in a nonsexual way. Let's say, instead of whatever it is that you do, you are an inventor—a chemist, even.

Let's say that during your rigorous studies in the field of chemistry (with a little biology thrown in, you know, for the *ladies*), you come across an amazing compound. This compound, accidentally discovered while searching for an even *more* effective way to give your grandfather an erection, has regenerative powers beyond the realm of human comprehension. When you test this compound on lab rats, they not only recover from strenuous activity quicker—whatever strenuous activity lab rats might need to recover from—they actually grow muscle mass *without any physical activity at all*. That is to say this compound makes the rats stronger, faster, and smarter . . . it turns them into superrats.

You are amazed by this discovery but are concerned about the rats. Would they become overly aggressive? Would they suffer from reduced genital size—a serious problem, though, hey, it happens to lots of rats!—or perhaps some sort of heart ailment? You run them through every test you can find, and nothing appears to be wrong with them. All the compound did

was turn them into muscle-bound, physically and mentally superior rats, with no side effects whatsoever. Full of fevered dreams of a Nobel Prize (and all the cascading fountains of poon that come with it), you decide not to worry about a test group of human subjects; you skip that step and just distill it into liquid form—you call it, oh, Jesus Juice or something—and drink it down yourself.

You notice the effect within seconds. You are instantly bench-pressing twice your body weight, running a mile in six minutes, and able to solve sudoku puzzles in a matter of seconds. You're perhaps most dumbfounded by your hand-eye coordination; when you accidentally knock over a bottle of your magic beverage, you are stunned that you instinctively grab it before it hits the floor. After about six hours, the effects wear off, so you drink some more, and it all comes back. You immediately submit the juice to the Food and Drug Administration, and after years of testing, they officially announce that the juice (since dubbed "Jack Sauce," after your four-year-old son who can now juggle cars) has nothing but positive effects on human beings. No long-term negative effects, no added stress on the body, no problems whatsoever. It's all good. *Nothing is wrong with Jack Sauce at all.*

A statue of you is erected in your hometown, and you spend the rest of your life wearing suits of thousand-dollar bills and having a series of initially thrilling threesomes that provide diminishing returns but are still worth the trouble. You sail into your golden years as the most beloved and famous human being on the planet. Congratulations!

Okay. Now, legitimate question: If this Jack Sauce existed, and it truly had no side effects and only brought joy and health to humans, would it be okay for athletes to use it before games? Could they drink down a good batch before taking the field? If they were feeling worn down in the seventh inning, could they do a few shots between innings?

Or would that be cheating? Immoral?

How you feel about that question can be instructive to consider when weighing in on the issue of steroids. For all the column inches and broadcast minutes devoted to the concept, it's difficult to find a single side to the "debate" that makes much sense. And it's something we better figure out pretty soon, because if you think performance enhancers are bad now, just wait. Science is a crazy thing; Jack Sauce will be here before you know it.

HEADING into the 2006 National League Championship Series, the St. Louis Cardinals were extremely concerned about third baseman Scott Rolen. Rolen had struggled with injuries throughout his career, but by Game 3 of the NLCS he was as banged up as he had ever been. His shoulder hurt, his knee hurt, he even had a sticky film on him that just wouldn't rinse away. He was an absolute mess, but his shoulder was the biggest sore spot; he couldn't generate any bat speed and was slumping when the Cardinals needed him most.

Rolen—a tough midwestern guy whose face looks like he's more suited for riding a combine and complaining about how the Dixie Chicks are gettin' too goddamned liberal—had been feuding with manager Tony LaRussa about the extent of his injury. In a last-ditch effort to bump Rolen up somewhere near 100 percent, LaRussa went to Cardinals trainer Barry Weinberg (See? There are Jews in sports! They're the trainers!) and requested a cortisone shot. The cortisone shot is a staple in sports, used to provide temporary relief for lingering pain in trouble spots.

