

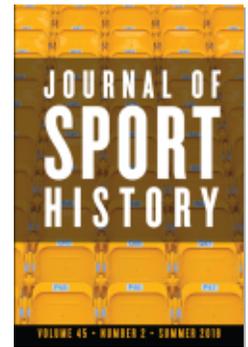


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Seventies

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“The Magnitude of Me”

Reggie Jackson, Baseball, and the Seventies

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During the 1970s, Reggie Jackson, arguably the most polarizing black baseball player of his time, became an emblem of the decade. A five-time World Series champion with the Oakland Athletics and the New York Yankees, he publicly challenged white owners, managers, teammates, and reporters. For Jackson, challenging white authority meant reclaiming his manhood. While white critics claimed that he was too flamboyant and too outspoken, black fans and writers complained that he was self-absorbed, unwilling to speak out for any cause other than his own. Embracing the politics of self, Jackson emerged as a symbol of excessive individualism during a growing cultural shift toward personal fulfillment. Although Jackson was one of the most prominent athletes of the seventies, historians have neglected to explain his larger cultural significance. His story, however, not only reveals how black athletes shaped the idea of the “Me Decade” but also how they transformed American sports through participation, protest, and personalized performance. Jackson was at the forefront of a new generation of black athletes: the first class of baseball’s free agents, players who were wealthier, more mobile, and more independent. Among the first black athletes who crossed over as mainstream corporate spokesmen, he became baseball’s greatest media star, recognized as much for his personality as for his athletic accomplishments. The age of Jackson marked a turning point in American sports history, one where black athletes embraced new freedoms, defied authority, and expressed their own individual style.

KEYWORDS: Reggie Jackson, baseball history, 1970s, African American athletes

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Sometimes I underestimate the magnitude of me.

—REGGIE JACKSON

Reggie Jackson had no doubt that he was the best player in baseball. And he had no trouble telling the world, either. He craved the spotlight, the recognition—and the salary—that came with being known as the very best. In the early 1970s, an age before free agency, when major league owners exercised complete control over the labor of players, Jackson, arguably the most polarizing black ballplayer, challenged the paternalism of Oakland Athletics owner Charlie Finley. “He owns me,” Jackson charged in 1970. “I’m a prisoner. All players are owned by the owners. They’re slaves to the system.”¹

Like Curt Flood, who in 1970 had sued the major league owners over his right to become a free agent and declared that he was treated like a “well-paid slave,” Jackson resented how baseball’s labor structure diminished black manhood. Finley, he said, “was stepping on my manhood, trying to deprive me of my dignity.” In an age of declining respect for authority, Jackson challenged “The Man,” emerging as a symbol of black empowerment and self-determination. For Jackson, freedom was not just about negotiating a better contract. It meant reclaiming his manhood, controlling his own labor, and asserting his independence.²

Jackson embodied a complex model of black manhood. Rejecting white expectations of black gratitude, he defied the sports establishment, battling white owners, managers, teammates, and reporters. The central impulse behind his drive for independence was to showcase his manhood—his ability to exercise authority and power, commanding respect from anyone who encountered him. “I want to be the man,” he said. Jackson loved to tell stories that fed his image as a dominant force, bragging about his power: the distance of his home runs, his conquests with women, the sports cars he drove, his real-estate business that made him a millionaire, his lavish lifestyle and the glamorous parties he attended. This was a man’s world, according to Reggie Jackson.³

During the 1970s, when black athletes shaped mainstream popular culture more than ever before, Jackson became an emblem of the era. A five-time World Series champion with the Athletics and the New York Yankees, his story complicates the narratives around sports and politics. If the late 1960s marked the height of the revolt of the black athlete, Jackson’s career signaled the gradual decline of activism among the most prominent black athletes. Consumed by fame and wealth, he foreshadowed an era where black professional athletes expressed political insouciance. “I’m not much for politics,” he explained in 1975. In response, black columnists questioned his blackness and excoriated Jackson for surrounding himself with white friends and white women. Yet white writers vilified him for being too flamboyant and too outspoken, arrogant and selfish. He seemed to personify the “Me Generation,” more interested in the politics of style than the politics of substance.⁴

Jackson’s ascendance in American culture took place at a time when pundits characterized the 1970s as “an era of narcissism, selfishness, [and] personal rather than political awareness.” The concept of the seventies as an age of self-gratification became popularized in 1976 with Tom Wolfe’s famous *New York* magazine essay “The ‘Me’ Decade and the Third Great Awakening.” Wolfe condemned what he viewed as the hedonism and reflexivity in American life, an obsession with “remaking, remodeling, elevating, and polishing one’s

very self." Americans like Jackson who came of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Wolfe suggested, were less concerned with posterity than with themselves. Three years later, in his bestselling book *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch lamented that self-absorption and a broader fixation with the therapeutic stemmed from "a cult of consumption." Written during a time of inflation and recession, oil shortages, rising crime rates, and urban decay, Lasch suggested that narcissism was not simply a product of self-indulgence. Rather it was a social phenomenon, an escape from a tumultuous and uncertain world.⁵

Although these jeremiads exaggerated Americans' self-preoccupation, the notion that the seventies was a time of "excessive individualism," as Wolfe argued, persisted in popular culture. In his history of that decade, Dominic Sandbrook suggests,

While the Me Decade was a caricature, a good caricature, as any illustrator knows, must have a core of truth. There was a genuine sense of individualism and self-absorption, evident in everything from religious affiliation and neighborhood politics to folk songs to psychotherapy. Collective institutions were in retreat; individualism was on the rise.⁶

