

Cal Ripken Jr.



Responsibility

In 1994 major league baseball players went on strike. For the first time in history, the World Series was cancelled. For many baseball fans, this action was unforgivable. They viewed the baseball players, many of whom make millions of dollars a year, as greedy and uncaring. Many fans vowed to stay away permanently from baseball. They refused to go to the ballpark or watch games on television. As a result, the average game attendance for baseball dropped 20 percent in the next year. However, even the most jaded fans could not turn their backs on the events that would unfold on September 6, 1995. Arguably the most prestigious record in baseball was about to be broken. Lou Gehrig, the original “iron man,” played 2,130 games in a row for the New York Yankees from 1923 to 1939. To break Gehrig’s record of consecutive games played, a player would have to play 13 years without taking a day off. That would be like a student never missing a day of school from kindergarten through high school graduation. When people spoke of records that would never be broken, Gehrig’s consecutive game streak was at the top of the list. Yet, Cal Ripken Jr. showed them that records are made to be broken.

The irony is that Ripken never set out to break any records. As he put it, “All I ever wanted to do was play well and play every day.” In an era when overpaid athletes take themselves out of the lineup for a hangnail or a sore elbow, Ripken felt a responsibility to the game of baseball and to his teammates to play every day. He once commented, “When my team is out

there on the field, I want to be with them.” Most of his fans were hard-working people who could relate to his strong work ethic. Ripken did his job to the best of his ability and gave his full effort day in and day out. He was the consummate professional, never complaining after a loss nor calling attention to himself after a win. Cal Ripken Jr. was a loyal and dependable player who represented everything that is good about baseball.

As Ripken’s playing streak began to approach Gehrig’s record, the media coverage quickly became overwhelming. Every aspect of the streak was covered. When Ripken had answered every question posed by the media, reporters turned to relatives, friends, former teammates, and hotdog vendors to get their comments and opinions. Ripken estimates that he gave six interviews a day during the 1995 season. The interviews became so distracting to the team that a mock locker room was set up to accommodate the press. Ripken, a regular guy in many ways, had become as famous as any baseball player to ever play the game. And the fans couldn’t seem to get enough of him. He would sign autographs for hours after the games ended. However, he never seemed to mind. “I do my best to get to as many as I can,” Ripken said. “I’m happy and willing to give people as much time as possible.” He thought of his time with fans as part of his responsibility as a major league ballplayer.

Breaking Gehrig’s playing record was unlike breaking just about any other record in baseball. For instance, before Barry Bonds broke the single season home-run record, no one knew when, let alone if, he would indeed break the record. However, barring an unexpected injury, baseball fans knew that Ripken would break Gehrig’s record on September 6, 1995, at Oriole Park at Camden Yards. President Bill Clinton was in attendance that day, along with 750 members of the press and a stadium packed with thousands of jubilant fans. In the bottom of the fourth inning, Ripken crushed a ball for a home run. Of that hit, Ripken said, “I nailed that pitch, and I knew right away it was gone. What a thrill that was!” When the final out of the fifth inning was made and the game was declared official, the fans went wild. For 10 minutes, they were on their feet cheering and

applauding their hometown hero. Ripken would periodically come out of the dugout to tip his hat to the crowd—the traditional way to say thank you and show respect in baseball. But this night was different. The fans wanted more. Finally a couple of teammates pushed Ripken onto the field, where he spontaneously took a lap around the bases. Along the way, he high-fived just about every fan in the front row. The celebration turned into a 22-minute standing ovation filled with wide smiles and heartfelt tears. It was clear that baseball felt the same way about Cal Ripken Jr. as he felt about baseball.

In a speech after the game, Ripken thanked his family and paid homage to the late Lou Gehrig, who was struck down in his prime with ALS, a degenerative disease. Ripken concluded his speech with these words, “Whether your name is Gehrig or Ripken, DiMaggio or Robinson, or that of some youngster who picks up his bat or puts on his glove, you are challenged by the game of baseball to do your very best, day in and day out, and that’s all I’ve ever tried to do.”

To honor his marathon achievement, *Sports Illustrated* named Ripken the Athlete of the Year for 1995. He was also awarded the ESPY for Male Athlete of the Year in 1996. Everyone, it seemed, had something complimentary to say about Cal Ripken Jr., but Tom Hicks, owner of the Texas Rangers, might have expressed it best when he said, “He’s one of the greatest ambassadors of the game we have ever seen. He’s a great role model. He’s a role model for baseball but also for the entire population.”

Ripken played in 2,632 consecutive games in his career—a streak that covered 16 years. On the last day of the 1998 season, Ripken elected to take himself out of the lineup. There was no big announcement or fanfare leading up to the game. Typical of Ripken, he just quietly asked the manager not to play him that night against the New York Yankees. When the Yankees realized the significance of the moment, they collectively stepped out of the dugout and tipped their hats to Ripken. It was their way of paying their respects. In return, Ripken tipped his hat toward them. Although he would play three more seasons, the streak was over. It was the end of an era.