The cortisone shot is also a—gasp!—steroid. Cortisone is produced naturally by the body, released automatically when a person is under stress. Injectable cortisone is produced in a lab but is rather close to what the body produces on its own. It is, by definition, a performance enhancer, and it's even an *injection*. If something hurts, you can inject it with cortisone, and the pain will go away. It is a far more effective and immediate performance enhancer than human growth hormone or

Decadrol or whatever else players are always trying to sneak past the censors (that is, if said censors happen to exist).

The thing about cortisone is that it has no side effects. It doesn't do anything but make a person feel better.

So, Rolen took his shot and, lo and behold, within a matter of hours he started hitting the ball again. His reinvigorated bat, along with the Bugs Bunny curveball of closer Adam Wainwright and the power that Jeff Suppan derived from his hatred of stem cells, led the Cardinals to a series victory and, ultimately, a World Series title. (Woo!) Suddenly, Rolen and Tony LaRussa weren't fighting anymore, and no one remembered his earlier slump. He was a hero.

And nobody gave a damn about his cortisone shot. In fact, fans, if they knew about the cortisone shot at all, were ecstatic about it—anything to get him to start driving the ball to right-center again. And why wouldn't the fans be happy? Science helped an athlete best utilize his natural abilities through a synthetic compound that artificially tricked his body into thinking it was healing itself. That's exactly what a steroid does. This one just happened to not have any downside to it. And someday, no steroids will.

Meanwhile, Mark McGwire, Barry Bonds, Jose Canseco, and Rafael Palmeiro have put up the most historic of numbers during an age of baseball when every aspect of the game is focused on the home run—a.k.a. the “Look How Big *My* Cock Is” period—and they're the pariahs we flagellate for all the sins of an era. These men's heads grew to Rosie O'Donnell size while their testicles shriveled to the size of, oh, Rosie O'Donnell's, and their back looks like your face did when all you could think of was your algebra teacher while masturbating into a sock. (And by “when” I mean “Tuesday.”) These players, while they (mostly) deny it, bore the signs of serious steroid users, but they were hardly the only ones, doing it during a time when there were no rules against it and probably facing pitchers just as roided up as they were. None of those

players will likely make the Hall of Fame—Bonds has the best chance—and they will forever have the word “steroids” attached to their name. If there’s a day that McGwire walks down the street and isn’t serenaded with “Hey, Mark, I’d ask you how your day is going, but I’m not here to talk about the past,” that will be a day that McGwire decided not to walk down the street. It’s over for him, and all of them.

But we love the cortisone shots. If anything, McGwire and company are being punished for bad science; they were unfortunate to play in an age when the steroids were crude and could actually cause long-term damage. They are labeled cheaters, as if there were a time before them that the game was “pure,” like there will ever be a time like that in the future. We scream at these guys because it’s easy to.

I should hesitate to use the term “we,” though, because most fans, deep down, don’t really care about steroids that much. Most fans, as much as they might like to throw plastic syringes at Bonds and boo McGwire during the rare times that he pops his head out of his mole hole, are much more pure about sports than paid sportswriters. We don’t fool ourselves into harboring illusions. We’d really rather not know, but if we do have to know, we’d prefer that our team just win. If McGwire had led the Cardinals to a World Series title, Cardinals fans wouldn’t have minded if he had scored the winning run while in the throes of an ether binge. This is not an instance of fans sticking their collective heads in the sand, as many sportswriters would like to perceive it. It’s a matter of keeping our sports in perspective.

Baseball suffers the brunt of the steroids controversy, because baseball is the sport that most writers care the most about, and—more important—probably once played and believed, in their heart of hearts, that they could have actually thrived at, if that damned high school coach had just believed in them. (I am 100 percent guilty of this; if Mark Jackley had recognized my brilliance at pitch calling and blocking balls in the dirt for the

1993 Mattoon Green Wave, I'm convinced I'd be backing up Yadier Molina right now. And I'd give a damned good quote and be extra special double plus nice to the groupies too.) Baseball is seen as the game that normal people can play—this is the only reason why John Kruk was so popular; it is astounding that he's now making a living by *talking*—so when superhuman players dominate the game, it destroys the fantasy that baseball is the people's game. Thus, everyone comes down harder on the baseball players. Nobody cares that everyone's doping in cycling and track and field. Who plays those sports anyway? Can you even call those sports?