Yet historians have not considered how Reggie Jackson fused sports with celebrity culture, shaping an image of the seventies as the Me Decade. At a time when pundits and fans lamented that narcissistic athletes had replaced sports heroes, Jackson came to be seen as the epitome of greed and self-absorption. His emergence as a symbol of excessive individualism, however, can only be understood in the context of three interconnected changes: the advent of free agency, the gradual increase of salaries that followed, and the growing cultural shift toward personal fulfillment. These developments made many baseball players focus less on team accomplishments and more on proving their manhood—and their economic value—through individual achievements. Perhaps more than any other player, Joe Falls wrote in *The Sporting News*, Jackson understood that he got "paid not for what his team does—though that figures into it—but primarily for what he does as an individual."⁷

Jackson's story not only reveals how black athletes influenced the idea of the Me Decade but also how they transformed American sports through participation, protest, and personalized performance. Reggie Jackson was at the forefront of a new generation of black athletes: the first class of baseball's free agents, players who were wealthier, more mobile, and more independent than any previously. Among the first black athletes who crossed over as mainstream corporate spokesmen, he became baseball's greatest media star, recognized for his personality as much as his athletic accomplishments. He fashioned an era of black self-expression on the field, the kind of improvised cultural practices that could be seen when Muhammad Ali played "the dozens" in the middle of the boxing ring, taunting his opponents, or when Julius Erving, sporting a magnificent Afro, cradled a basketball and dunked it with flair, or when Billie "White Shoes" Johnson celebrated a touchdown with a "rubber-legged dance."⁸

The age of Jackson marked a turning point in American sports history, one where black athletes embraced new freedoms, defied authority, and expressed their own individual style. Wearing "his uniform like a star—tight, muscles bulging, top button of shirt open," Jackson seemed to "carry a stage with him everywhere," journalist Thomas Boswell wrote. When he crushed a towering home run into the bleachers, he did not immediately drop the bat and

begin jogging modestly with his head down. Instead, the master of self-promotion flipped his bat and lingered in the batter's box as the ball soared over the fence, admiring his own power, reminding the crowd to appreciate the moment—and *him*—for just a little longer.⁹

* * *

In 1968, Reggie Jackson arrived in Oakland, a battleground city where black activists challenged residential segregation, job discrimination, and police brutality. Two years earlier, Oakland militants had organized the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, a movement influenced by masculine liberation ideology. Recruiting young working-class black men, Black Panther founder Huey Newton understood their frustration. Lacking political and economic power, he noted, the young black man believes “that he is something less than a man.” Confronting the white man—“THE MAN”—Newton argued was critical for reclaiming black manhood.¹⁰

No one confused Reggie Jackson with Huey Newton. Although he never embraced the politics of the Black Panthers or joined community activists, asserting his manhood became essential to Jackson's identity. In his first two seasons in Oakland, reporters described him as model of respectability politics, sensitive and thoughtful, modest and humble. “His manners,” a writer from *Sports Illustrated* observed, “are impeccable.” At a time when writers increasingly focused on “angry black athletes” demanding racial justice, Jackson never expressed any interest in direct political action or using his platform for social change. He was, one writer commented, “caught up in a search for himself—both as a ball player and as a man.” Yet Jackson displayed hints of rebellion in 1969, charging the mound after Twins pitcher Dick Woodson threw a pitch behind his head. It was rare for a black player to instigate a fight against a white player, but Jackson believed that Woodson gave him no choice. “If I don't go out,” he declared, “I'm less than a man.”¹¹

The following year Jackson and Charlie Finley engaged in what one writer called the most “intense feud in sports.” It began prior to the 1970 season when Jackson demanded a significant raise. He wanted to be paid like the All-Star that he was, “the most interviewed and photographed athlete in baseball.” He was only twenty-three years old and had already graced the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. Some writers predicted that he would become the next Willie Mays. After hitting .275 with forty-seven home runs and 118 RBIs, Jackson was on the cusp of greatness. The more success he enjoyed on the field, the more empowered he felt. He told Finley that he would sign a new contract for \$60,000, which amounted to a \$40,000 raise. Scoffing at Jackson's figure, Finley refused to negotiate. The owner had a reputation as an egotistical “robber baron” and a shameless self-promoter who would do anything to get his way. Neither man budged. When Jackson held out—an open gesture of defiance—Finley began criticizing him through the media, suggesting that he “choked” under pressure and did not play hard all the time, implying that Jackson was an emotional, lazy black man.¹²

“Massa Charlie,” as he was known inside the Athletics' locker room, leveraged baseball's reserve clause, which bound players to the service of one team. Every player contract included the clause, a one-year option that allowed an owner to reserve a player's services under the same terms for another season. In practice, the owners exercised the reserve clause

season after season. Therefore, a one-year contract essentially became a contract for life. Without the reserve clause, the owners argued, teams could not afford the players' exorbitant salary demands. Since the players could not negotiate their labor with other clubs in an open market, the owners artificially suppressed salaries. Jackson explained baseball's labor system: "The owner is the boss and the ballplayer is his property."¹³

Undoubtedly, Curt Flood and the broader Black Power movement influenced Jackson's perspective about baseball's economic structure. After Flood refused a trade from the St. Louis Cardinals to the Philadelphia Phillies and decided to sue the owners for restraint of trade, he met with the Player's Association, which included Jackson, who was one of only two non-white player representatives. Flood explained how the reserve clause was unjust and violated the players' human rights. Critics, most of them white, however, argued that Flood and other black players exaggerated how the owners exploited athletes by comparing them to slaves or indentured servants. Yet, as black men, Flood and Jackson viewed baseball's labor system through the lens of America's history of racial oppression. Looking back, David Halberstam observed, it was unsurprising "that the first baseball player to draw the line on the reserve clause was black. Blacks felt far more alienated from the norms of society than whites, and in the case of athletes, they were far more sensitive to being thought of as chattel."¹⁴

