The Iron Man. Strong. Dependable. Enduring.

He looked perfectly human. But beneath the surface stirred something greater. Something other mere mortals do not possess. Something intangible, something that filled him with a burning desire to always compete and never rest.

Determining his place among the greats requires not just checking his impressive stats but the periodic table as well. Look down the chart to the 26th element. There you'll find "Fe" – a symbol derived from the Latin word "ferrum" meaning "iron" – a substance not often encountered in its purest form. A substance that made him seem invincible and indefatigable, that allowed him to defy time and any thoughts of exhaustion. Simple scientific calculations deduce his 6-foot-4, 220-pound body contains slightly less than six grams of iron. But sometimes desire and science do not intersect in reality.

As the games passed by, Number 8 was always inked in on the lineup card. Manning the left side of the infield. Inning after inning. Rain or shine. Each crack of the bat and smack of the glove strong and steady.

Imagine never missing a day of work for more than 16 years. Imagine playing through pain. Never going on the DL. Ignoring fatigue. Never succumbing to tiredness. For 2,632 consecutive games. Think of that, 2,632 games. Never missing a game. A record so unbelievable it's simply called "The Streak."

His father's son, he grew up living, talking, eating and bleeding baseball. Learning commitment, perseverance and loyalty. The consummate team player, he was always prepared to play from the first pitch to the last out.

Breaking into the bigs, he first buttoned up the Oriole uniform on August 8, 1981. On May 30, 1982, he started "The Streak" at third base against the Blue Jays on his way to capturing American League Rookie of the Year honors. The years and milestones passed quickly.

In '83, starting the first of four straight seasons playing every inning of every game, he championed the O's to the World Series crown while leading the majors with a career-high, club-record 211 hits to collect the AL MVP award. In '86, he led AL shortstops in homers for the fourth straight year, redefining expectations for the position and starring as the first of a new breed of power-hitting shortstops. In '90, he established the records for errorless games by a shortstop (95) and consecutive errorless chances (431). In '91, he captured his second AL MVP with career-highs of 34 home runs and 114 RBIs, while hitting .323. In '93, he belted his 278th homer as a shortstop, breaking Ernie Banks mark for the position. And on and on...

At times there were close calls when "The Streak" appeared in jeopardy, like when he sprained his ankle in '85. Or when he twisted his knee in '93. Or when he felt lower back pain in '97 and thought of leaving the game. But his resolve never wavered. Pushing the limits of human endurance to a new plateau, he played through swelled joints and nagging pains. He possessed an unbreakable iron will that hungered for daily diamond excellence.

The accomplishments and clutch performances piled up like autumn's falling leaves ... the errorless streak, the Gold Gloves, 400 homers, multiple AL MVP awards, 16-plus All-Star Game appearances, more hits and runs batted in than easily counted. As the drama mounted in his unrelenting charge to match Lou Gehrig's record of 2,130 consecutive games played, his consummate grace never faltered. On the night of Sept. 6, 1995, he broke an unbreakable record in an epic game that included a 22-minute ovation and an unforgettable victory lap. His iron will helped recharge the national pastime.

He handled it all with class and dignity in an age decried lacking in both. Autograph requests? Never a problem. Off the field, he made the cause of Adult Literacy the centerpiece of his community service.

Now his pale-blue eyes peer toward a setting sun as immortality and Cooperstown await. Yet his legacy leaves one question unanswered: What coursed through his veins? Was it indeed a form of pure iron scarcely seen before? Or simply an unmatched passion to play a timeless game forever?

"I want to be remembered as an Iron Man, a player who went out there and put it on the line every day. I want people to say they couldn't keep him out of the lineup."

–Cal Ripken, Jr.

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