

Speaking of Sports

When looking for brilliance in the words of athletes, look to the past

Among other things that make the presentation of the annual Heisman trophy such a special event is the fact that it is one of the few times when an athlete knows that he is going to have to deliver a speech. Not a statement, not a quote, not a quip in answer to a question, but a speech. It is a lot to ask of a 22 year old, but on my personal list of “greatest sports speeches,” two were delivered by athletes accepting the Heisman Trophy.

To make my list, the speech has to be a true speech. Towards the end of Bull Durham, Crash Davis gives Nuke LaLoosh a lesson in all the clichés he will need, such as, “Play ‘em one day at a time,” or, “Lord willing, things will work out.” To be sure, there have been some memorable quotes from athletes. Yogi Berra fills up several books’ worth. Satchel Paige’s philosophy —“Work like you don’t need the money, love like you’ve never been hurt, dance like nobody’s watching”—is one of my favorites. But it’s a line, not a speech.

Furthermore, the speech must be delivered by an athlete. Bob Costas’ eulogy of Mickey Mantle in 1995 was one of the greatest speeches in a sports context ever delivered. But Costas is a broadcaster who gets paid for his words. Similarly, Knute Rockne’s “Win one for the Gipper” speech to his team at the 1928 Army game doesn’t qualify. Teddy Roosevelt’s famous “in the arena” quote is tremendously inspirational, but he was a president.

Of course, there is no rule that great athletes should be great statesmen. But when they have been—particularly when it has come out of nowhere—their words leave an indelible memory. There is a speech that’s unlikely to be supplanted—Lou Gehrig’s retirement speech in 1939. As he was dying, he said, “Today, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.” Sixty-seven years later, watching footage of that speech still gives you goose bumps.

by Bob Latham

There is also a clear number two on my list and it came from a man not noted for his speaking prowess at the time, though he has transformed himself into a highly sought-after banquet speaker. When Gale Sayers took the podium in 1970 to accept the George S. Halas Courage Award, no one could have expected that the words he was about to utter, beginning with “I love Brian Piccolo,” would be the breakthrough event that would allow men to cry. You ask any man to admit a

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time when he cried and more often than not, especially to a casual acquaintance, the first thing out of his mouth will be “Brian’s Song.”

Hall of Fame inductions provide an annual opportunity for memorable speeches. However, so many athletes have gotten used to speaking in Bull Durham-esque clichés that it is hard to turn them off. Nevertheless, Cooperstown provided the setting for the best sports speech I ever saw in person, on July 25, 1999. It also came from an unlikely source—the very private and reserved Robin Yount.

Yount’s speech that day was genuine, personal and revealing of his character, and it used sports as a backdrop to make a larger point. As he neared the end of his speech, Yount said, “We are often reminded how quickly things can be taken from us.” He paused before continuing, “My heart goes out to the families of the men who lost their lives in the construction of the new stadium in Milwaukee.” Brilliant. Classic Yount. Blue collar all the way. He concluded, “The game of life can sometimes be too

short. So play it with everything you’ve got.” And he was finished.

As for Heisman Trophy acceptance speeches, there are two that stand supreme above the rest—one famous, one not as famous. The famous is Penn State’s John Cappelletti dedicating his 1973 Heisman Trophy to his 11-year-old brother Joey, who was stricken with leukemia. “They say I’ve shown courage on the football field, but for me it’s only on the field and only in the fall. Joey lives with pain all the time. His courage is ‘round the clock... I want him to have this trophy. It’s more his than mine, because he’s been such an inspiration to me.” Cappelletti’s speech later inspired the movie “Something for Joey.”

That speech gets the Heisman for pathos and inspiration. But for eloquence, the modern day crop of soundbite athletes are unlikely to match Nile Kinnick, the Iowa halfback who on December 6, 1939, concluded his speech in this manner: “Finally, if you’ll permit me, I’d like to make a comment, which in my mind is indicative perhaps of the greater significance of football and sports emphasis in general in this country... I thank God I was warring on the gridirons of the Midwest and not on the battlefields of Europe. I can speak confidently and positively that the players of this country would much rather struggle and fight to win the Heisman award than the Croix de Guerre.” Several years later, Nile Kinnick perished serving in the military.

The human stories behind the scenes at a sporting event are often what drive our interest in sports. Kinnick’s speech, like other great sports speeches, followed that mold, using sports as a backdrop to deliver a genuine human message that stands the test of time. ■

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