

Old at 40 but young at 43

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Bill Hall



commentary

David Cameron, the new prime minister of England, and Ken Griffey Jr., the Sultan of Safeco Field, have something in common - how close they are in actual age but how many competent years apart they are in their perceived ages.

I have many friends who are sportswriters, while I have spent much of my career reporting on politicians. Frankly, the two jobs are similar in most respects. But there is one huge exception. Sportswriters and political writers have two very different perspectives on the aging of human beings.

Griffey and Cameron were both in the news on the same day. Griffey, at 40, was the subject of much speculation because of the fairly common belief that he is so old.

Cameron, who is 43, was being treated as astonishing because he is so young. In fact, leaders of major nations aren't often as young as David Cameron. Teddy Roosevelt at 42 and John F. Kennedy at 43 were the youngest U.S. presidents when they entered the Oval Office. So political reporters were buzzing the other day over that 43-year-old Cameron kid and his young wife.

Meanwhile, the sports writers repeatedly referred to Griffey as "the 40-year-old Griffey" with an implied exclamation point. They were saying that "Junior" is much too far into his baseball dotage to be feebly swinging a major league bat. Those bats are heavy. The poor old guy is going to hurt himself if somebody doesn't get him out of the game in time.

On the other hand, David Cameron, by the standards of political writers and the laws of common sense, is wet behind the ears. If the kid isn't careful while playing with Britain, he could damage that country and the rest of us too.

Griffey can't do much worse than break the hearts of his fans if he overstays his greatness. Cameron can break a government.

As for poor, old inappropriately-named Junior Griffey, one sports writer noted that "the rocking chair days are creeping near for Griffey" and his 40 years are "evident to anybody who looks at him."

I looked at him. He still looks like a baby to me. As I sit here rocking in my old typing chair, trying not to strain myself, I face an imminent 73rd birthday. All of our children are several years older than Junior Griffey.

In fact, you might say our children are at the awkward age - too old to play professional baseball and barely ripe enough in their mid-life prime to run Great Britain.

Mind you, I have no quarrel with the sportswriters saying that Griffey is beyond an age at which most major sluggers can swing a bat well enough to earn a living at it, let alone run jiggling around the bases as they display where the word "middle" comes from in the term "middle age." But I do kind of resist the use of the word "old" in a sentence that refers to someone 40 or younger. To hear some of the sportswriters, I'm surprised to see that Griffey, the old homerun coot, can still walk to the plate.

Let the sportswriters say that overripe players are past their prime professionally or slowing down, but don't tell me someone 33 years younger than I am is old in the normal sense of that word. The very notion verges on grandpa bashing.

But it gets worse in the sports world. Look at all those old women of 20 phasing out of gymnastic competition because they're just too darned far over that hill. They're so old they're afraid to crawl up on a pommel horse. They might get bucked off.

Actually, the sports writers and I are pretty much in the same line of work. The terminology is similar - about winning and losing and skilful moves and who's at the top of his game. And both sports and politics are filled with larger than life characters.

In addition, most athletes and politicians believe they are picked on by the press - hammered by rumped nerds who couldn't play the political or sports game half as well as those they criticize.

But the sportswriters and I have to forgive them for their resentment. After all, they're so old or so young that they don't know what they're saying.

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