

Kids Thirst for Image

Ah, the golden boys and girls of sports. You know their names—Tiger Woods, Grant Hill, Rebecca Lobo, Derek Jeter, Doug Flutie. Of course, others aren't so golden. And, since 1997, when the NBA's Sir Charles Barkley bounced an "admirer" through a plate-glass window, the notion of superstar athletes serving as model influences on the nation's youth, and a debate over the level of social responsibility that should accompany their elite status, has raised hackles throughout the nation. Some have concerns that the youth of America are following their tarnished heroes straight to perdition.

Many athletes, recognizing their potential influence, demonstrate exemplary behavior; others show disregard, suggesting it's the parents' job—not theirs—to be a kid's role model. If only it were that simple—to raise our children in a vacuum, in a world that did not subject them to the ubiquitous television presence of both sports celebrities and product pitchmen.

Often overlooked in this debate are the kids' opinions. From whom do our youth say they obtain guidance and inspiration? In a study released in late 2000, the Kaiser Family Foundation offers some valuable insights to consider. The twist here is that instead of seeking out just the grownups for their opinions on the matter, Kaiser asked America's 10 to 17 year olds to weigh in as well.

Parents, rest easy. You get top billing—92% of your children named you as the most influential role models in their lives. But kids identified others as well: 73% see athletes as influential, followed by teachers (72%), and then friends (67%). Interestingly, when moms and dads were asked who they think has their children's attention, they concurred with their kids: 94% said they personally have a lot or some influence. However, opinions diverged after that, with parents significantly downplaying the importance of famous athletes (48%) and perhaps overemphasizing the power of friends (87%) and teachers (86%).

What's to make of this? For now, let's put our 1950s "father knows best" idealism aside and focus on the attraction of famous athletes for our kids. First, kids identify with athletes. Seventy-eight percent find playing or participating in sports to be important. It follows they may look to athletes for direction. These elite stars are the best of the best, the ones who have made it to the top with a unique combination of talent, desire, and commitment.

When kids were asked whether or not a particular phrase or word described most famous athletes, "dedicated and determined" topped their list at 92%. "Good sport or team player" and "well liked or popular" followed with 89% support each. Next was being smart, a trait 75% of the kids recognized in famous athletes.


Of course, all is not unsullied. Our kids—although to a lesser extent—also identified famous athletes with being "into money" (66% thought so), while 50% said they were show-offs, and 40% found them cocky or arrogant.

But for those kids who said they *personally* had a favorite athlete, there was near universal agreement that their role model, without question, was a dedicated team player (97%), was well liked (95%), and was smart (93%). Less than a third said their favorite was into money, 22% saw a show-off, and only about 1 in 10 found their choice cocky or arrogant.

So, is the glass half full or half empty? One interpretation of these findings is that our kids naturally gravitate toward the athletes of sturdier character. It is also possible, though, that kids are all too willing to see past character flaws in their favorite stars as long as they are on winning teams and making big plays.

Me, I'll take half full. Kids are smart enough to recognize that even the sports world isn't Utopia, and we shouldn't expect it to be. While recognizing negative influences, perhaps kids evaluate them as such and, instead of looking to Daryl Strawberry or Mark Chumura, prefer to take a page out of Cynthia Cooper's or Derek Jeter's books.

Over half the kids interviewed said athletes inspire them to work harder at a sport. Of course, they also said by a similar margin that they've wanted to buy clothes or sneakers as a result of various product endorsements by star athletes. For direction in other, more serious aspects of life—safe sex, the dangers of drugs and alcohol, and the importance of obeying the law—majorities of our kids see athletes as appropriate spokespeople.

The verdict: like it or not, kids pay attention to superstar athletes on a number of levels. Nine in ten think the actions of top athletes—on and off the field—teach mostly good lessons. And as many of our youth say athletes motivate them to follow their dreams. Many athletes are communicating the right messages and assuming adequate levels of social responsibility. Still others can do better, and should. For now, our kids seem to be doing just fine distinguishing the sturdy role models from the flawed. 

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