Regardless of what Ripken does for the rest of his life, he will always be remembered for his playing streak. He is the iron man of baseball. To some extent, it's a shame that most people only know about that particular aspect of his life because the story behind the man is much more interesting. It is important to understand what made Ripken different from other talented baseball players. What drove him to be so dedicated to his craft? Why did he feel such a responsibility to the game and the fans when so many other pro athletes dodge this obligation? What events produced a man of such outstanding character and stamina?

Cal Ripken Jr. was born in 1960, while his father was a minor league player with the Baltimore Orioles. Unfortunately, Cal Ripken Sr. sustained an injury to his shoulder that permanently ended his dreams of making it to the big leagues. He quickly turned his attention to coaching, working his way through the minor leagues. As a result, the Ripken family moved to a different city nearly every season. Cal had an older sister and two younger brothers, and the four children lived in 14 cities while growing up. Cal says that the biggest drawback of moving so often was the difficulty of making friends. The upside was that the family grew much closer because they had to rely on each other. The Ripken family was typical of that era, with Cal's mother staying at home to raise the children. Cal says that his mother ran a tight ship—he and his siblings were expected to meet certain standards, and mediocrity was not tolerated.

All the children loved to play sports. Cal played basketball, soccer, football, baseball, ping-pong—just about every sport you can think of. He developed a competitive edge and hated to lose. He still lists stubbornness as one of his dominant personality traits.

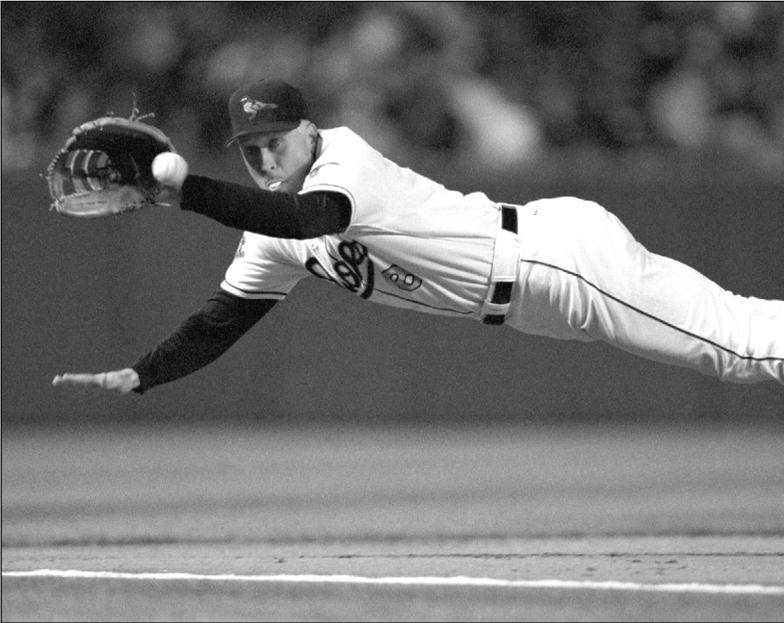
The Ripken family was not wealthy. The salary of a minor league coach is modest, and during the off-season, Cal Sr. had to take on extra jobs to make ends meet. At various times he worked at a lumberyard, a hardware store, and a pharmacy. Those hard times taught Cal to do whatever was necessary to get ahead. His mom and dad provided a good example for their

children under less than ideal circumstances. No one in the family complained or whined when things didn't go according to plan. All six of them kept plugging along and put forth their very best to contribute to the family.

When Cal was 15, his father landed a job in the major league as a scout for the Orioles. It was around this time that Cal was just beginning to take a serious interest in baseball. His dad's job gave Cal the opportunity to meet some of his heroes. On a few occasions he was allowed to shag some balls with the players during practice. The biggest asset to his dad's position, however, was having his father around to help him with the fundamentals of the game. For example, after a dismal freshman year in high school, Cal's dad took him into the batting cage to work on his swing. Cal's skills improved dramatically during his sophomore and junior seasons. By the time he was a senior he was hitting .496. Based on his success as a ballplayer, he decided to forgo college and entered the draft. As fate would have it, the Orioles used their second-round pick to select Cal Ripken Jr.

Due to the recent phenomenon of high school basketball players going directly to the pros and signing multi-million dollar contracts, many people might think Ripken became an instant millionaire as a big leaguer. Nothing could be further from the truth. In baseball, players usually spend several years trying to prove themselves in the minor leagues. For the record, Ripken made \$100 a week during his debut season with a farm club in Bluefield, West Virginia. His life as a minor league ballplayer was anything but glamorous. Ripken lived in a boarding house with several of his teammates for \$25 a week.

