

Big Fish, Big Pond

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Big Fish, Big Pond

Henry Weinberg

Walking through the locker room, teammates and staff greet him as they would any other day. They exchange game notes or small talk, yet as he continues on, an underlying sense of awe persists. Over time the sensations have faded and personnel have acclimated - taking for granted his presence as a phenom. In fact, he will be arguably the greatest player of all time, and he still has elite years coming to help validate that notion. But, this isn't LeBron James or Tom Brady, as you may have assumed. He gets his headphones and continues his walk - R&B and Hip-Hop are the pregame norms. The walk concludes with him grabbing his glove and putting on his jersey, the back of which reads, "Trout".

27 years ago in quaint Cumberland County, New Jersey, his story began. Nicknamed the Millville Meteor for his time spent dazzling across Little League fields and later at Millville Senior High, it was there that people realized the boundless ceiling he possessed. Michael Nelson Trout is the humble, kind, and generous man that a small town appreciates, as well as the face-of-the-game superstar they could never dream of. His rate of production aligns with or even surpasses the previous legends of the game, but he would be the last person to tell you that.

I, on the other hand, would be one of the first. Playing baseball for about a dozen years in my life led me to watch plenty Major League Baseball. I've always been a fan of the game before any specific team (during in-depth sports conversations I take pride in being the ultimate, unbiased sports fan). Ironically, this trait was strengthened once my hometown Cubs won the World Series, as most of my teenage years were spent hoping they'd finally break the curse. Once they did, I felt much less obligated to root them. This freedom allowed me to simply enjoy the best, the unique, and the crazy of the league. I found myself rooting for the Mariners to break their depressing playoff-drought, or for the Indians 2017 win-streak to never end, or any other admirable campaign. This overarching fandom led me to begin watching Angels games when I could, in the same manner that fans of basketball would watch LeBron play - because he is legendary. My LeBron James became Mike Trout. Watching Trout play, looking into the statistics and analytics of his career and its trajectory wowed me. *How is this guy not heralded as the greatest of all*

time? In an era where the Stephen A. Smith's of the world debate anything...why don't people argue this? Eventually I realized that it obviously wasn't the skills - just everything else, especially the human behind the stud.

Trout is the embodiment of 9 to 5; he comes in for work, grinds, and goes home. Longtime teammate Garrett Richards said, "Being able to watch him the whole time, I feel like he doesn't get enough credit...they don't see what he does on a nightly basis." Richards followed that up with, "He doesn't like the spotlight off the field. He likes to sit in a deer stand. He likes to hang out with friends." Trout is never creating drama or being associated with off-the-field issues. But he also is rarely documented taking part in lavish or exuberant activities like Rob Gronkowski or Russell Westbrook. Trout is more likely to be spotted at an Eagles game than Hollywood. He isn't a wild partier or a socialite, his fascination is weather - weather - he loves monitoring and studying weather.

At the 2018 All-Star Game, Trout is approached by the Fox on-field correspondent, after hitting a homerun, and this interview commences: "Normally I'd ask you to break down your homerun, but let's go to the weather map, this is your truest skill! What's going on here?" The uniqueness of the full exchange is comical. I can't think of another star athlete that would engage in a conversation about such a mundane topic on national television. But it is these personality traits that highlight the distinctions between Mike Trout the man and Mike Trout the baseball player.

Trout shines under the stadium lights but stays out of the spotlight. He is widely cited turning down promotional deals and advertisements and interviews to spend time with his wife. All of this is sweet and tells you a lot about his true character and humble attitude, yet it is a primary obstacle in being associated with the "GOAT" title.

Mike Trout and Bryce Harper have some uncanny parallels. Since their first full seasons in 2012, both have been associated with the peak of baseball - the best of the best. For the entireties of their careers to date, Trout and Harper have been in major markets, L.A. and D.C. respectively. They each hit their 150th home run at the exact age of 24 years and 295 days. Nevertheless, it is Harper who runs his own campaign to "Make Baseball Fun Again" and is signed to national T-Mobile, Jaguar, Under Armour, and Gatorade endorsement deals. Harper also speaks out regarding boundaries between athletics and religion, as well as interjects on social issues. To be fair, Trout is featured in Subway commercials and does a lot for MLB's "I Play" and "#This" initiatives, but those are just clips of Trout carrying on baseball activities - signing autographs, playing catch with kids, and hitting or catching baseballs. Trout is convincingly better, but it is Harper who is most likely the household name. Mike Trout is an ideal role model for his genuine kindness and the lengths he goes through with the aforementioned interactions, not to mention the hustle and quality with which he plays the game, but his outreach

pretty much stops there.

