

Oprah's Crowded Couch

In an era where secrets are hard to keep, the mythology of some sports stars may not survive



BOB LATHAM

While civilization did not end on December 21, 2012—as predicted by the Mayan calendar, according to popular legend—sports mythology began a serious downward spiral. The evening before the potential end of the world, the story broke that the American 1500-meter runner and three-time Olympian Suzy Hamilton had been working for an

escort service in Las Vegas. Thus started an alarming descent of legendary sports figures from Mount Olympus. Suzy Hamilton a call girl? Lance Armstrong a performance-enhancing drug user? Manti Te'o's girlfriend a hoax? What's next? Katherine Webb is a dude? The Dos Equis guy is not the most interesting man in the world?

With so many athletes queuing up to cleanse their souls, I will offer to Oprah Winfrey the paraphrased advice of Roy Scheider's character in "Jaws": You're going to need a bigger couch. In fact, since her services are increasingly needed in the sports world, it might be a good idea for Oprah to make her legendary couch more sports friendly, perhaps by accessorizing it with beer, chips and sports-themed blankets. Though civilization did not end after the last cycle of the Mayan calendar, the beginning of this next cycle was accompanied by at least one tectonic shift in human behavior: Men were forced to figure out where on their cable or satellite service Oprah's network, OWN, was to be found in order to watch Oprah and Lance—the Frost/Nixon of this generation.

Mythology has always had its place in sports, but it is an increasingly dangerous business. In the digital age, the creation of sports myths comes with an enhanced risk of a fall from grace. Suzy Hamilton looked and seemed every bit the "all-American girl" from the Heartland with the fighting spirit to take on the best middle-distance runners in the world. Lance Armstrong was the cancer survivor who through sheer hard work and determination rose to the top of the cycling world. And Notre Dame's Manti Te'o was the man of deep faith with an open heart who was the spiritual leader of the No. 1 college football team in America. But in a world where information flows at unprecedented speed, and where those things in the shadows get moved quickly to the light, it's hard to perpetuate a myth. You wonder to what degree these athletes knew that risk. There truly is a tinge of tragedy in each of their sagas,

though I don't think Dion needs to adjust the lyrics of "Abraham, Martin and John" for Suzy, Manti and Lance.

One of many things that is so bizarre about l'affaire Te'o is that the last place that needed to come up with an inspirational story is Notre Dame. They have been living off of the George Gipp story for roughly 90 years. Did the Gipper's words finally reach their expiration date? Will "win one for the Gipper" now be supplanted by "win one for the fibber"? The Te'o saga is a bit different in that Te'o is part victim, though it does show how a story, once told and then told again, takes on a life of its own. In a previous era, before cellphones, YouTube and TMZ, the mythology may have been preserved, and indeed embellished even further. One of the most debated stories in American sports was Babe Ruth's called shot off Charlie Root in the 1932 World Series. Ruth himself had fun with, and perpetuated, the legendary story. Yet former Brooklyn Dodger Babe Herman once revealed that on the set of "Pride of the Yankees" in 1942, he heard Ruth say to Ruth: "You never pointed to center field before you hit that ball off me, did you?" To which Ruth replied: "I know I didn't, but it made a hell of a story, didn't it?"

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Te'o's supposedly deceased girlfriend did indeed make a hell of a story, the type of story that tends to enhance a Heisman trophy candidacy. And if anyone on the Notre Dame campus played along with it

despite suspicions, well, it can be added to the list of blarney done in the name of a Notre Dame Heisman trophy candidate. Keep in mind that Joe Theismann's last name was actually pronounced "Thees-man," but was changed in 1970 before his senior year by Notre Dame's sports information director to rhyme with Heisman. Theesman/Theismann ended up as the runner-up, just like Te'o this year when the guy caught with a fake ID before the college football season won the Heisman in lieu of the guy caught with a fake girlfriend at the end of it—the football season, that is, not the world. ■

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