What Price Fame?

Jake Halpern 2/01/2008 @ 6:00AM

The death of Heath Ledger has sent shockwaves through the entertainment world, and perhaps nowhere is this felt more acutely than at Warner Brothers, the studio which will release Mr. Ledger’s next film–posthumously, now–this July.

The film, *The Dark Knight*, is part of the enormously profitable and popular Batman series. Mr. Ledger plays the role of the Joker. Warner Brothers was preparing to roll out a multimillion-dollar marketing campaign highlighting Mr. Ledger’s swashbuckling persona–now that plan is almost certainly out the window.

Though they would never admit it, some disgruntled movie executives may feel that Mr. Ledger failed them by not taking better care of himself. The truth of the matter, however, is that it is the studios that have failed Mr. Ledger.

It is common knowledge that fame is often both intoxicating and toxic.

On almost any given day, one need only pick up the tabloids to read news about the latest young star who has suffered some horrible fate–drug addiction, the loss of his or her children, even an untimely death. Perhaps no one is more familiar with the challenges that fame poses that Dr. Robert Millman, a psychiatrist at the Cornell School of Medicine.

For many years, Millman served as the official “psychiatric advisor” for the Commissioner’s Office of Major League Baseball. In addition to counseling America’s most troubled pitchers and heavy-hitters, he has also counseled actors, CEOs, politicians and foreign princes. His main job, as he explains it, is to help them cope with the trauma of being famous.

After years of observation, Millman concluded that celebrities often suffer from a range of psychological torments, including isolation (i.e., “I have no real friends”), paranoia (i.e., “Everyone is using me”), depression (i.e., “I guess I’m not as great as I thought I was”), and rage (i.e., “You’re not giving me what I deserve!”).

After years of seeing his patients deal with issues like these, Millman wondered whether he couldn’t find a way to help young celebrities deal with the challenges of fame preemptively–before they became a problem.

Dr. Millman eventually teamed up with Kevin Hallinan, an official at Major League Baseball who had just launched a “fame school” for the league’s most promising rookies. Officially, the program is known as the “Rookie Career Development Program,” and its purpose is to educate baseball’s future stars on how to handle the reporters, agents, business managers, fans and sportswear executives who have just begun beating down their doors. With input from Dr. Millman, Hallinan devised a lengthy, detailed curriculum for the leagues rookies.

I had a first-hand look at the program when I attended several years ago. The first class that I attended was “Mafia 101,” taught by Michael Francese, who was introduced as a former captain in the notorious Colombo crime family. He now spends his time advising athletes on how to avoid getting caught up in gambling schemes. The young rookies in my class were immediately fascinated by Francese.

“Did you ever ‘whack’ anyone?” asked one player, midway through the class.

“Is *The Sopranos* accurate?” asked another.

“Look!” said Francese, who obviously sensed his message about the dangers of gambling might be getting lost. “During my 15 years in organized crime, you were my targets. I have seen more families broken up, more legs get broken, more lives get ruined over *gambling*. OK?”

After Mafia 101, I followed the young rookies to two more classes–one on handling the press and another on handling large sums of money–and then we headed off to the improvisational sessions. Here, a band of actors recreated a number of fame-related scenarios.

In one skit, a very aggressive reporter asked a number of pointed questions. Another scenario features a “Rookie of the Year” who returns to his hometown bar and encounters some old friends who exhort him to buy everyone drinks and then heckle him for being a show-off.

During these sessions, the rookies took turns trying to handle the situations, then received feedback from the “resource players”–a gang of retired Major Leaguers who sat at the back of the classroom and chimed in like a crusty, old Greek chorus. Occasionally, one of the resource players is invited to act out a scene with the actors.

So when it came time to do a skit on strip clubs, the retired slugger Bobby Bonilla stepped on stage and showed how he handled himself in the presence of over-solicitous dancers. He declined to pose for a picture, enter the VIP room, refused to sip any drinks that were poured out of his sight and did not accept the “room service” option back at his hotel. Everyone clapped, and he took a bow.

Eventually, I caught up with Kevin Hallinan and I asked him why the other celebrity-based industries–namely, the movie and music businesses–had not created a similar program for their young stars, he nodded his head vigorously.

“That’s a good question,” he replied. “At one point, I was actually approached by some people in Hollywood who were interested in me starting up a similar program out there, but as far as I know, it never got off the ground. I’m not sure why. In baseball, our rookie program comes down to two things. First, it’s the right thing to do on a human level. Second, this is a business with a lot of money. The ball clubs are making a big investment in these players, and it just makes sense to protect that investment. In the end, it’s just smart business.”

Yet if this is such “smart business,” why haven’t the nation’s other major fame-based industries developed fame school schools of their own? For one thing, movie studios and record labels don’t “own” their celebrities in the same way many sports teams do.

The other problem is that there’s no official league or single organization that oversees the entire music or movie industry, which might sponsor a program like this one. That being said, it might be time for Warner Brothers and some of the other studios to step up and make it happen–both because it is the right thing to do and because it is smart business.

It is impossible to know whether any program, no matter how good it was, could have saved Heath Ledger. But there’s a chance, at least, that such a program could have helped him deal with paparazzi, who stalked him relentlessly. It might also have helped him address his apparent penchant for taking sleeping pills, a habit that may have contributed to his death. So when the executives at Warner Brothers ask themselves what, if anything, could have been done to save the life of their young star–the first people they should pose this question to is themselves.