Jackson viewed his salary as an index of self-worth, status, and autonomy—the measure of a man. "Money is power," he said. "When you have it, you are independent." So, when Finley refused Jackson's contract demands and insulted him, it made Jackson "feel less than a man for taking it from" the owner. He would never forget how Finley emasculated him during their negotiations, calling him "a good boy."¹⁵

Ten days before the 1970 season began, Jackson and Finley agreed on a contract—\$45,000—yet their relationship remained fraught with tension. Jackson slumped throughout the year, playing so poorly that Finley threatened to send him back to the minor leagues. When Jackson objected, Finley told Athletics manager John McNamara to bench him. Being yanked in and out of the lineup angered Jackson, who became increasingly frustrated. Reporters began describing him as "moody," "inflexible," and "temperamental." Such commentary reflected a larger pattern of political sports writing where white reporters framed the most misunderstood black ballplayers—Bob Gibson, Dick Allen, and Roberto Clemente, among others—as arrogant and disagreeable, rather than competitive like their white counterparts. Burning with resentment, Jackson felt mistreated by white writers and Finley. The whole experience made him bitter and disillusioned. A year earlier he told a journalist that he had not experienced "much prejudice." Now, he told that same writer that "prejudice has eaten me alive."¹⁶

On September 5, 1970, Jackson stuck it to The Man. In the eighth inning of a game against the Kansas City Royals, he clubbed a pinch-hit grand slam off lefty Tom Burgmeier. Sitting in his private box, Finley watched Jackson trot around the bases, the crowd jubilant. When Jackson reached home plate, he stopped, flung his helmet into the air, raised his fist—extending his middle finger toward the owner's box—and glared at Finley as he yelled, "Fuck you!"¹⁷

Never before had a black ballplayer so publicly disrespected an owner. For Jackson, his demonstration marked a moment of self-liberation. Removing his "mask of deference,"

in that moment he reclaimed his manhood from Finley. He would no longer allow the owner to embarrass him. His gesture of defiance made clear that he did not play for The Man. He played for himself.¹⁸

* * *

During the next five seasons Jackson's ascent helped transform the Athletics into one of the most formidable teams in baseball history. Between 1972 and 1974, he led the A's to three straight World Series championships. In 1973, he won the American League Most Valuable Player award. The following season, he received more votes for the All-Star team than any player in history. *Sports Illustrated's* Roy Blount Jr. called him "a superstar advancing toward superduperstar status." In the world of sports, there was no one quite like him. He "has put together a package of power, speed, science, flash, funk, outspoken quotability, popularity . . . social and economic independence . . . and winningness that is unique among ballplayers." "And," Blount added, "Reggie knows and loves it."¹⁹

In the public imagination, Jackson remained a complicated personality, both beloved and despised for his independence and assertiveness. Sensitive and intelligent, he defied stereotype. A picture of outsized ego and self-confidence, he was a reporter's dream, honest to a fault, speaking freely about his aspirations and achievements. Writers appreciated that he would "tell it like it is," unafraid to criticize his teammates, manager, or the owner. "Telling it like it is" meant something more than a slogan popularized by Howard Cosell. Rooted in the black freedom struggle, "telling it like it is" meant speaking the hard truth, confronting The Man with blunt language. It reflected a kind of no-holds-barred politics that made Jackson appear more authentic.²⁰

Yet Jackson remained unfulfilled with fame and success. His teammate Billy North found Jackson one of the most insecure people he had ever met. Fellow teammate Sal Bando agreed. Jackson, he said, "hasn't yet learned who he is." Other players complained that he was moody and unpredictable, sullen and combative. Jackson admitted seeing a psychiatrist because he had become "too self-centered and not taking enough interest in the outside world." Reading the bestseller *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, he identified with the gull that refused to conform or accept limits, breaking from the flock on a journey of self-exploration and self-discovery. For millions of readers like Jackson, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* resonated as an allegory for those seeking personal transformation. In an age of division and disillusionment, many Americans like Jackson turned inward, focusing on self-improvement and personal fulfillment. In his pursuit of happiness, Jackson was, Wells Twombly wrote, "a restless, wandering soul. He's always searching for a new reality, a sense of identity."²¹

Jackson viewed his identity through the lens of individual achievement, materialism, and capitalist aspirations. Image conscious, he flaunted his success through conspicuous consumption, living in a lush condominium in the Berkeley Hills with a magnificent bay view. He collected show cars and sport cars. He owned more than one hundred dress shirts and pants, Gucci shoes, Geoffrey Beene suits, and twelve leather jackets ("I've got every color."). He had so many demands that he hired a private secretary who handled his bills,

fan mail, and phone calls. "Ain't nobody lives like I do," he said. "I'm the only black in my neighborhood."²²

Jackson, the poor son of a tailor who ran numbers on the side, had escaped poverty and now enjoyed the fruits of his labor, living among affluent whites. He sought acceptance among the very privileged and found pleasure as a bachelor. After divorcing his wife in 1973, Jackson became less interested in long-term commitments and more focused on personal freedom. Being a famous baseball player came with an expectation that he should be "a stud," he said, admitting that he sometimes succumbed to the pressure and embraced "the part." Dating white women, once forbidden under the threat of violence, Jackson ignored racial boundaries. His interracial relationships made him seem like a character out of a blaxploitation film. Assertive, materialistic, and sexually liberated, Jackson fit the part of the "black outlaw." "Young, strong, and full of confidence," William Van Deburg noted, the black outlaws "were toned and groomed to perfection," financially empowered and acquisitive.²³

Yet Jackson insisted that race did not matter in his relationships. However, in the age of "Black is Beautiful," dating white models offended many black Americans, including some of his teammates who questioned his racial pride. But he believed that they were jealous of him—his success, physical gifts, and prowess with women. "Those guys have a ghetto mentality," he said. "They just never learned how to relate to white people."²⁴