And don't kid yourself: Everyone's doping. NFL commissioner Roger Goodell must pray to his Ditka every night that baseball takes all the steroid hits for his league. Two years ago, it came out that four Carolina Panthers players actually bought and used steroids *the week before the Super Bowl*. Can you imagine if it had been proven that Bonds did that before the World Series in 2002? People would *still* be anal-raping that guy. But with football no one seemed to notice. People were just surprised that one of the users was the punter.

Then, two years ago, San Diego Chargers linebacker Shawne Merriman, one of the top defensive players in the game, tested positive for an injectable steroid (typically, he said it was accidentally ingested from an over-the-counter supplement, which is like saying you “accidentally” had sex with your secretary) and was suspended for four games. Was there outrage and betrayal? Was the sports world finally convinced of the NFL's epic steroid menace? Well, let's compare the reactions to Merriman's positive test to Rafael Palmeiro's just more than a year earlier.

**Michael Wilbon on Palmeiro (*Washington Post*,
August 3, 2005)**

“Oh yes, baseball is facing a crisis. In this current climate of suspicion, is it fair to start looking at any pitcher with biceps with increased skepticism, too? Well, maybe it isn't fair. But

that won't stop anyone. And where, exactly, is the commissioner of baseball while such an obvious crisis breaks out? Apparently hiding under his desk."

John Clayton on Merriman (ESPN, October 23, 2006)

"The four-game steroid suspension of Chargers linebacker Shawne Merriman really comes at a horrible time for the team. Linebacker Shaun Phillips is expected to be out four to six weeks with a calf injury. They've lost linebacker Steve Foley for the season. The only outside linebacker of note is Marques Harris or Nick Speegle, which might force the Chargers to move Tim Dobbins or Donnie Edwards to the outside."

NOW that's some hand-wringing! (During the 2007 season, Merriman never got his own Nike ad.) Those who defend the NFL stance on steroids say that NFL fans are just more honest than baseball fans; they already assumed that most of the NFL was roiding up and therefore just pout if one of the guys on their fantasy team gets caught and misses a few games. It is generous to call this a "defense"; still, the average fan has more important questions to attend to than "Is the game on the level?" Because, it isn't.

This is hardly just a sports thing. Show me an industry in which the vital players don't try to take every opportunity to give themselves even the slightest competitive edge, and I'll show you an industry that isn't around anymore. The NFL can't afford to be entirely honest about the raw number of its players who use performance-enhancing drugs, but we fans know the score. And we don't mind.

But this doesn't stop the *tsk-tsking* of the average sports-writer, most of whom gleefully ignored the steroid "problem" of the '90s because they were too busy giving McGwire and Sosa prose back rubs. But that's the thing: There really isn't a steroid problem. There's just a perception problem. You can't

fine or suspend scientists, and you'll never discover a test that will detect everything. And, all told, we'd rather you not discover one anyway. If Scott Rolen needs a steroid to win games for the Cardinals, legal or otherwise, as long as he wins them, I don't care. Just don't tell me. Being a sports fan mostly involves blissful ignorance of the outside world, and that is just *fine*. That is, after all, why we watch sports in the first place.

And if you think we don't mind now, wait until the Jack Sauce is invented. Frankly, I'd like to type an extra twenty words a minute. I might even figure out a way to rid myself of all those dangling modifiers and extraneous adverbs, which I have a tendency to overdeploy, extensively. Please don't test my urine.



WHY GILBERT ARENAS MATTERS MORE THAN LEBRON JAMES

During the 2007 NBA playoffs, when the Cavaliers were making their run to the finals, I noticed something odd among my fellow sports fans: Everyone was rooting against LeBron James. Anytime I'd watch a game with someone, or I'd mention LeBron on Deadspin, the instant reaction was mild (with the exception of that semifinals Game 5 vs. Detroit).

