

Earvin gives us a lesson in life

There are a lot of people, including myself, who take sports and athletes too seriously at times.

It's a diversion, an escape from life for awhile. Some make their living at games, but only a small percentage and only for a short while. The majority go through life with their 9-5 job, never really thinking what life is all about.

Most of the world got a dose of reality Thursday when they heard that an icon was mortal.

When Magic Johnson made his announcement, it hit most of us like a heavy weight on our chest. All of the sudden, he wasn't Magic Johnson, superstar, he was Earvin Johnson, HIV positive. He was a human being, not an untouchable myth, but just a man with an infection.

Maybe we, the public, put too much emphasis on having icons, heroes, those larger-than-life ideals manifested in human form. Maybe we need to face our own lives, rather than living through the lives of others.

While this announcement shocked me, I had already been brought back to earth earlier this year.

In July, my father died of cancer. A man I always looked up to, the man who was always the steady force in the family, the voice of reason and strength, was gone. For the first time, he wasn't there, and I felt very alone in the world.

I had always thought of myself as independent, making the choices that determine the path of my life. But once my father was gone, there wasn't that safety net that was sitting in the back of my subconscious. Choices became more critical, more meaningful. I was really on my own now.

Events like these force you to take a long look at what life is all about. You only have one shot at it, and you need to make the most of life and not giving up, because you won't get another chance.

Those are easy words to say; I'd heard them all my life. But now, each time a new challenge or new opportunity presents itself, I'll do my best to complete it. I want to experience as much as I can, since there isn't a next time in most situations.

My Dad had just turned 50 when he died. He spent most of his life at work, and wished he had spent a little more time at home, but that's normal. He and my mom put my sister and me through college, which was probably his proudest achievement.

Maybe I have the feeling most people do; to be able to do all the things that my father never was able to do. I suppose that's common as well.

But now it seems the whole world is having these feelings when a member of their own family, Earvin "Magic" Johnson, has sent our ideas of an infallible image crashing down.

We now have to look at our own lives and see that our idols are not too different than we are, susceptible to all the foibles of the human race. It comes as a shock to us, of course, that we can't live in that perfect world of fame with no worries, no problems. It shatters our fantasy world.

Having heroes is not a bad thing; we all need to strive toward a goal. But when we start to live our lives through the lives of others, then that's when problems occur.

My view is that we should be our own role models. We should strive to be the best we can be within the limits of our own abilities. Don't model your life on what others have done, create your own niche.

For many years, I wanted to be Rick Monday, playing the outfield for the Cubs, then I wanted to be Walter Payton playing for the Bears. Now I want to be me. Experiencing life on my own terms, not trying to emulate someone else.

My dad was larger than life, that invincible icon of strength and stability, someone who gave me security. But he's gone and I have to find strength within myself.

Now Earvin Johnson is in trouble. Someone we've loved to watch play the game in a special way won't be doing it anymore. He lived the way we want to live, and for a while we could escape in to his world. But that is gone now, too.

It saddens us to see someone cut down like this, but there are one million others who carry the same virus who deserve just as much support as he does, or anyone else who needs our care.

While it puts a knot in our stomach to see this happen, it seems more a blow to our psyches that have allowed us to put people on a different level, to a level of a demigod. When he falls, all our illusions fall as well.

After all, Earvin Johnson is now just one in a million.