Although Jackson maintained that he was colorblind, his behavior suggested otherwise. In 1974, while the team prepared for a game in the locker room, he bragged about "a gorgeous white chick" he was dating. When Billy North asked if the woman had a friend he could meet, Jackson supposedly answered, "She doesn't go out with niggers." His insult sparked a brawl between them. When Jackson suggested that North was not sophisticated enough to date white women, he implied that black women were less desirable. Perhaps "sleeping white" was an act of rebellion, though Jackson had been raised mostly among whites in a suburb of Philadelphia and had always courted white women since he was a young man. Nonetheless, demeaning North's blackness and proclaiming his own superiority revealed Jackson's need to affirm his exceptional manhood in the locker room.²⁵

In the eyes of black critics, Jackson's publicized relationships with whites and his lack of engagement with the larger black community made him seem like a fraud. He may have worn a natural Afro, but he seemed to lack real "soul"—an expression of black consciousness that conveyed his commitment to black culture and black solidarity. In an age of "soul power," writers observed that he was "not super cool, although he can turn it on when he wants to" and, at times, he pushed "his soul a little hard." One angry black "fan" wrote him a letter, deriding him as an "Oreo cookie"—black on the outside, white on the inside.²⁶

Jackson struggled to understand why some black fans did not think that he was black enough. He denied being disconnected from the concerns of the black community, making a point of saying that he gave money to "black causes." Yet he rarely spoke out against racism unless he had experienced a personal affront. Unlike Muhammad Ali or Arthur Ashe, he was not a voice for social justice. Criticized for his preoccupation with self-gratification and his distance from black activists, like Wilt Chamberlain, Jackson believed that addressing

racial inequality was more about economics than protests. As an entrepreneur and real-estate developer, he embraced black capitalism.²⁷

Prioritizing his financial interests, he challenged the traditional economic structure of baseball by directly ignoring ownership's complete control over his behavior. For example, before the 1974 season began, he signed an endorsement contract with Puma, a rare achievement for a black athlete at a time when advertisers were reluctant to sign black spokesmen. But Charlie Finley had already secured a contract with Adidas requiring his entire team to wear their shoes. When Finley ordered Jackson to wear Adidas, he flat out refused. Jackson's stance marked a turning point where professional athletes asserted greater autonomy outside the bounds of ownership and increasingly allied themselves with corporations.²⁸

Jackson ignored the old rules of the game. "I'm not merely a baseball player," he declared. "I'm a black man who has done what he wants, gotten what he wanted, and will continue to get it."²⁹

* * *

"The athlete," Robert Lipsyte declared in 1975, "represents celebrity without power." The *New York Times's* columnist argued that professional athletes were trained performers, commodities "used to satisfy others," and defined "by the quantity and quality of that satisfaction." Treated like "chattel," he argued, they possessed few labor rights. But in 1976 that all changed for Major League Baseball players.³⁰

In the "Year of Jock Lib," a federal judge upheld an arbitration ruling that struck down the reserve clause. Arbitrator Peter Seitz had determined that the reserve clause only bound a player for an additional year after his original contract expired. His decision proved significant: it meant that any player could become a free agent simply by playing out the 1976 season without signing a new contract. Three years earlier, the Player's Association had successfully negotiated for salary arbitration, an effective tool that weakened the owners' leverage over the players and ultimately led to higher player salaries. The combination of salary arbitration and the arrival of free agency set in motion a financial revolution in Major League Baseball that gave the players unprecedented economic power.³¹

Reggie Jackson fully intended to use that power and become a free agent after the 1976 season. "For the best players on the auction block," Ron Fimrite wrote in *Sports Illustrated*, "the future looks golden, and no future glitters more than Jackson's. Of all the liberated players, he has the greatest star quality." Recognizing that nine of his players would play out the season without signing a new contract, Charlie Finley cut each one's salary by 20 percent, the maximum allowed by the collective bargaining agreement. Knowing that he also could not afford to pay them all market value, he considered the prospect of losing the players without receiving anything in return. So, on April 3, he traded Jackson, Ken Holtzman, and a minor leaguer to the Baltimore Orioles. Initially, Jackson refused to report to Baltimore, but three weeks after the season started, he finally joined the team. The Orioles had offered him \$200,000 to sign for an additional year, but Jackson turned it down. Despite an outstanding individual season with the Orioles, leading the team in

home runs and stolen bases, Jackson knew that he did not want to play in Baltimore for another year. What did he want? "I just want to be free," he said.³²

* * *

On November 29, 1976, a crowd of New York reporters and photographers crammed into the Versailles Terrace Room in the Americana Hotel to meet the richest player in baseball: Reggie Jackson. Surrounded by family, friends, and a blonde companion, Jackson appeared before the television cameras dressed in a gray designer suit, black alligator shoes, and a gold bracelet with R-E-G-G-I-E spelled out in diamonds. New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner smiled watching Jackson sign a five-year contract worth about \$3 million, setting a new record for how much a baseball player had earned. Jackson's arrival signaled an important moment in the history of the Yankees: he was, the *New York Times* noted, the team's first "black superstar" and the club's "first black millionaire."³³

The Yankees' press conference underscored the dynamic relationship between professional sports, media, and celebrity. It was what Daniel Boorstin called "a pseudo-event," an artificial media spectacle staged for public consumption. Two seasons earlier, when he was still with Oakland, Jackson said, "I want to be nationally known. I'm not even a household name yet, even though we've won three straight World Series." But after the press conference in New York—the media capital of the world—he became, according to one writer, "an event, a happening," page-one news. In "the age of instant media attention," baseball fans paid to see the performer, and Reggie Jackson was the ultimate showman. Steinbrenner understood his value as a "personality." "Reggie is made for this town," he said. "He has charisma. He is the kind of guy who makes things happen."³⁴