This is the opposite of what one would expect. Since the age of fifteen, LeBron has been groomed for the role of NBA supernova. He was on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* at the age of seventeen, he signed a \$90 million deal with Nike before he'd played his first game, he had a ready-made entourage (that included Jay-Z!) on the day the Cavaliers won the right to draft him. Everyone was initially concerned that a teenager wouldn't be able to handle all the attention, but LeBron never seemed all that fazed by it. He averaged 20.9 points, 5.9 assists and 5.5 rebounds during his rookie year at the age of eighteen, becoming only the third rookie ever (Michael Jordan and Oscar Robertson are the other two) to reach those plateaus. He also did it all in the way we allegedly like our players to do it: He played unselfishly, dishing the ball around, making his teammates better while remaining unafraid to take the big shot at

the end. He never gets arrested—he leaves that to his mother, who was once *maced* after a DUI arrest—and he’s a smiling pitchman for the countless sponsors who have signed up for Team LeBron. He’s everything we have always claimed to want in a superstar.

Yet no one, outside of Cavs fans, seems to truly *love* him. Not in the way, say, that they loved—or loved to hate, the way Knicks and Pistons fans loved to hate—Michael Jordan, the guy he (and everybody else) has obviously patterned his career after. He’s done everything Jordan has done, and perhaps even a little more; sure, he doesn’t quite have the slit-your-throat-to-win-a-\$5-bet competitiveness of Jordan, but he also doesn’t seem quite as fake as MJ. Jordan wants you to believe he not only is the best basketball player in history, but is also casual enough to hang out with Kevin Bacon in his underwear.

But LeBron’s dominance—and he’s asserted about as much dominance as a player can assert without winning a title (yet, anyway)—has not made him as universally beloved as you (or his sponsors) might expect. Sure, he’s succeeded in his goal of becoming the global brand, the guy even people in China know the name of. But I never get the sense that he *inspires* people. Rooting for LeBron James is like rooting for Nike in a way that rooting for Michael Jordan never was.

I think the reason for this is Gilbert Arenas.

Arenas couldn’t have had a more different introduction to the NBA than LeBron. Considered something between a shooting guard and a point guard, he was undrafted in the first round in 2001 and ended up at Golden State. He immediately became an unheralded crowd favorite—LeBron was five times as famous as Gilbert was at Arizona in 2001, and he was seventeen years old—and, most dramatically, improved his game to an unprecedented level. He was a guy who had grown into himself without the hype. He became a human, one of us. And this is why he is the opposite of LeBron James, and why his existence

illuminates all the flaws in LeBron's plan for world domination.

The stories of Arenas's accessibility are legendary at this point. A personal favorite involves a guy who ran into Arenas at a bowling alley. (Can you imagine running into LeBron at a bowling alley? They would have shut the place down and made it a private party the minute they heard he was coming. It somehow seems perfect that Arenas would spend a random evening just bowling.) The guy, noticing Gilbert, walked over to him, introduced himself, and told him he's great. Gilbert smiled and asked if he wanted to join the game. Stunned, the guy did, and they spent hours together. Afterward, Gilbert invited him to go back to his place with his friends to play video games all night. *So they did.* This is beyond any rational comprehension of what we expect of our athletes. To say that Gilbert is Just Like Us is oversimplifying it; Gilbert is only himself, and therefore all of us. His lack of pretense makes him human. And we know, now, that athletes are human. We were too jaded to ever believe otherwise.

LeBron's ideal shoe commercial involves him doing something amazing and all of us shuddering in its wake. Gilbert's? Well, just ask him.

