

In the seventh century B.C., Chionis of Sparta swept the sprinting events at the Olympics. The Greeks decided to honor him by carving his name on a stone memorial at Olympia. Two hundred years later, when Astylos of Croton surpassed the feat, the poet Simonides of Ceos immortalized him in an epigram. The wrestler Milo of Croton, who won titles in six consecutive Games, showed up in the writings of Aristotle and Cicero.

Since then, civilizations have fallen all over themselves to lionize star athletes. An account from Mongolia around A.D. 1240 cites a match involving a Mongolian wrestling champion, the undefeated Buri Bokh, organized and attended by Genghis Khan himself. By the Late Middle Ages in Europe, jousting knights charged one another with lances bearing ribbons given as favors by the ladies of the court who swooned at their valor.

One of England's first celebrity athletes was James Figg, a practitioner of fisticuffs, or bare-knuckle boxing, who by some estimates won a headache-inducing 269 fights—one of which was the subject of an ode published in 1726 in *The Spectator*. The American boxing champion Jack Dempsey once called Figg the father of modern boxing. By the nineteenth century, boxing matches in England were attracting more than twenty thousand spectators while jockeys, golfers, and tennis players, alongside the stars of team sports like rowing, rugby, and soccer, earned their own devoted followings and were given individual awards for being deemed the "most valuable" or "best and fairest."

The progenitor of the modern cult of celebrity athletes was baseball's Babe Ruth. Six foot two and barrel-chested, Ruth was the gregarious son of a Baltimore pub owner who had a folksy air and a mischievous streak. Coming along during the 1920s when radio, newspapers, newsreels, and motion pictures spawned an explosion of mass media, Ruth was bombarded with attention—but he didn't seem to mind. In addition to smashing home run records with his long-jimbed uppercut, he played himself in a handful of movies, hosted a radio show, performed in vaudeville acts, and appeared in advertisements for gasoline, chewing tobacco, cigarettes, breakfast cereal, and underwear. In 1930, "the Babe" made eighty thousand dollars, which was more than President Herbert Hoover. "Why not?" Ruth famously said. "I had a better year than he did!"

In the middle of the century, television raised the stakes. For the first time, the entire world was able to watch Brazil's Pelé play soccer in real time. His astonishing talent, and his smiling, carefree aura, made him one of the first global celebrities—recognized and mobbed in every city he visited. Once, when a reporter asked Pelé how his fame compared to Jesus's, Pelé replied, "There are parts of the world where Jesus Christ is not so well known." In the mid-1980s, thanks to his otherworldly feats on the court and a groundbreaking advertising campaign by Nike, Michael Jordan demonstrated that an athlete's fame could be more financially lucrative than his athletic ability.

Although these GOAT candidates like Ruth, Pelé, and Jordan played on teams, each with their own complicated dynamics, the fans didn't see them as pieces of a larger whole. They believed that the size of their talent was so immense, and their contributions so vital, that whether they were captains or not, their leadership was assumed.

On most teams, the players don't bother to challenge this perception publicly. After all, it's the stars people pay to see. But in a few cases, when pressed on the subject, some of the more blunt captains in the top tiers of my study hinted that behind the scenes, the hierarchy of the team was vastly different than the public might imagine.

In the dressing room, former Manchester United captain Roy

Keané once wrote, "the gap between what we do—and feel—and other people's reality is alarming. The media hero is not necessarily the Man in here. . . . Ditto the crowd pleaser. We live in a make-believe world created by the media, which is largely though not entirely, fiction. The fictional hero is often an arsehole."

Alex Ferguson, Keané's manager at United, also believed that a player's raw athletic ability and their fitness for leadership are distinct and separate things. "Yes, there are elements of symbolism to the role, because the captain is the man who always gets to lift the trophy," Ferguson said. "But I only ever wanted a leader, rather than someone who might look good on top of a cake."