On opening day, Ripken made three errors and had a dismal performance at the plate. But, true to his upbringing, he did not give up. He was determined to get better. His body was still underdeveloped, so he made up for it by using his brain. He studied the opposing pitchers and kept notes on their strengths and weaknesses. Today that is standard procedure in baseball, but back then it was ingenious. Ripken's hard work and preparation paid off. He worked his way up through the system, from the Instructional League in St. Petersburg, Florida,



*Cal Ripken Jr. diving for a ball in his final season as a Baltimore Oriole.
Photo courtesy of Bill Wood and Ripken Baseball.*

to AA baseball in Charlotte, North Carolina, to the AAA club in Rochester, New York. In three years of professional baseball, Ripken played six hundred games, rarely missing a game, which is just the way he wanted it.

Finally, on August 8, 1981, Ripken was called up to the Baltimore Orioles. His excitement was dulled when he discovered that the Orioles already had a full infield, relegating him to a seat in the dugout chewing sunflower seeds. It was not exactly the start he was hoping for. However, in the off-season, a star player was traded, making room for Ripken at third base. When the 1982 season began, Ripken went into a severe batting slump. He couldn't even get a hit off of his own dad during batting practice. Nothing seemed to work. Finally, while playing against the California Angels, the great Reggie Jackson made it to third base and said to Ripken, "Look, don't let everyone else tell you how to hit. You could hit before you got here. Just be yourself and hit the way you want to hit." Those words of

wisdom made all the difference in the world. Ripken began hitting again and won the Rookie of the Year Award for 1982. Earlier that year, in what seemed like an insignificant event at the time, Earl Weaver, the manager, decided to sit Ripken down for the second game of a doubleheader. Nobody knew it at the time, but that was the last time Cal Ripken Jr. would miss a game for the next 16 years.

Over the course of his career, Ripken had many highs and lows. Some of his accolades include a World Series victory; being named a two-time MVP of the American League and two-time MVP in an All-Star game; and having 19 consecutive All-Star appearances. He was also only the seventh player in history to hit 3,000 hits and 400 home runs, and he was voted the starting shortstop for the All-Century team. Ripken also endured many lows over the course of his career. He was a part of 10 teams with losing records, including the 1988 team that lost 107 games. He had more strikeouts than any other Oriole in club history, and he endured many slumps at the plate. Through his humility and quiet determination, however, Ripken showed his fans that he could handle the good times and the bad.

When other professional athletes were denouncing the responsibility of acting as role models for their fans, Ripken openly embraced this status. Later he reflected, “Whether I liked it or not, my actions, I came to realize, influenced kids. Just as I had looked up to athletes when I was a boy, some kids were now looking up to me.” He learned this the hard way early in his career. During the first inning of a game, he was ejected for arguing with the umpire. After the game Ripken learned that a young fan and his father had traveled all the way from Virginia just to watch Ripken play and that the boy cried the remaining eight innings. The story had a lasting impact on Ripken, and he learned to keep his anger under control and to maintain his composure regardless of the circumstances.

In 1987 Cal Ripken Sr. was promoted to manager of the Orioles. At the same time, Cal’s brother Billy had been called up to the major league after working his way through the minors. The Ripkens became the first brothers in baseball to be

managed by their father. When the boys were in high school, Cal Sr. was rarely able to watch them play because he was busy coaching. Now, as professionals, Cal and Billy could do what they loved in front of the man they loved. Cal always credited his father with teaching him how to play the game. The first public words he uttered after breaking Gehrig's record were, "Let me start by thanking my dad.... From the very beginning, my dad let me know how important it was to be there for your team and to be counted on by your teammates." As a child, Cal idolized his dad and wanted to emulate his can-do attitude. When asked about this father-son relationship, Cal Sr. commented, "I always talked to him about doing something the right way. He's the guy who had his priorities in the right order."

Throughout his life, Cal Ripken Jr. has put his family at the top of the list. In his autobiography, appropriately titled *The Only Way I Know*, Ripken says he enjoyed many incredible moments in his life, but cites four as the most special—three of which are related to his family. The first special moment was the day he married his wife, Kelly, whom he had met in an unusual way. While sitting in a restaurant one evening eating dinner with a teammate, Cal was approached by an attractive older woman who asked for his autograph. This scenario was not unusual, until the woman told Cal that he must meet her daughter, Kelly. Next to his autograph Cal wrote a clever note, which read, "To Kelly, if you look anything like your mother, I'm sorry I missed you."

