

I believe in “heroes”. Heroes like Lincoln, Edison, Martin Luther King Jr., Steve Jobs, and Bono (U2 was my favorite growing up!). I also believe in sports heroes. I have a 7 year old son as well as a 5 year old daughter (but let’s focus on boys for this piece), and I’ve been thinking about heroes that I grew up with and if that was a positive thing or not.

My son, David loves watching Stephen Curry play basketball. I told him that my wife and I went to his college games at Davidson in N.C. and how he could shoot from anywhere. I knew he’d be a good NBA player, but had no idea he would be one of, or if not the best! Now when David is dribbling or shooting, I hear Curry’s name mentioned quite a bit. David’s prized possession is his Curry card. Is this good? Healthy? I can only look at my childhood, as well as adulthood for my conclusions.

Growing up in the 70’s and 80’s near Buffalo, NY, we were located close to Canada. Our TV’s had “rabbit ears” back then (Google it, youngsters!), and I would watch the Montreal Expos baseball games. My favorite player was their catcher, Gary Carter. I wanted to hit like him, play with his enthusiasm, and basically do everything he did. I collected his cards, wore his jersey, and even wrote “Kid” on my batter’s gloves like he did (his nickname). When he was traded in 1985 to the NY Mets, they instantly became my favorite team! The “86” Mets were the best and I’ll never forget that magical season and how he started the comeback in Game 6. One of my middle school teachers actually knew him! His wife used to babysit for Gary’s kids, so my teacher gave me a calendar from Carter. For my Best Man gift, my brother tracked down Carter’s foundation, and with a donation to the charity, Gary signed a jersey for me shortly before he passed away from cancer at the early age of 57.



Recently I saw a documentary on ESPN, “30 for 30: Doc and Darryl” about 2 of the stars of the ‘86 Mets, Dwight “Doc” Gooden and Darryl Strawberry. They were incredible players and 2 of Carter’s teammates. They discussed the drinking, drugs, and raunchy behaviour of that team. They even stated that everyone was doing “speed”, which made the ball look bigger and easier to hit. They also said that players who weren’t using them were playing “naked”, like it was unheard of. Was Carter involved in this? From everything I’ve read so far, he was a role model to the younger players and was not involved in the drugs and womanizing.

Every person that has given interviews about him has stated only positive things about “Kid”.

Did he drink with the team, party with them and go a little crazy at times? Probably. Did he give back to charity, mentor and coach players, and do a ton for baseball, his community and kids like me? Definitely! I think I picked a pretty good person to model myself after.



There were other athletes that I think played the game with integrity and hard work. I absolutely loved watching Jerry Rice catch football passes. He could come down with any ball thrown to him. I heard he would torture younger players who wanted to train with him by bringing them to his hill where they would run sprints until they couldn’t take it anymore.

Jerry was said to train like a maniac so that game time was a breeze. We found out later that he could “dance with the stars” almost as well!

The “Great One”, Wayne Gretzky was my favorite hockey player back then. I read his autobiography, collected his cards, and would watch as he would look for where the “puck was going, and not where it was”. He scored more goals, had more assists and totalled more points than anyone in history. Not bad!

On a different note, I remember watching Mike Tyson as a 17-18 year old just crushing everyone and thinking this guy is never going to lose! He wasn't tall and didn't have a long reach, but his powerful left hook could knock the biggest guys out cold! YouTube his early fights. You'll smile before the bell rings knowing that his opponent has no idea what's about to hit him! Then his career took a turn for the worse. His manager and mentor, Cus D'Amato died, he went through an ugly divorce, and ended up in jail for rape. I remember watching live as he bit Evander Holyfield's ear twice during their bout. He's paid his price, but is more of a joke now than one of the greatest boxers in history.



As an adult, I started watching the Tour De France around 2001 because of an incredible person that overcame cancer to win 7 Tours in a row. Lance Armstrong was my hero! I read his books, wore his yellow Livestrong band, donated to his charity, and watched every second of the Tour every July (this was before I was married and had kids and actually had time to watch it!). He was the best! He did things no one had ever done before, and he stood up to those “evil” other riders that would try to stop him. He stood against cancer and stood up for America! He was brash and backed it up with his titles. I couldn't get enough of watching him and learning more about this sport.

Then came the allegations of doping and cheating. I refused to believe the riders who lied about Lance. I even bet a coworker at the time that by 2010 he wouldn't be indicted for doping (I won only by a couple of years!). In 2013 on Oprah, he actually said the words. He lied, cheated, doped, sued people, called people nasty names, and did everything possible to shut accusers up and keep his legacy. How could he do this??? I was devastated. I felt duped and couldn't believe my hero would do this. I haven't watched the Tour since then.



I have more examples, from Tiger Woods, to Joe Paterno, to Alex Rodriguez (my rookie card of his really plummeted in value!). All great at their sport. All phenomenal. All heroes of mine. All fell from the top. I guess I could add, all human.

So, should my son have sports heroes? I say yes, but he needs to know a few things:

1. No one is perfect.
2. It's okay to emulate their work ethic, passion and charity.
3. Root for them, but know that they won't always win or meet your expectations of them.
4. Look to your family, teachers, coaches and community members. They are or should be your real “heroes”. I think overall I picked some great players to emulate and follow. I know they

made mistakes, and I know they are or were not perfect people. Will Steph Curry let my son down? Probably. Twitter and other social media weren't around when the "86 Mets were causing trouble. Now we the fans know far more than I knew back in the '80's. Testing for performance enhancing drugs wasn't around when I was young. I've no doubt that athletes in my day were using "questionable" if not illegal substances to improve their game. Also, if an athlete tweets one thing or is seen in public doing anything these days the entire world knows in an instant. We didn't know half as much back then. My final thought is this: to all the teachers, coaches, and parents out there- be the hero boys crave. Be a solid role model. Teach them. Instruct them. My son needs me and all these boys in our lives need all of you.