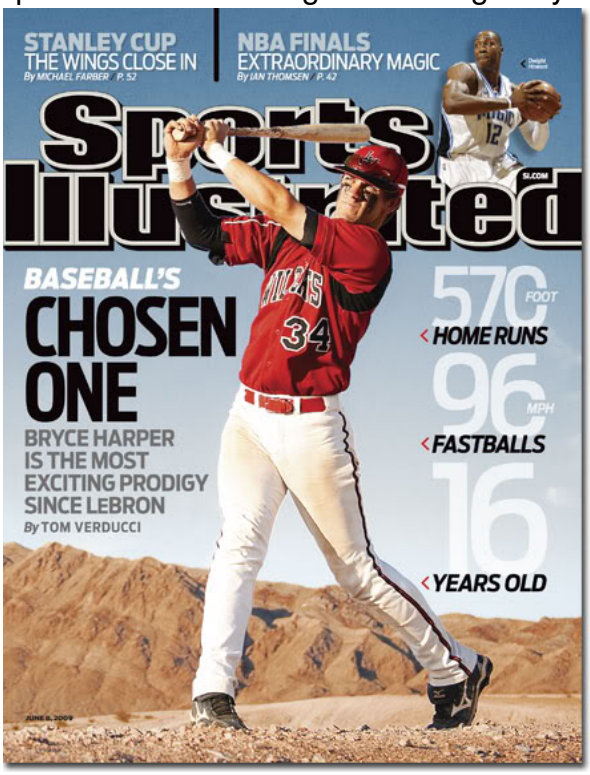
It's probably already too late to figure out how many young savants have been labeled the next "LeBron" in their respective sport or pursuit and mostly futile to stop future ones from having to labor under that tag, but it does beg the question of whether the writer making the comparison is just being lazy or whether he's also being stupid. In Gary's latest, he says Sports Illustrated writer Tom Verducci, as well-credentialed of a sports writer as there is out there, mindlessly fell into that trap this past week when filing his fawning story about high school baseball phenom Bryce Harper.



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When I say fawning, I mean ridiculously down-on-your-knees for hours at a time ass-kissing, fawning.

And when I say ass-kissing, I mean "if there anything else I can do for you now or in the future, just call, day or night, doesn't matter, this goes beyond man-love" ass-kissing groveling.

To say that Harper is a richly-talented 16-year old ballplayer probably doesn't quite put enough emphasis on the skills he has at such a young age. But to put him already in the same category as James, Wayne Gretzky and Tiger Woods as Verducci does is about as far over the top as you can get.

It's a disservice to James, Gretzky and Woods to put their brand on a 16-year old kid who hasn't accomplished much of anything outside of his confined world of high school baseball in Las Vegas. I get it, he can hit the ball a long way. He throws hard, too.

He's also a good catcher.

He's a man among boys and opposing teams don't stand a chance against his awesomeness.

That's the short story of LeBron, too.

But all that does is set the table for Harper.

That isn't to knock Harper as much as it is to remind the Verduccis of the world that each icon to whom he compared Harper have actually done something at the highest level, something Harper won't even begin to contemplate until a year or two more.

If Harper can make the jump directly from high school to the big leagues and then star immediately, as James, Woods and Gretzky did, then it might be time to consider where Harper's accomplishments fit into the debate. Until then, everything else is premature. And before you send me your emails, I recognize that Woods went to college for a few years.

But at the same time he was competing directly at the highest level and had entered several pro tournaments even as a collegiate.

No question that the story of a phenom makes compelling reading. Who doesn't want to contemplate the future of a kid that looks so bright?

But the sports world is full of cautionary tales of Harper-like kids that labored under can't miss tags until crushed by the expectations of others to make even the most optimistic person cynical about the Harper article.

Harper may very well make it and Verducci's article may be prescient, but let's not anoint him the next anything except the next kid, like a million before him, that has a chance to make a decent living chasing around a little white ball.

But coming across like somebody's crazy grandpa sitting in the corner mumbling something about socialism was not my intent. But this really isn't a column about Harper or Verducci so much as it is about what it says about the state of the game, any game really. The story of Harper comes on the heels of a somewhat similar story in the New York Times about a month ago.

This time the player's name is Jeremy Tyler and his sport is basketball.

Like Harper, Tyler is freakishly talented at such a young age. Like Harper, Tyler feels that he can no longer compete against the mere mortals that inhabit high school ball. And, like Harper, Tyler is considering novel ways to jump start his pro career.

In the case of Harper, the idea was floated about his moving to the Dominican Republic to play for a year and then come into the major leagues as a free agent.

Although his mother steadfastly denies it will happen, just remember that behind every stupid idea is a stupid agent.

In Harper's case, it's Scott Boras. It's not known whether this Dominican Republic foray could even skirt the league's rules. But if it can, Boras is just the creep to do it.

And if Harper's mom doesn't think that Boras has the verbal skills to spin a tale that makes leaving high school early and playing in the Dominican Republic sound downright All American, then she needs to look up from her scorebook once in awhile.

My guess, though, is that Harper's parents already are well schooled in agent oiliness as one of the unfortunate hazards of raising the gifted.

Tyler, too, has thoughts of leaving his high school mopes behind and heading off to Europe. It will accomplish two things according to, wait for it, "advisor" Sonny Vaccaro, expose Tyler to better competition and avoid the NBA's rule about having to wait until he's at least a year our of high school before entering the NBA. Oh yea, there's money involved, too.

My naïveté about the underbelly of sports dissipated somewhere around the time that the Indians signed Wayne Garland, so none of this comes as a surprise. But still, even these moves, or potential moves in the case of Harper, take this to a whole other level.

Capitalism may be the best economic system, but it does have some downsides.

As I wound my way through Harper's story, I couldn't help but think how awfully far off the mark Verducci really was. Maybe it was Harper and his dudes that labeled him the next LeBron and all this talk is kind of cute.

But it also underscores a certain level of sophistication that has crept into their conversations in a way that probably has robbed them of some of the charms of being young. Rather than see the point, Verducci contributes to it.

Buried in the Harper story were his goals, which I quote, are to "be in the Hall of Fame. Play in Yankee Stadium.

Play in the pinstripes.

Be considered the greatest baseball player who ever lived."

In that short burst, Harper has succinctly but sadly captured baseball in all of its economic dysfunction with the sophistication of someone that isn't spending all his free time on Facebook.

Recognizing that he'll likely end up on a dreg of a team at the outset of his career owing to how the baseball draft works, Harper first sets his sights on just playing in Yankee stadium. Even with the Yankees in a new stadium that has yet to build its own history, his sentiment is understandable. It's the game's biggest day-to-day stage.

But like the teenage gymnast in *Jerry McGuire* pretending to cry when on the phone with Jerry and coldly negotiating with Sugar on the other line, Harper demonstrates his worldliness and a bit of his own cockiness by then saying he wants to play in pinstripes. By that Harper means that when his accomplishments outgrown his current team's ability to compensate him adequately, it's off to the Yankees.

That's baseball's unspoken but ever present dynamic.

Unfortunately, that's also the way young phenoms now think and there's no turning back. But I have a suggestion to Verducci. He should have read his own story more closely. It would have been far more accurate for Verducci to label Harper as the next CC Sabathia.

That's his story and his trajectory.

For now James remains true to the team that drafted him.

For now.