There's no question that an athlete can play both roles at once. Ferenc Puskás, Tom Brady, Yogi Berra, and Maurice Richard all compiled offensive numbers worthy of GOAT consideration while leading their teams into Tier One. Puskás holds the all-time international scoring record with eighty-three goals in eighty-four matches.

The majority of captains in the top tiers of my study, however—like Didier Deschamps—were not considered sensations. Syd Coventry, Valeri Vasiliev, Buck Shelford, Carla Overbeck, and Carles Puyol, among others, were hardly fixtures on MVP lists.

Beyond this, most of the Tier One captains had zero interest in the trappings of fame. They didn't pursue the captaincy for the prestige it conveyed—if they pursued it at all. In 2004, when Carles Puyol's teammates unanimously elected him captain, his was the only dissenting vote. "I thought it was more ethical to vote for others," he told me. In 2011, after Barcelona won the Champions League final (the team hadn't lost a match he'd played in that season), he handed the captain's armband to a teammate, Éric Abidal, who had recently returned from treatment for liver cancer. It was Abidal who lifted the trophy. "It was a gesture of comradeship not very often seen," Barcelona's David Villa said. "It is one of the most important moments a captain has—and he gave that to Abidal."

All of my research showed that contrary to the public view, it is possible for a water carrier who prefers toiling in the service of others

to become a strong captain. In fact, superior leadership is just as likely (if not more so) to come from the team's rear quarters than to emanate from its frontline superstar. Carrying water, especially on defense, is clearly vital to a team's success, even if it's not something that inspires people to compose epic poems or chisel their names in stone.

Still, as I noted earlier, great leaders are—by definition—supposed to reveal themselves in moments of maximum pressure, when the game is on the line. In these instances, it's the leader who is supposed to step in to make the dazzling clutch play. If most Tier One captains did not do this, I wondered, then how, exactly, did they lead?

Buried inside an obscure 1997 clinical psychology textbook called *Aversive Interpersonal Behaviors*, there is a chapter titled "Blowhards, Snobs, and Narcissists: Interpersonal Reactions to Excessive Egotism." The authors were a Wake Forest University professor and a handful of his undergraduate students. The paper concluded that self-centered people who project arrogance through their speech and body language tend to be viewed less favorably by others and can weaken a group's cohesion.

The most significant thing about this paper was the identity of one of its student co-authors, a twenty-one-year-old named Timothy Duncan. Duncan wasn't just another psychology major at Wake Forest. He was the star of the basketball team.

Growing up on St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Tim Duncan dreamed of becoming a champion swimmer. Hurricane Hugo destroyed the local pool in 1989, taking his pathway to the Olympics with it. Not long after that, his mother died of breast cancer, a day before his fourteenth birthday. Duncan didn't take up basketball until he was a high school freshman, and although he'd shot up to six foot eleven by his senior year, he was so skinny and raw that most recruiters weren't sure he'd ever be able to hold his own in the paint against major college competition. Wake Forest was the only major program to offer him a scholarship. Duncan matured so quickly, however, and worked

so hard to hone his game, that the same year that research paper was published the San Antonio Spurs picked him number one overall in the NBA Draft.

From the moment he arrived in San Antonio, Duncan seemed determined to abide by the conclusions of his undergraduate thesis. He never asked for special privileges, never skipped practices, never bristled at being dressed down after poor performances. On the court, he didn't hang on the rim after dunks or stare down opponents. Gregg Popovich, the Spurs' coach, once said Duncan didn't have any "MTV" in him. When a twenty-two-year-old Duncan showed up to receive the NBA's Rookie of the Year award in 1998, he wore mesh shorts and a ratty T-shirt and barely cracked a smile. He seemed to have no interest in being singled out or telling his story to the world. "You guys just write what you want to write," Duncan once told reporters. "Stop trying to analyze me."

On the night of June 25, 1999, Duncan won his first NBA title in the fifth game of a series against the New York Knicks. Once the Spurs had collected their trophy, I followed the rest of the media into their jubilant locker room.