The rarity of Mike Trout is best showcased through his megastar status on the field and his subdued, “average-joe” nature off of it. Over the summer, Trout got brought up in awkward fashion when Major League baseball commissioner Rob Manfred used him as an example of baseball’s modern marketing struggles. The commissioner then elaborated, bringing up Mike’s apparent disinterest in “building his brand” and saying that “he has to make a decision that he's prepared to engage in that area. It takes time and effort" (Canepa, 3). This riled some folks up, as blatantly calling out prominent players is quite uncommon in any league. Backlash for the commissioner came on all fronts - the Angels organization, other players, and countless media outlets.

Now, I’m all for individuality and respecting the personal life of Mike Trout, and I think Manfred handled himself poorly, but the subject at hand goes deeper than media banter. Trout has an immense love for the game and Manfred is right to want the stars of his league to be as prominent as possible. In an era where LeBron James is one of the most recognizable people on the planet while the likes of Kevin Durant, Steph Curry, Tom Brady, and Aaron Rodgers are within shouting distance fame wise, the opportunity is there. Trout should never be obligated to do anything for anybody, but he should be much more inclined given his stature. Being an elite professional athlete gives a select few extreme outreach and a platform consisting primarily of the next generation. It is the foremost hindrance I can think of to Trout’s GOAT campaign, as in an era where sports are so tied to media and communications in general, the elites must “walk the walk and “talk the talk” - he doesn’t do much talking.

Again, Trout is his own man, he dictates what he does with his time. He has chosen to form a massive disparity between his life and career. Does his utter disinterest in brand building hurt his fame? Absolutely. Does his quiet, humble nature limit the phenom hype? Probably. But, does he play on the West Coast? In fact, he does - taking the field in “primetime” slots where he majority of the continental United States is asleep due to the time gap. Is this west coast team a dysfunctional franchise that is also always struggling with injuries? Yes indeed. Trout has only been to the postseason once and his Los Angeles Angels lost. This combination of factors has somewhat shielded Trout from the public eyes and these eyes scarcely dig into advanced metrics. If they did, they would find a burgeoning player trending towards eclipsing baseball royalty.

WAR is a baseball metric. It stands for Wins Above Replacement and can be defined as a calculation of one’s value compared to if a league-average player were in the same spot. It is very telling, as it encompasses all parts of the game into a single stat. Mike Trout has lead the American League in WAR in 5 of the previous 6 seasons, in the outlier, Trout missed about 50 games

due to injury...and was 10th in all of baseball. Also note that Mike Trout has only played 6 MLB seasons. In his 5 full seasons, he has taken first or second in the MVP voting every time, winning. Craig Biggio, an excellent baseball player (Hall of Fame, 3000 Hit Club, 20 seasons), will be passed in cumulative career war by Mike Trout in by the end of the 2018 season. Currently in his age-26 season, Trout is continuing on a historic pace:

Player	Alex Rodriguez	Rogers Hornsby	Mickey Mantle	Ty Cobb	Mike Trout
WAR Through Age 26 Season	55.2	56.9	61.4	63.4	63.4

The above chart is only updated to September 14th, 2018, so Mike Trout, through his age-26 season, is on pace to be the greatest of all time. Excluding the injury-shortened campaign, Trout averages 9.46 WAR per season and he is only now entering his theoretical prime (26-30 is the commonly accepted range). Regression in performance is inevitable as a player ages, however the next couple of years could be his best.

This idea doesn't garner much attention, partially due to baseball being a more classical sport that doesn't rage in controversy like basketball/football often can. While people debate about LeBron v. Michael Jordan, that is aided by LeBron welcoming the fame and hype, while Trout lays low on the subject. It is the great difference between him and other athletes of his caliber

Mike Trout epitomizes etiquette and is a generational talent. One without the other would be duller, however they go hand in hand. His being, coupled with the underappreciated nature of it, is a travesty to me, which is why I'm writing about it. I love baseball and Trout is far and away the best baseball player I have ever witnessed, so him being underrated is an issue to me. He isn't in G.O.A.T. consideration because he is a modest, polite, and simple person who steers clear of the celebrity lifestyle, ergo drastically limiting his clout. But that isn't fair and it shouldn't be a factor, much less a detraction, from his legacy. The contrast present between elite performance on the field and casualness off it is gigantic. Yet, that's exactly what he wants. Trout will look to elude the path transcendent athletes have taken and look to reach the peak of profession sports through his play alone. He is looking to build fame as a humble, kind, and generous man that a small town appreciates - and if he can't do it in in that style, I think he'd rather not do it at all.