Over the course of 1977, the press covered the Yankees like critics reviewing a soap opera with a cast of "affluent athletes and bleeding egos." Personality journalism, characterized by greater emphasis on scandals and stories about the private lives of individuals, particularly in the worlds of sports and entertainment, shaped Jackson's image as "a prima donna." In the aftermath of the Vietnam War and Watergate, Americans had grown tired of hard news and political conflict. Increasingly, the public demanded entertainment, especially in the form of sensational narratives about celebrities. This cultural impulse gave rise to *People Magazine*, which began publishing in 1974 with a "focus entirely on the active personalities of our time." Three years later, the magazine named Reggie Jackson one of "The Most Intriguing People" of the year.³⁵

By the mid-1970s, *Sport* looked a lot like *People Magazine*. A popular monthly publication featuring profiles and colorful photos, *Sport* had become a model of personality journalism. In the 1950s and much of the 1960s, sportswriters protected the image of ballplayers and turned athletes into heroes, carving out myths about the sacred values of American sports. But in the age of Woodward and Bernstein many sportswriters now aimed to reveal the truth of the "Sports World," exposing the secrets hidden behind locker-room doors. Increasingly, magazine profiles focused more on conflict than the heroism of athletes. At the same time, readers hungered for more accessible stories about the private lives of prominent sports figures. *Sport's* editors understood the market was "more concerned with

satisfying the public's increasing appetite for personality." In this context, Jackson was an ideal subject for magazine writers.³⁶

During spring training, *Sport* writer Robert Ward met with Jackson at a Ft. Lauderdale bar called the Banana Boat. Wearing a blue t-shirt with a huge yellow star and the word SUPERSTAR! spelled out in silver letters across his chest, Jackson called attention to his brand. As the host of ABC's sports competition show *The Superstars*, Jackson seemed to be promoting the network's program. Yet he also wore the shirt to send a message, reminding the world that he was a *superstar*, exceptional in every way. That was how Jackson wanted others to identify him, how he sold himself.³⁷

Sport's profile of the richest Yankee revealed Jackson's desire for recognition. According to Ward, Jackson said that, now that he played in New York, "people talk to me as if I were a person of substance. That's important to me." He insisted that he "used to be known as a black athlete, [but] now I'm respected as a tremendous intellect." In his view, that was what separated him from other ballplayers. When Ward asked him how his arrival would help the Yankees win, Jackson suggested that he would be a more successful team leader than catcher Thurman Munson, the American League's Most Valuable Player. "This team," Jackson boasted in an unforgettable line, "it all flows from me. . . . I'm the straw that stirs the drink." Ward's article magnified Jackson's reputation for vanity. "There is nobody who can put meat in the seats [fans in the stands] the way I can," he told Ward. "That's just the way it is."³⁸

In May 1977, tension between Jackson and his teammates intensified when the *Sport* article hit the newsstands. Every newspaper in New York published Jackson's "straw that stirs the drink" line, perpetuating his image as the narcissistic athlete. Although he denied that the quotes in Ward's profile were his words, most of his teammates did not believe him. Treating him like an outcast, his teammates often ignored Jackson. Manager Billy Martin and many of the players resented his presence as much as his arrogance. Since the Yankees had won the pennant the previous season without him, some players took his signing as a criticism of their shortcomings. "They treated his [arrival] and all the attention he received from the news media like an invasion," Tony Kornheiser wrote in the *New York Times*. There was a growing feeling in the Yankees clubhouse that Jackson made everything about him: his fame, his talent, his contract.³⁹

Jackson represented "the new jock millionaires," a group of athletes who were "more independent and decidedly more mobile." Critics suggested that free agents had damaged the relationship between fans and teams; the transitory nature of free agents not only widened the economic gap between them, but it also broke the ties between the "hometown heroes"—players who spent their entire career with one club—and the way that fans identified with a local team that looked less and less familiar.⁴⁰

For the loyal baseball fan, the consequences of free agency—the redistribution of wealth and corruption of traditional values—could be seen in the New York Yankees. By 1977, with the city on the verge of bankruptcy, suffering from rising unemployment and growing welfare rolls, white middle-class New Yorkers fled for the suburbs. In the South Bronx, where the Yankees played, entire blocks of abandoned buildings, burned-out tenements, and empty parking lots filled with weeds contoured the borough's landscape. The city tabloids stirred widespread fear among New Yorkers with stories of street gangs,

arsonists, and drug dealers taking over the impoverished neighborhoods around Yankee Stadium. Yet the Yankees remained, according to *Sports Illustrated*, "an embarrassment of riches." Assembling the most expensive payroll in baseball, the Yankees "attracted the kind of hot glare of publicity that tends to magnify, distort and, finally, roast."⁴¹

From the perspective of disenchanted fans, the Yankees were a symptom of pervasive avarice in sports. A year earlier, on opening day, after taxpayers coughed up more than \$100 million for stadium renovations, including luxury VIP boxes with private bars and bathrooms, air-conditioned dugouts, and a computerized scoreboard, protestors marched outside Yankee Stadium, demonstrating disapproval of the city's wasteful spending. Then, before the start of the 1977 season, fans learned that George Steinbrenner planned to raise the price of every ticket in the stadium, except for a small section of the bleachers. Jeff Greenfield, a writer for *New York* magazine, fumed: "There was no explanation of how a kid from the Yankee Stadium neighborhood of the South Bronx—which has gone conveniently ignored by the franchise that took \$100 million of our money to rebuild a ball park—was supposed to be able to see this team short of charity." Ultimately, Steinbrenner reduced the amount of his proposed ticket increase, but the damage was done, leaving fans infuriated over the team's rapacity as the borough decayed.⁴²