At this point in his career, Tim Duncan had never seen so many cameras. If he'd been Babe Ruth or Pelé, he would have taken this moment to soak in the adulation. But after Duncan got his hands on the trophy, I watched him carry it calmly across the room and open the bathroom door. He pulled his teammate and closest friend on the team, David Robinson, inside with him, and slammed it shut. Whatever emotions needed to pour out of Duncan in that moment, they were none of the public's business.

On the court, Duncan might have had the scoring ability to challenge Michael Jordan, who was putting up twenty-nine points per game at the time, but rather than focusing on taking every shot, Duncan often passed the ball to open teammates. He set picks for the guards, played aggressive defense, battled in the low post, and guarded the rim. His twenty-one-points-per-game average in his first season ranked thirteenth in the NBA, but he finished third in rebounding.

His teammates, in honor of his selfless, no-thrills all-around game, affectionately dubbed him the Big Fundamental.

Over the next few years, basketball writers watched Duncan become a force. They sought time with him to write profiles, but as he continued to ignore them or offer them nothing but affectless responses, the word “boring” appeared in articles—at first affectionately, and then with a critical edge. One columnist even called him “the most boring superstar in the history of sports.” In a 2012 survey that asked teenagers to name their favorite NBA player, Duncan didn’t receive a single vote.

Duncan’s selfless approach to basketball did earn him one prominent fan, however. Bill Russell, the other basketball captain in Tier One, raved that Duncan was the league’s most efficient player, the one who wasted the least motion—and emotion—on the court. Russell especially admired the way Duncan played without the ball. “He sets picks to make the offense operate,” Russell said, “not necessarily to get himself a shot.”

Duncan’s coach, Gregg Popovich, said, “His style of play is such a fundamental style that it’s not flamboyant or awkward or different from the norm. The norm is what’s rare now: You have everybody doing everything every which way. He does things the way we were coached when we were little kids—his footwork, his body movement, everything that he does. It’s not sexy. But it’s efficient.”

In an era when the economics of the NBA made it difficult for teams to maintain steady rosters, most players of Duncan’s elite caliber believed it was their job to focus on scoring while their rotating cast of “support” players took care of the rest. Duncan took a different view. He helped the Spurs survive the roster churn by demonstrating a rare level of flexibility. He switched positions throughout his career, pivoting between center and power forward depending on the composition of the team. Sometimes his offensive metrics were off the charts, other times his defense predominated.

Off the court, Duncan did something else that was unheard-of—he agreed to be paid less than his market value so the team would have

more space under the NBA’s salary cap to sign better players. In 2015, Duncan’s two-year, \$10.4 million deal was shockingly far below what he could have demanded on the open market, but it allowed the Spurs to acquire the power forward LaMarcus Aldridge, who outearned Duncan by more than four to one.

The best way to look at one’s teammates, Duncan said, is that “you’re helping them as much as they’re helping you.”

When Duncan retired in 2016, his teams had won five NBA championships and had made the playoffs in all nineteen of his seasons. Individually, he managed to set the most impressive mark of all—winning more games with one team than any player in NBA history. There would be no fawning goodbye tour, however. Duncan kept his retirement plans private during the season, then announced his decision with a 146-word letter to the fans, which ended: “Thank you to the city of San Antonio for the love and the support over these years. Thank you to the fans all over the world. Much Love Always, Tim.”

It’s as if Duncan had used his Wake Forest thesis as a blueprint for how to be an effective teammate in a league where “narcissists” and “blowhards” were the lords of the realm.

The public never fully got Duncan, but his teammates did. His leadership turned out to be something of a graduate seminar on the value of carrying water. Duncan was the rare captain who had the talent to take over games and put up some of the NBA’s gaudiest statistics. But his approach to leadership compelled him to suppress his skills, and even his salary, in order to focus on fixing whatever happened to be broken. He wasn’t concerned with his public image, only that his team won.