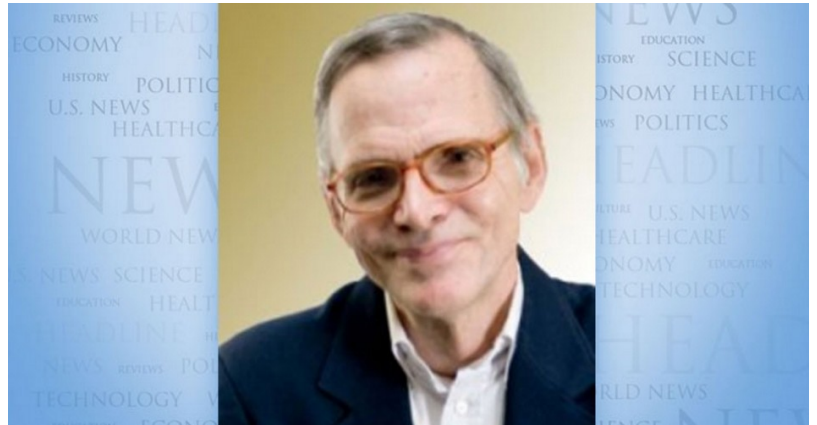




Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on February 3, 2013

Ted, Saint Paul, and the Super Bowl of Life

I always knew the first question I wanted to ask Ted Williams if I ever had a chance to question the great Hall of Fame slugger. It was about a statement attributed to him when he was a raw rookie with the Boston Red Sox. It was an amazing statement, breathtaking in its boldness, and I wanted to know if he really said it or if it had been one of those statements invented by a writer and attributed to the man believed by many to be the greatest hitter in the history of baseball.



I was already aware of one statement attributed to Williams that he said he never made. According to the story, when Williams joined the Red Sox, teammate Bobby Doerr, who had preceded Williams in promotion from the Pacific Coast League, told the young slugger about the prowess of the great Jimmy Foxx, who had joined the Red Sox years earlier after several seasons of slugging for the Philadelphia Athletics.

“Wait’ll you see Foxx Hit!” Doerr said.

“Wait’ll Foxx sees me hit!” Williams supposedly replied.

Williams later said he had never said that. “But,” he added with a laugh, “it sounds like something I might have said.”

But the [statement](#) that had always intrigued me was this one: “All I want out of life,” he is reputed to have said, “is that when I walk down the street, folks will say, “There goes the greatest hitter who ever lived.”” Did Williams really make that premature, but ultimately accurate boast, I wondered. Or was that someone rewriting history?

One winter night in 1984, Ted Williams came to Nashua, N.H., to talk about real estate for developer Sam Tamposi, a Nashua resident and part owner of the Red Sox who had a real-estate development in Florida called Citrus Hills, where Williams was a resident. I approached Williams and asked for an interview for a weekly journal published up the road in Manchester.

“Shoot!” he said settling his large frame down in a chair at a table. I knew the answers would be straightforward and rough-edged, and nothing would be “off the record.” So I asked what I had always wanted to know. Williams didn’t hesitate. He nodded emphatically and said, “Yeah, I said that.”

“Well,” I said, “Do you think you achieved that?” Here Williams assumed what seemed to be an uncharacteristic modesty.

“Well, I’d say I come pretty close,” he said. “I’d say I’m in the top 20.” Before I could write down top 20, he said, “Make that top 10.”

“Maybe top three,” I suggested. Williams said nothing, but someone else at the table asked the obvious question.

“Who would the other two be?”

“Well, Ruth and Cobb would surely qualify,” I said.



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“Oh, yeah?” Williams chimed in, suddenly becoming quite animated. “What about Al Simmons? What about Eddie Collins?” He threw out some other names and then asked, “What about Jimmy Foxx? You think he could hit?”

“Oh, yes,” I said.

“Oh, ho! I guess so.”

All those other great names notwithstanding, Williams has long been regarded by many baseball men as the game’s greatest hitter, eclipsing even Ruth, Cobb, Gehrig, et al. That he could have not only predicted that, but proclaimed it his life’s goal when he was but a raw rookie with knowledge of all the greatness that had gone before was extraordinary. Ruth, according to the popular story, had his “called shot” home run. The “called shot” Williams made covered not only his entire career, but all of baseball history. It was an extraordinary goal, stated with extraordinary confidence.

But was it a worthy goal? Well, admittedly, this is setting the bar pretty high, but compare it with the goal of Saint Paul, as described in his epistles that are part of the New Testament. In the third chapter of his Epistle to the Philippians, the Apostle stated what he wanted in life. Paul, remember, was as talented in his way as Williams was in his. His pedigree was impeccable: a Hebrew of the tribe of Benjamin, he was learned in the law and was among the highly educated Pharisees, trained by the legendary rabbinical scholar Gamaliel. He was zealous for the law, even persecuting the Christians before his conversion.

“But the things that were gain for me, the same I have counted loss for Christ,” he wrote.

“Furthermore, I count all things to be but loss for the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ, my Lord; for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but as dung, that I may gain Christ.” His goal was not to be praised on earth as the greatest Apostle or preacher who ever lived, but simply “That I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable to his death. If by any means I may attain to the resurrection which is from the dead.”

Nothing equivocal about that goal, either. Williams and Saint Paul represented what Saint Augustine called the divide between the City of man and the City of God. Williams was striving for the glory of Ted Williams in the worldly Hall of Fame. Paul was striving for the glory of Christ in the heavenly kingdom. There is nothing wrong, of course, with someone wanting to be the best at what he does. Martin Luther King, Jr. called on street sweepers to sweep the streets as Rembrandt would. And who knows if there are not one or more street sweepers ranked greater than Rembrandt in the Kingdom of God. But should that be life’s highest goal?

Williams was, to be sure, speaking for the sports pages about baseball. His thoughts on religion, if any, he kept to himself. He would, I’m sure, be embarrassed by ballplayers today who spend much of their post-game interviews praising God for giving them all their wonderful talent. (Hall of Fame manager Sparky Anderson, skeptical about overtly religious ballplayers, once remarked, “All I know is there’s more degenerates in the Hall of Fame than there are of these guys.”) But Paul was clear and explicit. He was in training for an athletic contest of sorts, but the contest was spiritual and the prize was the high calling of life in Christ.

Paul said he disciplined his body to bring it into subjection. “Know you not that they that run in the race, all run indeed, but one receiveth the prize? So run that you may obtain. And every one that striveth for the mastery, refraineth from all things: and they indeed that they may receive a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible one.” (I Corinthians 9:24-27)



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Again in Hebrews, the inspired writer likens the Christian race to an athletic contest, one resembling a track meet or a prizefight. After having recalled the acts of faith of Old Testament heroes, he says:

“And therefore we also having so great a cloud of witnesses over our head, laying aside every weight and sin which surrounds us, let us run by patience the fight proposed to us.”

“Time and circumstance happen to all,” the author of [Ecclesiastes](#) tells us. There are few in the world with the greatness of Ted Williams, who can withstand all the vicissitudes of life and come out on top. Today’s Super Bowl will produce a winner and a crown of glory, but that glory will be fleeting. I remember seeing in my grandmother’s home a little poem on the wall that began:

Only one life, too soon it’s past.

Only what’s done for Christ will last.

We may hope and pray Ted Williams is in heaven. But if he is, it is not because of his six batting titles, the .406 he hit for the season of 1941, his Most Valuable Player Awards, his .344 career batting average or his two triple crowns. He is there, as we all may hope to be, by the eternal grace of God in Jesus Christ.



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