HERO FOR THE DAY

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(1) We human beings need someone to model ourselves after, someone to look up to. Unfortunately, for most of us, our heroes are untouchable, and we rarely get to meet, much less know them. Yet we still dream of that unlikely day.

(2) The day I watched Game One of the 1983 World Series between the New York Yankees and the Los Angeles Dodgers began my experience of hero worship. After that day, first base became more than just a kiss to me when a close-up of the Dodgers' first baseman, Steve Garvey, appeared. Of course what first caught my attention was his obviously perfect physique—broad shoulders rippling into his muscular arms, short legs bulging with power. But his physical appearance was not all that swept me off my feet. During a between-innings interview, he projected his warm, friendly personality to every television monitor. He welcomed each prying, insignificant question with a smile that expressed complete confidence. He answered every question with ease and even thanked the sportscaster, patting him on the back at the end of the interview. This two-minute conversation was the deciding factor. Steve Garvey was my hero.

(3) There were not enough books I could read about him. The sports page suddenly became a hot item at my house, and I replaced my frilly pajamas with an extra-large jersey with "Garvey" on the back. I began reading Sports Illustrated at the dentist's office and dreamed night after night about meeting Steve someday. I became obsessed with a desire to be in the same stadium with him, breathe the same dusty air and smell the same beer as he did.

(4) Finally, on July 18, 1984, I sat in Wrigley Field stadium clutching my San Diego Padres vs. Chicago Cubs program, fighting for a glimpse of the Padres' first baseman, my hero. I felt the earth move as he came out of the dug-out, ready to warm up. Mary Decker never ran as fast as I did when he stopped at the fence to talk to a bat boy. I knew this was the magic moment. I took the golden opportunity, and with all my energy, tried to shout the enchanted words "Steve Garvey." I mouthed the words again, but no sound came out! I figured the drool dripping out of the corner of my mouth and the stars in my eyes had got in the way, so I counted to ten and just yelled "Mr. Garvey!" In no more than one-millionth of a second, our eyes were locked. Ten years passed before I
could ask him for his autograph. "Sure," was his cool, deep reply, and with a wink, he set my heart on fire. As he was signing his name, I noticed his perfectly squared jawbones and the beginnings of a five-o'clock shadow. His eyelashes curled up to his dark bushy eyebrows, and as he handed me the now priceless piece of paper, a lock of hair fell down over his forehead. "Here you go!" he said, locking eyes with me again. Regaining my composure a little more quickly than before, I sighed and managed to blurt out, "Thank you, sir." With much more panache than Indiana Jones or Robert Reford could ever have commanded, he said, "You're welcome," and my life was complete. I had met my hero.