

IN YOUR FACE

Without 'tude, Grace is dead

BY MITCH ALBOM

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As the year fades to dust, we mourn an old friend in sports. His name was Grace. He passed away in 1994.

Cause of death was neglect. They found him wrapped in a blanket, frozen and forgotten, in an alley behind a TV studio. He left no survivors.

You may recall Grace from your youth — if you're old enough. He played for many teams. Many sports. Once upon a time, when his legs were strong, he was welcome on any playing field in America.

He was best known for tipping his cap in the baseball stadium, or speaking humbly with reporters in small towns. You saw him respecting a referee's decision in tennis, or handing the ball to the ref after a touchdown.

He could dunk a basketball — but gently, without yelling obscenities. He could grind for a hockey puck — but never pushed the stick into an opponent's throat.

He even boxed a little, and after victories, he was humble. "I'm lucky tonight," he would say. "That man is a fine fighter."

This was long ago, before commercial endorsements, before ESPN highlights, before players practiced dance steps in front of the locker room mirror.

Grace was a hero then. He never made a lot of money. In fact, he never took a paycheck for anything he did.

He died penniless.

People laughed at his "lack of marketing."

Sports as a Vehicle

These are the same people who see sports as a star-making machine: shoe companies, agents, TV networks, media "pals."

The same people who brought you a new CD last Christmas, featuring rap songs by NBA players. One is called "Livin' Legal and Large" by Seattle's Gary Payton:

"I'm just a superstar, rolling down the boulevard in my \$50,000 car."

It doesn't matter that most of America doesn't know who Payton is — or that he's never won an NBA title, or that, as a point guard, he ranked 17th in assists last season. The NBA is about 'tude. Payton has 'tude.

Grace did not have 'tude.

He didn't even know what it meant.

Grace knew how to lose. He never would hire a hit man to whack an opponent, and he didn't blame reporters when he made a mistake. He wouldn't throw firecrackers at fans, like Vince Coleman, or desert his team to be with Madonna, like Dennis Rodman.

Remember Joe Louis, when he said, "Every man's got to get beat sometime"?

Grace taught him that.

He knew how to lose.

More importantly, he knew how to win. He knew that for every great play he made, many others were trying to do the same. He refused to rub their noses in his success. When he made an interception, he did not wiggle down the sideline, laughing at the opposing team, the way Deion Sanders does today.

And when he hit home runs, he did not flip the finger to opposing dugouts, as Ken Griffey Jr. did last season.

In June, during the NBA playoffs, Scottie Pippen dunked over Patrick Ewing. Ewing fell and Pippen stood over him, so Ewing had to stare up into his crotch. Pippen glared. Later he said, "You wait your whole career for a moment like that."

Grace would never have understood that.

The screamers take over

Throughout his sports career, Grace never wore his name on his uniform. He never held out of camp, or demanded that a contract be renegotiated. "A deal's a deal," he once said.

Later, when Grace retired from active sports, he coached. For a while, he worked with men like UCLA's John Wooden. Men who taught. Men who kept things in perspective.

But soon, Grace was driven out of coaching. He was squashed by obnoxious types like Buddy Ryan and greedy types like Rollie Massimino, who made a dirty deal with a university, then demanded they pay him off.

In the twilight of his career, Grace tried broadcasting. An understated voice, never intruding. Men like Ernie Harwell and Vin Scully shared the booth with Grace.

But soon, he went out of fashion, tossed aside for screamers like Dick Vitale, Chris Berman and John Madden. Grace never understood them. Never understood becoming bigger than the game itself. "They sure are loud," he would say, trying to be kind.

After that, Grace disappeared. No one seems to know exactly when, but those who loved him felt his absence like a cold wind.

Now he is gone.

Reaction to his death was mild. Only a few of today's athletes — Joe Dumars, Stefan Edberg, Barry Sanders — seemed to care about his tradition. Others were busy pulling off their helmets and pointing at TV cameras.

And so this is it, the obituary, the death of Grace. His last request concerned his funeral. For all he had done, he wanted only this: "Something small, something quiet, something dignified."

Hmm. Does anyone know how to do that anymore?

Mitch Albom has been named the Associated Press National Sports Columnist of the Year for nine consecutive years. He is the only columnist to have won the award more than once.