

Now batting, Number 9, Forever... '85

Seed magazine is a New York glossy covering the crossroads of science and popular culture. When Boston Red Sox legend Ted Williams died he took both to an unearthly level, and this piece landed *Above the Fold*. The summer season continues as cultural coverage from Berlin for *Seed* on both the G8 summit and Einstein's artists are on tap.

above the fold

TED WILLIAMS

Surely Ted Williams, baseball legend, one-time owner of a dog named Slugger, and rugged American icon, never thought he'd wind up rooming with a man named FM2030.

But after passing away this July at age 83, the pride of the Boston Red Sox was in strange summer lodgings, suspended upside-down in a chrome cylinder of liquid nitrogen super cooled to -320.8 fahrenheit at Alcor Life Extension Foundation in Arizona. His body is in a cryogenics tank, frozen solid in the hope that one day science can revive the occupant in a secular afterlife.

It might be a natural end for Mr. FM2030, a well-known futurist, but Ted Williams sits in the pantheon of baseball gods. He's a symbol of America's mid-century golden years man who went to war and flew fighter planes during the prime of his career. The spectacle of Williams as experimental cryonaut, with a judge on the hook to decide whether he should be thawed and cremated amid a family feud, made for strange days even as a bitter labor dispute and steroid haze hung over this year's baseball season.

The deep-freeze? It's jarring.

"It shouldn't be," said Robert Ettinger, catalyst and founder of the Michigan-based Cryonics Institute, who blames the widespread rubbernecking over Williams on cultural inertia. Inertia was not, however, what a barkeep and would-be actress named Tony was feeling while tending the Black Sheep in Manhattan recently. "I'm from Boston, and I'm so mad I could punch him in the nose," she said. She's talking about John Henry Williams, Ted's son, who emerged as the main advocate for cryonics in the family dispute. Ted Williams reportedly told friends that he wanted his ashes scattered off the coast of Florida; it's written in his will. However, the executor of Williams' estate claims Williams changed his mind. An oil-stained

handwritten note backs this claim, with John Henry, sister Claudia, and Williams all agreeing to be placed in bio-stasis after death. Half-sister Bobby-Jo wants the cremation. All in all it's a harsh scene.

The dispute is variously called ghoulish, startling, or sad. It's a disorienting turn because a good part of the public feels it owns Williams as a defining hero of the past. Conversations about him have suddenly revolved around scientific, moral, and legal themes, instead of the anticipated traditional yarn about baseball as metaphor for American life. Even the clerics aren't sure what to

make of the cryonauts. In one case, a Roman Catholic priest blessed a cryogenics tank, a move approved by a bishop. Reverend Robert Friday, a

conversation about Williams had an uncomfortable new caveat, and baseball's final sendoff to the man, in the green cathedral of Boston's Fenway Park, posed fits for those trying to describe it. The Marine color guard and the band in the outfield gave the muggy evening the solemnity that Theodore Samuel Williams deserved, described one account, going on inevitably to compare the scene with a Norman Rockwell painting. Dom DiMaggio, Williams' teammate and brother to Joe, another baseball deity, drew cheers when he called for Ted to rest in peace. Taps played. The family members were not part of the ceremony. There was still a frozen elephant in the room.

Ralph Merkle, an Alcor board member and Texas-based electrical engineer, says the usual arguments over cryonics miss the mark. "The debate is not about

better orchestrated.

Williams, Boston's beloved Teddy Ballgame, is a giant in the American imagination, a newsreel titan forever taking perfect swings. In 1941 he was the last man to hit .400, finishing with a .406 average after going 6-for-8 for the Red Sox in a doubleheader against the Philadelphia A's.

Baseball aside, he was by all accounts a superb fisherman, battling bonefish and tarpon in the wilds of Florida. He crash-landed a Panther jet in the Korean War. After he died, Williams was compared time and again with another rugged American figure: John Wayne. With cryonics, Williams moved from the Western to the sci-fi; from Rooster Cogburn to something more like Ziggy Stardust at Hammersmith Odeon, gleaming and looking vacantly toward the future.

Then, there's thinking of someone like my own dad, himself an Air Force jock who was once a kid, like thousands of other kids in the Bronx, watching Ted Williams spectacularly hit into the Yankee Stadium outfield all those summers ago. "It's sort of... unnatural."

Michael Dumiak

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professor of moral theology at Catholic University, says the deep freeze is an opt-out of the Christian matrix of resurrection and rituals. And if it works, Friday says, then it raises the specter of a surreal Rip Van Winkle hangover.

This end game also posed problems for baseball, which quickly renamed an All-Star award in Williams' honor, only to see its mid-summer classic game end in a controversial tie. Because of the tie, the new award went un-awarded. Every

whether we can raise the dead. The debate is, are they dead?" he says. Most people try to delay the time at which they are declared dead. That's the line for the cryonics movement; it gave inspiration to Jason Oddy's well-timed photography exhibition, "Dying is Not Good for You," which opened in New York's Frederieke Taylor gallery on July 10, even as controversy boiled over. Oddy's photos, clinical interiors taken at Alcor and the Cryonics Institute, could not have been