You know how I always throw my jersey into the stands after a game? In Washington, they just go crazy for it. So in this commercial, that's what I'm gonna do with my shoes. I've just hit a game winner, and I throw these shoes. Everyone starts to react, and you see everything in slow motion. Everyone's pushing, shoving, doing whatever it takes to try to get to these shoes. People from the 400 level, they're jumping off the ledge, they're missing the pile, hitting nothing but chairs, and you can just see in people's faces like, Ooooh, that hurt. While all this stuff's going on, one of the shoes pops out of the crowd, and a little girl gets it and she takes off. A couple of people see she has it, and they start chasing her, and she's

looking back running—and then she gets clotheslined by a kid in a wheelchair. So he picks the shoe up and says—he’s gonna have the only line in there—“They said I couldn’t get it. Heh. Impossible is nothing.” And then he rolls off.

This, friends, is batshit nutty of the highest order, in the most likable way possible. You couldn’t get a team of comedy writers to come up with something half as bonkers as what Gilbert rattled off the top of his head. Here are some more Gilbert highlights:

- He sponsors a professional Halo video-gaming team.
- He once took a shower in full uniform for no reason. “I don’t know why I did it,” he said.
- He boasts of staying in the hotel during road trips, watching infomercials and “buying colon cleanser.”
- He gleefully admitted to trying to vote himself into the All-Star Game.
- When asked how well he played after one victory, he said, “My swag was phenomenal.”
- He claims his favorite nickname is “Agent Zero,” which was given to him by the Dada-esque Web site Wizznutzz.

Oh, and Gilbert has his own blog, where he once “wrote”:

I did something bad yesterday. It wasn’t bad, but it was either me or her . . . I dropped my daughter. I had my daughter in my arms and I was ready to go put her to bed because she was sleeping. But I was just outside first because I forgot to put my brakes on in my car. So it was wet outside and I only had on my house slippers and they were wet when I came back in the house. When we got to the stairs I slipped, and you know, my left leg can’t bend. So it was either both of us stumble down the stairs, or drop her. So I had to drop her. She’s okay. She dropped on her butt first.

Can you imagine *LeBron* admitting something like that? No, wait, imagine *Jordan* doing that. Gilbert Arenas is constitutionally unable to be anything other than Gilbert Arenas, and this is why he's so much more successful at being all things to all people than LeBron—who desperately wants to be—ever will be. LeBron thinks that by his saying nothing, we will fill up the empty vessel with our hopes and dreams. But we know better than to do this anymore. The athletes we've worshipped have disappointed us; they've turned out to be human beings like the rest of us—flawed, vain, confused. But they will never admit it. *Here's who I am*, says Arenas. *I don't have the heart or energy to be anything else.* This is not how athletes are supposed to carry themselves. But it's how they should. This is when we love our athletes—when the myth goes away and we believe they're handling themselves the way *we* would handle ourselves, if we were so blessed to be professional athletes.

In one breathtaking post, Gilbert laid out what it meant to be a fan, and a player, and how they tie together:

When we step inside that court and people come into those arenas and sit down, it's not about what they did that day, it's not about their rent, their jobs, how bad their day is going. It's about, "I'm going to forget about it for two hours."

Never has the essence of what sports means been summed up so well by someone who exists smack in the center of it. The reason LeBron James will never truly capture our hearts is because he thinks we want another Michael Jordan. We don't. We want someone who isn't faking it, who recognizes that the price you pay to be a Michael Jordan is not worth the toll it takes on your soul. He just has to be himself, an original thinker, someone who we feel is being straight with us. Michael Jordan never was this, and LeBron James never will be. We see through it now. *We don't believe him.*

Gilbert Arenas will never be the player LeBron James is, but

his existence is in direct contradistinction to what LeBron James, and most athletes, really, have devoted their entire careers to. This is why, in twenty years, when we think of LeBron James, we will think of Gatorade, and when we think of Gilbert Arenas, we will smile and think of ourselves.



YOU'RE MORE INTERESTING THAN AN ATHLETE. REALLY!