A few weeks later, a young woman tapped him on the shoulder and thanked him for being so nice to her mother. Ripken quickly realized who she was and said, "You must be Kelly." Cal and Kelly dated for about a year before he decided to ask her to marry him. After cooking a romantic dinner for her one evening at his home, Cal invited Kelly out onto the balcony. While looking out at his backyard, he flipped a switch that illuminated several strands of Christmas lights that had been shaped into the question, "Will you marry me?" Cal dropped down to one knee and presented Kelly with an engagement ring. Apparently, the "iron man" of baseball has a soft heart. They were married on November 13, 1987.

Several years later, Ripken continues to make his marriage a priority. Each week during the off-season, he and Kelly have a date night. They spend a quiet evening together, regardless of what else is going on in their busy lives. They say that it helps to keep the romance alive in their relationship. Typically, they share dinner and a movie, which can be challenging given Ripken's celebrity status. He says that he usually waits in the car at the movie theater until Kelly gives him the signal that she has the tickets and the popcorn in hand. He then hurries into the theater as inconspicuously as he can. The effort is worth it, Ripken says. He recognizes that it is important to be "just a husband" sometimes.

Two of the other very special moments in Ripken's life came when his children were born. Like most fathers, Ripken says their births had a profound impact on him. He took to heart the responsibility of being a father to Rachel and Ryan, knowing that they were now depending on him and looking to him for support and guidance. He made them a priority in his life. For example, although Ripken feels a genuine responsibility to sign as many autographs as possible, when he is with his family, he politely declines, saying, "I'm just Rachel and Ryan's dad right now. I hope you understand."

Despite fortune and fame, Ripken never lost sight of his priorities. On the day that he broke Lou Gehrig's record, he started his day by driving his daughter to her first day of first grade. Ripken also requested that Ryan and Rachel be permitted to throw the ceremonial first pitch before the game that evening. After the game, he presented his children with his game jersey and showed them that he wore a special T-shirt underneath that read, "2130+ Hugs and Kisses for Daddy." In the middle of all the hype surrounding his record-breaking performance, Ripken didn't forget to tell his children how much he loved them.

Ripken is one of the few players in recent memory to play his entire career with one team. Like other talented players, he had several opportunities to make more money by playing for a different team. But when it came down to it, Ripken valued loyalty over money. He never got caught up in the ego-driven

arguments about what he was worth as a ball player. He just played hard and let his numbers speak for themselves. His humility was refreshing to witness in a celebrity with his status, and it earned him respect from thousands of fans.

Even when he went into slumps, Ripken never agreed with the critics who told him he needed to rest. “That’s always seemed like nonsense to me,” he said. “Sitting out one or two innings isn’t going to restore my energy. In fact, I perk up when I trot onto the field.” Instead of resting, he simply worked harder. In 1990 when his batting average dropped to .250, several people said he was all washed up at the age of 30. Ripken refused to accept that assessment. He built a gym at his house that included a batting cage, exercise equipment, and weight machines. He put forth what he called “total commitment” and began a regimented workout program. The next season he raised his batting average to .323 and was named the Most Valuable Player for the American League. He continued to apply the same work ethic to the game until the ripe old age of 41. Not many players continue to play professional baseball with gray hair. But there aren’t many players as dedicated as Cal Ripken Jr.

In addition to family, Ripken has always felt a deep responsibility to his community. He and Kelly have hosted several fundraisers in the Baltimore area to help disabled children. They also started the Kelly and Cal Ripken Jr. Foundation to support literacy and health-related programs for young people. And because they passionately believe that every person should be able to read and write, they started an adult literacy project called the Ripken Learning Center. Finally, after breaking Gehrig’s record in 1995, Ripkin set up the Cal Ripken Jr./Lou Gehrig ALS Research Fund. While many professional athletes are accused of taking more from the game than they give back, this is not true of Ripken.

People remember Ripken, the baseball player, for his dedication, loyalty, determination and humility. However, we should remember him for something more. Ripken displayed a sense of responsibility that is rare in the world today. He felt a

responsibility to the game of baseball and to his teammates to give his best effort each and every day; he felt a responsibility to his fans and to society to give something back; and he felt a responsibility to his family to be a loyal and loving husband, father, son, and brother. To some people, he is seen as “old school” or a throwback to the way things used to be. Joe Torre, manager of the New York Yankees, alluded to this when he said, “Cal Ripken Jr. is a bridge, maybe the last bridge, back to the way the game was played.” But Ripken shouldn’t just remind us of how it used to be. He should be a living example of what is possible today. All it takes is a serious effort to put forth our very best—day in and day out. If we approach life with the same work ethic and sense of responsibility as Cal Ripken Jr., it would be amazing to see the difference each of us could make.

Ripken has been asked many times how he wants to be remembered. He says, “My answer is simple: To be remembered at all is pretty special. I might also add, that if I am remembered, I hope it’s because by living my dream I was able to make a difference.” No doubt about it, Mr. Ripken, you definitely made a difference. As a sign of respect, we tip our hat to you.