

The magic of Mantle

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The Record



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Today, a marketing marvel

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There are a few current baseball players who might — just might — compare to Mickey Mantle in ability: Frank Thomas, Barry Bonds, and Ken Griffey Jr., come to mind.

But when it comes to popularity, none comes close.

In the 1994 Marketing Evaluations/TV-Q ratings (a research companies' analysis of celebrities' popularity), Mantle ranked sixth among sports personalities, even though he had been retired for a quarter-century. No active baseball player even made the top 10.

To give a younger fan a grasp of Mantle's popularity both during his career and up until his death, one sports marketer suggests looking instead to football for reference.

"I would compare him to Joe Montana," says Brandon Steiner, president of Steiner Sports, a New York-based sports marketing firm. "Mickey was a down-to-earth, lovable, charming, pure sports celebrity like Montana. He was good looking, and had all of those rings like Montana. And one of the great things about him was that he never got confused about who he was, what his role was.

"There are several others in his category," said Steiner, citing Ted Williams, Joe DiMaggio, and Willie Mays. "But when you take Mickey's approach vs. Ted or Joe D or Mays, Mickey was the most available. He's a guy who not only had the restaurant, he actually showed up at his restaurant.

"And of all the big names, he took the autographs the most seriously. He cared about where he signed it, and how he signed it, whether he was getting paid or not. I've seen him sign for a kid, then be all apologetic if he didn't think the autograph came out just right. He was such a perfectionist, and that's why he took all that time to do it."

Steiner says that approach served Mantle well in his business dealings, too.

"I never met a corporate client that used Mickey that ever told me he was unhappy. He was unbelievable about showing up and doing what he was supposed to do."

The tangible benefit from the Mantle mystique was about \$30,000 for each personal appearance and between \$2 million and \$3 million per year from Upper Deck the last few years for exclusive rights to Mantle's autograph. That allowed him to receive as much as \$7 million or \$8 million per year, nearly the

amount which Montana takes in from his endorsements (Michael Jordan, the marketing king at roughly \$30 million per year, probably doubles runner-up Shaquille O'Neal's off-court income).

But if there's one area in which Mantle's fortunes would have changed had he been born a generation later, it would have been in.

Even All-Star players had difficulty getting salaries of more than \$40,000 well into the 1950s, and Mantle didn't reach \$100,000 in salary until the end of his career in 1968 (the average major league salary was \$25,000 that year).

The total of Mantle's salaries for his entire career barely exceeded \$1 million. Adjusting for inflation, that still doesn't match the annual paychecks of some of today's best players.

And if he played today, what would Mantle be worth?

One prominent agent says Bonds' \$7 million is the appropriate yardstick.

"Bonds has the three MVPs, so I'd say that puts them in about the same category," says the agent. "But the media is so different today. Mickey's private life would have been exposed, and we just don't know how that would have worked."