*In college, I once wrote a piece for the *Daily Illini* about a night I spent out at a campus bar with then-Illini basketball star Kiwane Garris. It is a measure of the limited success of the Illini at the time that Garris was the closest thing we had to Elvis; these days, he's bouncing around the development league and wondering if they need undersized point guards in Spain. I'd like to say that my story idea was founded on the altruistic ideals of participatory journalism, a desire to get in the head of a star athlete by witnessing him in his social environment. I certainly pitched it this way, but, mainly, I was just hoping I'd have a chance at a couple of his cast-off girls. *If we can't have Kiwane, how about the floppy-haired dork with the notebook and the Nirvana T-shirt at the table with him?* It was at a mid-western public university, and I wasn't in a fraternity; I needed all the help I could get.*

The enterprise could hardly be considered a success. Kiwane met me at the bar and spent most of the evening avoiding me; to be polite, he humored me with a game of darts and a pint of beer. Then he vanished into a tight semicircle of people that I was unable to penetrate. He wasn't rude. He just had better freaking things to do than waste a Saturday evening having a stupid kid with bottles of Wite-Out in his pocket following

him around. (My attempts to persuade him that the Wite-Out could get him high proved ineffective. Wite-Out won't get you high, by the way, and drugs are bad for you anyway.) I didn't have much of a story and, appropriately chastened, I finished up the rest of my beer and headed home to drink Mad Dog, play Sega hockey, and masturbate. It was a typical college night. I ultimately wrote a column in which I had an imaginary conversation with the ghost of Lou Henson, even though Lou Henson was alive and not terribly difficult to get on the phone. I was not the best college journalist.

The mind-set behind my column, though, was sound. Even in college, I was much more of a sports fan than I was a sports-writer, and if you really twisted my arm about it, I'd have to admit I really just wanted to tell my friends and family that I'd gone out drinking with an Illinois basketball player, because I was cool that way.

Sports fans love to tell stories about running into athletes in the regular world. On Deadspin, we even once ran a series of reader-submitted stories called "Athlete Run-Ins," in which people sent in their favorite athlete sightings. A few of these were brilliant—one guy who had worked as a ballboy at the Australian Open wrote about Andy Roddick being scared into shock by the sight of a man in a rabbit costume while having brunch; tennis players are absolutely underrated in the realm of total weirdos. A few tales were scary but most pretty much went like this:

Fan: Hey, [Name of Athlete, or, more likely, Unflattering Nickname]! You SUCK! The team I root for is vastly superior to yours. You cost me money! You make too much money! You are not as tough as you think you are and I suspect I could best you in a battle of physical supremacy.

Player: Hey, man, that's not very cool.

Fan: You are correct, and I apologize. May I buy you an alcoholic beverage? Here we have a common bar napkin.

Could you grace it with your signature?

Player: Sure. (exits, stage left)

Inevitably, these stories would end with “Yeah, so, cool guy!” even though the entire interaction probably took no longer than forty-five seconds. I stopped running them after a couple of months, mostly because I no longer believed them and you can’t exactly start throwing unsubstantiated stories on the Internet, because that would cause the series of tubes to collapse, forcing our economic structure to implode on itself. And that would severely diminish our capacity for easy access to pornography. But that was the pattern: Meet athlete, insult athlete, be surprised that the athlete is another breathing, walking human being who can form words in the same (or similar, anyway) language as the fan, immediate apology, and devolution into blatant hero worship. The process is sped up or slowed down by the insertion of alcohol, depending on whether the poison is ether or light beer.

This is bizarre. The interactions we have with the athletes we obsess over are mostly limited to the virtual; they are muscular stat machines that in no way relate to our lives as walking humans. When they cross over into everyday existence, we have to stop and wonder. Are they heroes? Are they regular people? Are they names on our fantasy teams who just happen to have a pulse?