Signing Reggie Jackson to a multi-million-dollar contract, therefore, further alienated New Yorkers who believed that the city's misplaced spending paid the exorbitant salaries of the Yankees. Many fans could not sympathize with privileged athletes like Jackson, especially at a time of growing income disparities. In a letter to the editors of *New York* magazine, a woman from Yonkers complained: "Million-dollar contracts turn ballplayers into petulant superpests who infect the team and worry more about off-the-field investments than the game they are being overpaid to play." With seven full-time financial advisers, a real-estate firm, three car dealerships, and endorsement contracts with Puma, Rawlings, Volkswagen, and Standard Brands, Jackson had become "a walking conglomerate," a business enterprise unto himself. Furthermore, his extravagant lifestyle—his luxurious Manhattan apartment on Fifth Avenue across from Central Park, his collection of Rolls Royces, his much publicized \$7,000 fur coat, and his appearances at the swank disco club Studio 54—made him seem out of touch with the plight of ordinary New Yorkers struggling to survive.⁴³

His career with the Yankees framed what cultural critics characterized as the passing of an era: the disappearance of sports heroes. "This is the age of the superstar, not the hero," Herbert London wrote in the *New York Times*. Superstars like Jackson, he added, "specialize in self-adulation, not sacrifice." It was a common theme found across the country's sports pages. Writers filed stories with nostalgic headlines lamenting, "Where Have You Gone, Joe DiMaggio?" The question suggested that past sports heroes were selfless, less concerned with their individual statistics than the team's record. But now fans listened to Reggie Jackson brag about how many home runs he had hit and read about his arguments with Billy Martin over his place in the batting order. He lacked "the ideal temperament" of a team player, a New York writer complained, a character flaw that did not prevent him from leading the Athletics to three consecutive World Series championships. "The hero has disappeared," London argued, "because of the athlete's narcissism."⁴⁴

Yet critics like London overlooked how the profound cultural changes that had taken place during the 1960s and 1970s shaped American views of heroism. Historically, heroes

had reflected and affirmed certain collective values. American heroes of the past, William Bennett wrote in *Newsweek*, embodied the country's aspirations, serving noble "purposes beyond the self, to something that demanded endurance or sacrifice or courage or resolution or compassion." But, by 1977, the country's splintered consensus turned idealism into disillusionment. Surveys showed that youth no longer believed in heroes. In the world of sports, the rising affluence of athletes, brought on by collective bargaining agreements and the influence of the players' lawyers, agents, and financial advisers, shattered "the perceived innocence that many fans attached to athletes." According to a 1978 poll published in *Sports Illustrated*, 67 percent of fans believed that athletes had become "greedier and more self-centered than they used to be." Furthermore, in the age of Jackson, athletes were more scrutinized by the media; personality journalism led sportswriters to explore all sides of an athlete, warts and all.⁴⁵

More than any other baseball player of his time, Reggie Jackson had, in the words of *New York* magazine writer Peter Bodo, "mastered the art of celebrity." A television star, he skillfully manipulated the press into selling his image, one that led Standard Brands to market a *Reggie!* candy bar, an indulgent treat befitting the man it was named after. "I am aware that I sell myself or promote myself," he said. But as long as he was noticed and people remembered him, nothing else mattered. Jackson was the perfect pitchman for seventies' advertising, which emphasized the "feelgood ad—the ad that tells you to feel good about just being you and [purchasing] anything that will bring you closer to that goal." Appearing on television—"the perfect Me Machine"—Jackson helped advertisers speak directly to individuals, spreading the gospel of self-gratification.⁴⁶

"The only person I have to impress," Jackson declared in a Volkswagen commercial, "is me."

* * *

The story of the Yankees 1977 season was the tension between Billy Martin and Reggie Jackson, each representing diverging sets of values. Martin, the manager who had played on the "old Yankees" in the 1950s, reminded fans of the Bronx Bombers' glory days, "a club that offered immortality." During his playing years, Martin was known as a "team man," not the most talented player but willing to do anything to win. Martin's old Yankees "were first and foremost organization men," "conservative and image conscious," Peter Bodo wrote. Yankee fans fondly remembered them not as quarreling individuals but, in the words of another writer, as a team of "heroes who summed up the ideals of manhood, courage, and the excellence of an entire generation." The old Yankees were also mostly white. Martin, Mickey Mantle, Yogi Berra, and Whitey Ford, the team's most prominent figures, played in an era when the team only grudgingly integrated. The first black Yankee, Elston Howard, did not join the team until 1955, eight seasons after Jackie Robinson broke Major League Baseball's color barrier.⁴⁷

If Martin represented the old Yankees, Jackson personified the new: "rich, rebellious, egocentric, black and explosive," Bodo wrote. In 1977, the Yankees featured nine black players, five of them regular starters, a reflection of the larger trend in modern American team sports. Twenty years earlier, less than 7 percent of major league players were black,

but, by the time Jackson joined the Yankees, black players made up nearly 20 percent of the league. The number of black athletes in professional basketball and football was even greater, sparking debate over the origins of the emerging "black dominance" in sports, a noticeable change that made many whites uncomfortable. "The image of the star athlete," *Time* noted in 1977, "is increasingly a black image."⁴⁸

Although Jackson had become the face of the team, he believed that many white fans, Martin, and some of his white teammates never accepted him as a "true Yankee." Discussing the Yankees' history early in the season, Jackson told a writer that the club had never had a "black superstar" before him, though certainly Elston Howard was an outstanding player, winning the American League MVP in 1963. "The old Yankees were an all-white team," he said early in the season. "The front office was racist and bigoted. They didn't want no black superstars. It isn't comfortable to say, but somebody has to say it."⁴⁹

