Why Grantland Rice Sucked

Grantland Rice was everything his namesake website should aspire not to be. He was a pandering mythmaker who wrote verse and prose the way Thomas Kinkade paints carriage lanes ("The Hills of Fame still beckon where the Paths of Glory lead..."). Reading him today is not unlike looking at your maiden aunt's collection of Precious Moments figurines. Moths come flying off every word. He was responsible for a lot of the worst pathologies of sportswriting today, and the fact that a major web site now unironically carries his name tells me we've done to Rice what Rice did to so many ballplayers over the years. We've godded up the godmaker.

Everyone remembers the first line of his famous story about the 1924 Notre Dame-Army game — "Outlined against a blue-gray October sky, the Four Horsemen rode again" — but not many people recall what came a paragraph later:

A cyclone can't be snared. It may be surrounded, but somewhere it breaks through to keep on going. When the cyclone starts from South Bend, where the candle lights still gleam through the Indiana sycamores, those in the way must take to storm cellars at top speed. Yesterday the cyclone struck again as
The Four Horseman now have become a cyclone full of stars in a war of some kind. Metaphors martial, meteorological, and celestial, tumbling on top of one another in the same sentence, and we're only a few words away from "a tank ... with the speed of a motorcycle" and a quartet of football players with "the mixed blood of the tiger and the antelope." Calling this purple prose is to suggest he wasn't using the whole crayon box at once.

The crappy mythopoetics are bad enough, but there's a real consequence to this kind of writing, one Robert Lipsyte sussed out years ago:

[T]he writer who likens a ballplayer to Hercules or Grendel's mother is displaying the ultimate contempt — the ballplayer no longer exists as a person or a performer, but as an object, a piece of matter to be used, in this case, for the furtherance of the sportswriter's career by pandering to the emotional titillation of the reader/fan. Rice populated the press boxes with lesser talents who insisted, like the old master, that they were just sunny fellows who loved kids' games and the jolly apes who played them.

A young Rice once wrote (most of the quotes here come via Charles Fountain's biography, Sportswriter): "Did you ever hear of the battles of Gettysburg, Bull Run or Waterloo? Of how Napoleon crossed the Alps on a mule and Washington the Delaware on a piece of floating ice? Well, all these were mere skirmishes compared with the struggle that took place yesterday at Athletic Park."

Rice was covering a minor-league baseball game.

An older Rice wrote: "Only those who looked upon the spectacle today can know what it means. One might as well attempt to describe the glory of the Grand Canyon or the peak of Mount Everest at dawn."

Rice was covering the fucking Olympics.

Four years later, he called the success of American blacks at the Berlin games "Darktown on parade" and wrote: "America will be okay until it runs out of African entries. ... We may have to comb Africa again for some winners." Elsewhere, Joe Louis was "stalking" his prey, a "panther" with the "speed of the jungle, the instinctive speed of the wild." (He once said of Louis, "Sportsmanship should be the very mortar of an athlete but never an entity in itself for conscious display," and a modern reader might hear the same harp music that played over all those preposterous stories about Kevin Durant's humility.) The standard defense here, that Rice was only as bigoted as his time, is probably accurate. But the casual racism was also a rancid variation on his habit of reducing human beings to the front end of a metaphor. Joe Louis was a jungle cat. Jim Crowley was a Biblical plague. Some busher from Selma was Pickett making for Cemetery Ridge. Kobe Bryant is Teen Wolf.

Oh, wait.

Rice was right about a lot of things. He saw Babe Didrikson for the phenomenon she was at a time when his colleagues were more or less calling her a dyke. He said smart things about baseball's reserve clause in 1913 that people didn't start saying en masse until the 1970s ("Every one knows the reserve clause in baseball will not stand the test of American law."). He wrote about Jim Thorpe and amateurism in a way that too few people write about Terrelle Pryor today ("The difference between Thorpe and several dozen others who rank high in the amateur world is that the Redskins was caught with the merchandise."). He could certainly turn a phrase — he called the boxer Jess Willard "a drab outline against a dull gray sky," which for my money is a better bit than the Four Horsemen line. But he was also sports' truest True Believer (during
World War I he noted that a German has no recreation to "erect in his soul a foundation of fair play"), and that was his biggest folly. He was the high priest of sportswriting's Church of the Perpetually Innocent, a guy who was always shocked to find that the games he covered didn't deserve all the metaphysical frou-frou and moral uplift he loved to swaddle them in. He knew Ty Cobb as well as anyone but professed horror that baseball players were capable of dumping a World Series. When two of the Black Sox were warmly received after their indictment, Rice wrote: "Anyone who would extend a welcome to crooked ball players ... would endorse burglary and child murder."

Bill Simmons is on the record as saying the name wasn't his choice. The story goes that the site's designer had used "Grantland" as dummy text, Grantland Rice being the only sportswriter he could think of. Eventually the name caught on with certain ESPN executives, the suits who are in the mythmaking business just as surely as Rice ever was. And now the name of mainstream sportswriting's last best hope is an homage to so many of the bad impulses that helped snuff out mainstream sportswriting in the first place. Grantland has to be good, because Grantland Rice was so bad.