

**COLLINS ON ROLE-MODELS AND MICHAEL PHELPS**  
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(**Note:** Quotes from this material were used in the article, **Redefining the Role Model** by Melinda Vickerman in the Jersey Journal, February 5, 2009. Ms. Vickerman writes The Jersey Mom Column in the Jersey Journal).

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Athletes are “role models” because they exhibit traits in their on- court or on the field work that translate into ideals for us in our daily lives. Cal Ripken comes to work every day. If someone works hard, they could be the Michael Jordan of their industry. We can tell a child to try to be great in math because wouldn’t Tiger Woods try to be great in math if he were a math student?

Most of us don’t know anything about an athlete’s real life unless the athlete markets that aspect of herself. For example, Steve Garvey once marketed himself as a pure family man. Charles Barkley said he wasn’t a role model because people didn’t really know about his real life they just knew him as a basketball player. As a consequence, Barkley said that one’s parents were the true role models. Barkley’s comment was right, but it missed the point. Athletes are “role models” because they exhibit traits in their on- court or on the field work that translate into ideals for us in our daily lives. They are not "role models" because they stand in lieu of one’s parents.

When an athlete commits untoward acts when they’re not on the field of play, it tends to create a mixed message and it creates some vague feeling of hypocrisy. After all, it is a bit unseemly to tell a child to try to be the best they can be just like Michael Phelps if that very same Michael Phelps is taking a bong hit. To that extent, Phelps is a role model. However, since he’s really just an embodiment of a trait in his capacity as "role model", the real danger in his taking a bong hit is that if he and his fellow athletes err too often we end up feeling a collective cynicism... kind of a, ”yeah, Mom, I’m supposed to work hard like Mark McGwire but come on, Mom you know the real deal.”

We can help children understand the complexity here by giving them a very real life lesson that people who embody some very good traits in one arena often fail in another arena. This doesn’t mean that the traits that they embody aren’t valid traits, but it does mean that our mission in life is not to emulate the individual athlete who embodies the traits, but to be the best people we can be in all aspects of life and understand that just like Michael Phelps we still have value and a lot to offer even when we fail to live up to our ideals when we’re not in the athletic arena. This message is not so different from the messages that Moms have delivered for years when they tell their children that they still love them even though the child messed up, and when they tell them that they know their child isn’t perfect, but they want them to be the best they can be.