Jackson's remarks about the team's legacy of racism came during an era of intense debate around affirmative action and busing, legal remedies that attempted to solve persistent disadvantages black people encountered in society. Many white people grumbled that black folks dwelled too much on the country's history of racism and now the government and unelected judges gave them all the advantages. The most vocal complaints came from white citizens who feared that black people were replacing them on the job, a pattern that some saw taking place on the playing field, too. In this culture, some white fans viewed Jackson as an uppity black man, wielding undue influence over their beloved team in the same way that black employees had tainted the workplace.⁵⁰

Speaking about the Yankees' history of segregation convinced many white fans that Jackson was a troublemaker, the stereotypical angry black man from the radical Bay Area intent on disrupting a great American institution: the New York Yankees. White New Yorkers, Jackson later wrote, believed that he was disrespectful of "authority, Yankee history, or even his own teammates." Most white citizens who disliked him did not resent Jackson simply because he was black, but rather because he was black *and* assertive, lacking "the quiet dignity" required for popular acceptance. Unlike Jackie Robinson, Jackson was not seen as "a moral man," what Lawrence Levine described as a righteous exemplar of "action and emulation for black people." Instead, he was viewed as the swaggering black man, unrestrained and combative. Writing for the *New York Amsterdam News*, the city's African American newspaper, Mel Williamson maintained that "the resentment toward Reggie Jackson" was based on "the character of his Blackness. He is outspoken and he exudes self-confidence."⁵¹

Billy Martin fit into that category. He never wanted Jackson on his team. Martin resented the way that Reggie congratulated himself and commanded attention from the press. And, Martin added, the Yankees did not need a boom-or-bust slugger whose strikeout ratio was one of the highest in baseball. Yet Elston Howard, Martin's former teammate and assistant coach, believed that the manager's racism influenced the way he treated Jackson. Martin, he alleged, was "prejudiced against blacks, Jews, American Indians, [Hispanics]," and other people of color, especially those who did not "bow to him." The Yankees manager could "get along with blacks if they" did not "challenge him. But Reggie challenged him in every way." Martin, who was known to tell racist jokes, reportedly called Jackson a "nigger" behind his back and expressed outright hostility toward him. "I think Billy wanted Reggie to fail more than he wanted the Yankees to win," Howard claimed.⁵²

On June 18, 1977, the simmering tension between Jackson and Martin boiled over at Fenway Park during a nationally televised game against the Boston Red Sox. In the bottom of the sixth inning with the Yankees trailing 7–4, Red Sox batter Jim Rice came to the plate against Yankees pitcher Mike Torrez. Rice looped the ball into shallow right field in front of Jackson, who, from Martin’s perspective in the dugout, had loafed, moving too slowly toward the ball and letting it drop in front of him. Making matters worse, Jackson’s casual throw allowed Rice to advance to second base. Jackson later said that he approached the ball cautiously so that it would not bound past him. But Martin did not see it that way; he questioned Jackson’s effort. In an unusual move, he replaced Jackson with Paul Blair in the middle of the inning. Stunned, Jackson jogged to the Yankees’ dugout, screaming at Martin. Seething, with his fists clenched at his side, Martin shouted that Reggie had “showed him up” and failed to “hustle.” They exchanged curses and threats while millions of television viewers watched them charge toward one another, struggling to break free from coaches and players who had to separate them.⁵³

Jackson left the stadium before the game ended and returned to his hotel room at the Boston Sheraton where he met with three reporters. The entire episode with Martin pained him, as did the quarrels with his white teammates, particularly the way Munson, Craig Nettles, and Sparky Lyle criticized him in the press. It was as if he was on the team but not part of the team. “It makes me cry, the way they treat me on this team,” he vented. “The Yankee pinstripes are Ruth and Gehrig and DiMaggio and Mantle. I’m a nigger to them and I just don’t know how to be subservient.”⁵⁴

In New York, the majority of fans sided with Martin, who was generally popular with the crowds at Yankee Stadium. As a player, he had a reputation as a fighter, a gritty working-class Italian who had overcome poverty and made it big as a Yankee. Even then, “the Rocky Graziano of baseball” raged at every perceived slight or injustice, defending his reputation against anyone who challenged him. Now as the manager confronting the imperious black superstar, he became a “hero to the guys in the torn T-shirts, beer cups in hand, sitting in the top rows of the grandstands.” He was Archie Bunker in pinstripes, standing up for the “forgotten Americans” who felt cast aside by government bureaucrats, liberals, and the black man. Frustrated by rising crime, busing, and unrest in the streets, “the blue-collar types” or “the white ethnics,” as they were called in the press, complained about how they were mistreated and ignored. “A large reason for the growing alienation of the white working class,” Pete Hamill wrote in *New York* magazine, “is their belief that they are not respected,” a feeling that Martin had experienced interacting with Jackson. When he pulled Reggie from the outfield, it was Martin’s way of reminding him that *he* was the straw that stirs the drink.⁵⁵

Two days after the skirmish between Martin and Jackson, the Yankees arrived in Detroit for a series against the Tigers. A few minutes before the game began, Martin, the former Tigers manager, trotted out to home plate to a standing ovation. When Jackson took his position in right field, those same fans booed him mercilessly. For many ordinary white baseball fans, celebrating Martin’s stand against Jackson reinforced the importance of order on and off the field. For them, the manager, linked to the old Yankees of the 1950s, represented a link to better times, when players were humble and respected authority.⁵⁶

In an era of national ennui, Americans yearned to revisit the past, to reclaim the myth of innocence lost. In the seventies, popular culture manufactured images of fifties’ nostalgia:

the production of *Grease* on stage and on the big screen, the hit television show *Happy Days*, and the growing popularity of "oldies" rock 'n' roll music played on the radio. That culture of nostalgia could be seen in baseball, too, celebrating the most iconic teams and players from the past. In 1974, four authors published biographies of Babe Ruth, the same year that Hank Aaron, under the stress of racist death threats, broke the Bambino's career home run record; that same season, the Baseball Hall of Fame inducted Mickey Mantle, arguably the greatest player of the 1950s. And two years earlier, Roger Kahn published a bestseller, *The Boys of Summer*, a sentimental book that romanticized the glory of Jackie Robinson's postwar Brooklyn Dodgers, a team that embodied racial cooperation.⁵⁷