Years ago, back when the primary ethos of sportswriting was the creation of larger-than-life titans, the fact that Joe Namath could (occasionally) throw a tight spiral was more than enough to classify him as someone who should be emulated and adored. Many of the sports leagues that employed these “heroes” were not near the popularity level that they are today. Everyone was on the lookout for a smiling face to stand in front of the corporate conglomeration and be loved not just by sports fans, but also by normal people who go to the supermarket, worry about their dress size, and only watch one football game

a year. Each league was graced with their big star; it was Namath (or maybe O. J. Simpson) in the NFL, Mickey Mantle (or Pete Rose) in baseball, Michael Jordan (or Magic Johnson) in the NBA. It wasn't enough for the hero to excel athletically; he had to stand out as the model of modern masculinity. Everyone contributed to this, and everyone benefited. If Jim Palmer could throw a nasty curveball, well, jeez, why *wouldn't* he know what kind of underwear I should be wearing? (If you've seen Palmer's old Jockey advertisements, it's now painfully clear that he, in fact, had no fucking idea what kind of underwear I should be wearing.)

But we can buy all of this for only so long. Advertising has evolved to the point where a celebrity spokesperson isn't enough anymore; in fact, we're all a little confused as to why Michael Jordan and Kevin Bacon are hanging out together in their underpants. Sure, athletes still have endless endorsements, but they don't have the same effect anymore, because we don't treat our athletes like we used to. Just because Peyton Manning has an impressive passing rating and can flap his arms like a deranged falcon doesn't mean that we want to be like him. And thank God for that.

Fact is, the world is larger now, and that has made it smaller for athletes. As teams and leagues and PR people and personal handlers work harder to bring the athletes closer into our lives, we see them more for what they really are: just advanced versions of every smaller athlete we've known in our lives. That is to say: Each one seems to be a bit of a dolt.

Think about every athlete you've known in your life. (If you are an athlete, congratulations on having someone buy a book for you, and even more congratulations for actually opening it.) Were you friends with them? Or were you one of the adoring masses forever on the outside looking in? Hell, maybe they gave you a wedgie.

Take that small disconnect between normal people and an overblown high school or college athlete, and multiply it by

45,000, and you have the modern professional athlete. Realize that there is no real motivation for professional athletes to care about anything other than their chosen sport. From the moment their talent is discovered—and this is happening earlier and earlier—they are immediately displaced from the rest of humanity and directed to concentrate solely on their perceived marketable skill. It's almost not their fault that they exist in a self-aggrandizing bubble; what else are they ever encouraged to concentrate on but themselves? They're essentially antisocial piano prodigies who can jump. By the time they make it to the professional level, their relation to the regular world is nonexistent. Even when an athlete is praised for being "well-spoken" or "thoughtful," it's almost always in a public relations construct. Perhaps the smartest athlete in the NBA is Washington Wizards center Etan Thomas, and he can't stop punching his teammate Brendan Haywood. (Brendan is constantly pulling out Thomas's dreadlocks.) Athletes are not connected to the world around them because they do not have to be. If you didn't have to be, you probably wouldn't be either.

The modern athlete has zero connection to any of our lives whatsoever, and if you met any one of them in real life, and you got to know him, and he got to know you . . . you probably would not be able to stand each other. No matter how much Jim Edmonds might mean to me as a Cardinals fan, no matter how many times I've screamed his name while leaping into the air, if I knew the guy on a personal level, I'm rather certain we wouldn't be able to find a single common reference point. I think I'd probably hate him. And I highly doubt he'd be particularly fond of my collection of Woody Allen movies either. Does that somehow mean that I care less about him? No. It just means that I treat him for what he is: a player on a team I root for, a guy who makes me happy and disappoints me only on a completely superficial level. In this way, our bond is unbreakable.

The Web has helped shrink athletes down to our level. The

days of Red Smith weaving tales of brilliance and assigning godlike qualities to the players are over. Athletes really are just like us, and they're entirely not like us. By bringing them closer, they are pushed farther from us. And we wouldn't have it any either way.

Not that I wouldn't buy Kiwane Garris a beer if I saw him today. Heck, I probably can afford one more than he can. Bet he still gets more girls, though.