

Time to Clean Up our National Pastime

In a way, the story of steroids in baseball is not so much about the power added to the game, but about the power that was always there. It's a power that has entranced millions for more than a hundred years, surviving game-fixing, labor strife, all sorts of drug scandals. It's a power that has both a bright and a dark side. Becoming a baseball star is a noble dream, but to do that, some players did the ignoble, ingesting and injecting dangerous and often illegal substances to enhance performance. And because the people who depend on baseball for livelihood and amusement wanted so much to believe in the essential goodness of the game and the greatness of the players, we missed or ignored the signs: the larger biceps, the back acne, the outsize statistics.

-ESPN the Magazine (November 2005)

The recent news of baseball players admitting to steroid use has dominated sports coverage over the past year. Even so, before these confessions, fans of the national pastime have chosen the easy way out by simply accepting steroid use as part of the game. This “news” is not news in the sense that we as fans have suddenly discovered how rampant steroid use has been in the last decade. Soon, fans will finally admit that America’s game is lacking the wholesome feeling that initially made it our national pastime during the Ted Williams and Babe Ruth era. Unless baseball cleans up its act, the worse-kept secret will keep getting worse. The only answer to this disaster is governmental intervention, as it is evident that the Players’ Association too has accepted performance enhancement as a tolerable way of obtaining an unfair advantage.

The real issue that surrounds baseball’s glaring crisis does not only surround the fact that the game’s best players are acquiring advantages they could do without and pushing non-using, mediocre players even farther behind. The major, explicit issue with steroid use surrounds the integrity of the game that so clearly performance-enhancing drugs destroy.

As Barry Bonds approaches Babe Ruth's mark of 695 home runs, second on the all-time list, speculation has arisen that Bonds "unknowingly" used a variety of "unknown" substances. Immediately after the claim from the man who sold Bonds the drugs, the all-star said in a press conference: "You can test me and solve that problem real quick. I just think it's the media trying to stir up stuff just to have something to talk about. To me, in baseball it really doesn't matter what you do; you still have to hit that baseball. If you're incapable of hitting it, it doesn't matter what you take. You have to have eye-hand coordination to be able to produce. I think [steroid use] is really irrelevant to the game of baseball."

Irrelevant to the game of baseball? We've heard the argument that steroids can't possibly accommodate for incredible hand-eye coordination at the plate. However, when you take a man, who is the best in the world at what he does, and build his muscle mass artificially, the ball that is normally a routine fly ball or grounder becomes a home run or a game winning single. The record books are the concrete proof, only creating a mockery of the history that makes the game so special. Before 1996, a player had not hit 50 home runs since Willie Mays did in 1952. From 1995 to the present, ten players have done so, highlighted by Mark McGwire's total of 73 in 1998 and Bond's 73 in 2001. We as fans chose to ignore this concrete evidence that artificial substances were changing the game; in our minds, the inflated numbers had nothing to do with illegal steroids.

While testing is a start, this will essentially do nothing to solve the long-term problem and the game will remain contaminated with deceit, denial as well as illegal substances. In November, Major League Baseball instituted a policy in which players are tested for steroids on a random basis. Penalties include a 50-game suspension for the first

violation, a 100-game suspension for the second, and a lifetime ban for the third with the opportunity to appeal.

While these punishments appear stiff, it is unlikely that many will receive them. The testing that baseball administers is strictly based upon urine samples. Human Growth Hormone, illegal in baseball, does not even show up in urine tests. Water-based steroids that many have admitted to using can be flushed from the system in days. While the Players Union has suggested that their will be testing immediately preceding Spring Training, these types of steroids would not be detected because they would be out of the system long before. Most contradictory to this idea is the fact that so-called designer steroids have been chemically altered to prevent a drug signature from appearing on samples. In essence, there is only one solution to having baseball return to its glory days as the national pastime: a no-tolerance policy, in which the standards for the game are raised to an entirely new level.

No matter how stiff the Players Union chooses to go with their choice of punishment for drug violations, the thieves will always remain one step ahead of the police. However, baseball's future relies on how many second and third chances the Union is willing to give to violators. Keep in mind that each time a player is caught, in actuality that player has most likely been using for years. For the sake of the goodness of the game, there must be a no-tolerance policy implemented. A one-time violation should equal a lifetime ban. What this also means is that the Players Union needs to publish a set of guidelines of legal and illegal substances; ones that they believe would entice players into acquiring an advantage. The drug tests need to be administered at greater lengths, perhaps using both urine *and* blood samples, but also need to develop a way to

defend against designer-steroids. This should not be a daunting task given the medical, technological innovations of today.

The goal of this proposal is to propel baseball to return to its status as America's pastime. To carry out this goal will by all means require the passing of a selfish generation, but the outcome would be more than adequate. Baseball overcame gambling and game-fixing scandals as well as continuous labor strife. The game has already suffered reasonable and obviously negative media attention. The state of the game cannot become any worse, so the upper echelons of baseball must focus the attention to the future of the game.

The single, most apparent observation regarding this chaos among the game resides in the effect of the choices of an egocentric few on the nation's youth. Over the previous three years, a record number of adolescents have chosen to shoot up, envisioning the "glory life" of their professional idols. Steroid use has caused serious depression in promising, young athletes who believed they witnessed the benefits of these performance enhancing drugs. Obviously, they were not exposed to the frightening physical effects: the back acne, shrunken genitalia and rapid weight gain. This scary exposition should be enough for the Players Union to crack down on those that are looked up to by millions of America's youth.

Even the fair-weather fan can identify the state of the game as at its worst in its storied history. Superstars are cheating to gain an even larger advantage. The problem expands farther than the obvious; it is the tradition, the goodness of the game that previously acclaimed baseball as America's game, and we could not be farther from these claims today. The only solution is a no-tolerance policy, in which we accept that we are

trapped in a society encompassing egotistical, selfish cowards. The Players Union must look to the next generation of players whom are capable of restoring essential pride, goodness and integrity to the National Pastime.