Compared to those Dodger teams, Jackson's Yankees demonstrated the breakdown of the integrationist ideal and the contradictions of a star player who embraced the politics of self. As the personification of uncompromising individualism, Jackson seemed to disrupt the entire team. Not even his black teammates defended him against Martin. Black writers criticized him for spending his free time in front of cameras instead of engaging with the depressed communities in Harlem and the South Bronx. When Jackson arrived in New York, he promised to help the city's black youth, but he neglected to fulfill his pledge. "He's too wrapped up in himself to do anything about their plight," a columnist complained in the *New York Amsterdam News*. On one occasion, during an autograph signing, an older black woman chastised him. "We helped make you," she said. "You owe black people something."⁵⁸

Jackson failed to appreciate that the larger black community expected more from him than success on the field. "Black athletes are not off limits to the struggle," civil rights activist Jesse Jackson declared in 1975. "They have an obligation to participate in it." As the first black star of the New York Yankees, Reggie Jackson had become a powerful symbol of black advancement. Yet he wrestled with the expectations that came with this role, unsure how to respond to those who questioned his blackness. "I'm a black man," he said, "but I'm not really accepted as a black man."⁵⁹

Moving to New York had changed Jackson's relationship with the public. "At first I loved the spotlight," he said. "Now I find that it burns the skin off my back." In New York, he was, according to the *New York Times's* Murray Chass, more "scrutinized and dissected" than any baseball player since Jackie Robinson. Critics called him a fraud and a charlatan, but they neglected to see that what made Jackson authentic was his transparency and vulnerability. Rarely had such a sports star openly revealed his pain and loneliness, his desire for affection and attention. As a celebrity, what made him intriguing—what made him great copy—was that people witnessed every aspect of his struggle as if it were a drama made for television. The story of Reggie Jackson, Philip Taubman wrote in *Esquire*, "is the story of an athlete dying young."⁶⁰

Yet Jackson proved in the 1977 World Series that there was another layer to his authenticity: greatness. Baseball fans wanted to witness something extraordinary, a performance that they had never seen before, and Jackson delivered. Facing the Los Angeles Dodgers in game 6 of the series, Jackson did something that no hitter ever had: he clubbed three consecutive pitches against three different pitchers into the bleachers. He broke or tied eight World Series batting records. After his third home run, Yankee Stadium erupted with fans chanting his name as he crossed home plate. Begging him to step out of the dugout for an

encore, Jackson reappeared and tipped his cap, thanking the crowd, finally receiving what he so deeply desired: public admiration of his individual talent.⁶¹

For Jackson, the 1977 World Series proved a moment of redemption. “This year isn’t a baseball story,” he explained. “This is a story of humanity and manhood.” Throughout the season, white writers repeatedly emasculated him, describing Jackson as “childish” and “petulant.” One writer from *Sports Illustrated* suggested that within Jackson’s “manly body lies the sensitivity of a child.” And on more than one occasion Billy Martin addressed him as “boy,” echoing Charlie Finley, diminishing his stature as a man and as a ballplayer. For decades during Jim Crow, whites refused to acknowledge the names of black men, often referring to them simply as “boy.” So when thousands of Yankee fans chanted his name—“Reg-gie! Reg-gie! Reg-gie!”—they not only recognized his prowess as a player but also his manhood. “I’ve become a man this year,” Jackson declared. “I’ve passed the test of manhood.”⁶²

In a triumph of individualism, Jackson’s three consecutive home runs remain the most iconic performance by a baseball player of the seventies. At the climax of a season fraught with controversy, “Mr. October” rose to the occasion when it mattered most, overcoming the obstacles. He had come through in the clutch, justifying his enormous salary and helping the Yankees become World Series champions for the first time in fifteen years. Most importantly, his performance proved a transformative moment in the history of baseball, for Jackson had demonstrated his economic value, encouraging the owners to invest more money in future free agents.⁶³

In the ’77 series, Reggie Jackson secured his place in history. Over the course of his career, he had profoundly changed the worlds of sports and celebrity culture. He had infused an ethos of self-expression and individual emancipation into baseball, turning the sport into political theater. From the moment he joined the Yankees, Thomas Boswell wrote, Jackson became “baseball’s King Midas of fame, its Hester Prynne of sluggers with a dollar sign on his chest. Everything he touched turned to instant celebrity.” He refused to be seen as anything other than an individual, rejecting the traditional labels imposed on black athletes. He was, Rudy Langlais wrote in 1977, neither “good nor bad. Hero nor villain. Perhaps anti-hero. But surely, a star.” Above all, Jackson reminded his critics, he was a winner and a man.⁶⁴



NOTES

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2. Brad Snyder, *A Well-Paid Slave: Curt Flood’s Fight for Free Agency in Professional Sports* (New York: Viking, 2006), 103–4; Jackson, with Libby, *Reggie*, 4–5.

3. Libby, *Charlie O. & the Angry A’s*, 98.

4. Jackson with Libby, *Reggie*, 15; Bill Rhoden, “The Ups and Downs of Reggie Jackson,” *Ebony*, October 1977, 64.

5. Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 145; Tom Wolfe, “The ‘Me’ Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” *New York*, 23 August 1976; Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979).

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15. Allen, *Mr. October*, 121; Jackson, with Libby, *Reggie*, 94; "Jackson-Finley Contract Battle Continues," C1.

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37. Ward, "Reggie Jackson in No-Man's-Land," 90.

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