



Steroids Killed the Baseball Stars but Saved America's Game

By Jakob R. Rodriguez

The '94 Major League Baseball Strike is regarded as one of the greatest betrayals in sports history, hurting MLB players, employees and fans. America's pastime was hanging by a thread. In a time of need, the '98 season restored the MLB to greatness with a record-breaking season in terms of ratings, attendance, and player statistics. For a time, it looked as though the MLB had been saved, but the greatness in the MLB was chemically manufactured using anabolic steroids. This paper analyzes the role of anabolic steroids in the resurgence of Major League Baseball, the '98 Home Run Race, and the investigation into '98's household names, as well as the steroid use of Mark McGwire, Barry Bonds, Jose Canseco, and Sammy Sosa. From this research consisting of studies and journalistic pieces, it is evident that Major League Baseball is complicit in baseball's greatest doping scandal.

“Take me out to the ballgame take me out with the crowd.”

When Jack Norworth wrote these words on a scrap of paper in 1908, accompanied by a doodle of a fictional New York girl named Katie Casey; he had no idea of the social and cultural impact his song would have on the game for decades to come. By the 1970s, the famous White Sox announcer Harry Caray began performing the song during the seventh inning stretch of each game. Across the United States, baseball fans sang Norworth’s words. “Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack,” went Norworth’s story a young woman, Casey, begging her boyfriend to take her to a baseball game rather than a show. “I don’t care if I never get back!” The song serves as not only the unofficial anthem for the sport. Today, the song also reminds us of the many decades when baseball emerged as America’s pastime. As the sport has declined in popularity, such reminders of its draw for the nation evoke a simpler time of spectacle and entertainment. To the extent that baseball has remained popular in recent decades, it has relied on the draw of the home run. Consequently, the resurgence of baseball has, ironically, depended on wrestling with what has been seen as one of the greatest threats to the game: steroid use by the would-be home run hitters.

The modern dilemma of baseball became especially apparent in the 1990s. Steroids would take the baseball world by storm, scarring the game forever and marring the triumphs and accolades of a generation’s greatest heroes. The late 1980s to the late 2000s became known as the “steroid era,” when a number of players, with both high and low popularity amongst fans, were accused and later proven guilty of doping their bodies or altering their physiques with the help of anabolic steroids.

Athletes take anabolic steroids, also known as anabolic-androgen steroids, to increase their muscle mass and strength, as well as gain an edge throughout competition and the training leading up to the contest. While some athletes take testosterone to boost performance, others typically use synthetic modifications of the hormone that

are approved for medical uses. They can be taken or administered in the form of pills, injections and topical creams.

The steroid era would serve as a permanent smear on the game of baseball and the players involved in the scandal. Over three-decades, observers of the baseball world came to see clearly how the commercialization of the game, combined with the greed of players and the League, could undermine the reputation of an entire professional sport, while essentially erasing the achievements of the players and coaches. The rise of steroid use cast a pall on the most famous players of the era, including Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa, and Barry Bonds. Others, like Jose Canseco, admitted their use of the illegal or banned substances, preserving their personal reputation, but not saving themselves from association with “cheating.”

Ironically, the steroid era also saw the resurgence of baseball, a sport that was declining in popularity as the National Football League and the National Basketball Association, among others, gained fan followings. With this in mind, it is possible to argue that steroids were a necessary evil that helped catapult the sport to the top of ratings during the home run races of Bonds, McGwire, and Sosa. The drama of those home run record races in 1998, and the regular moon shots smashed by players like Canseco, all helped usher in a new generation of fans to the parks. Following the Major League Baseball Players Association organized the strike in 1994, which ended the season early and canceled the year’s World Series. Baseball needed a spark and it found it in the artificially inflated muscles of its new heroes. However, for a game as entrenched as baseball is in tradition, when some of these generational “heroes” flirted too closely with records, previously or without the aid of steroids, thought of as being unbreakable. The Major League Players Association, the MLB itself, and even the United States Congress would eventually intervene to preserve a sense of purity in “the old ball game.” But the deed was done, the crime already committed, and the wounds from this ordeal have been very slow to heal.

The Timeline and Context of Anabolic Steroids

Doping was not and is not some new-fangled idea. It dates back to ancient Greece, where athletes who would compete in the Olympics would gorge themselves on meat, an abnormal dietary supplement, and would go as far as experimenting with herbal solutions to find an edge in competition.^{vi} Drawing upon a Sports Illustrated timeline^{vii} developed in 2008, we can identify key benchmarks for developments in anabolic steroid use and practice. From 1886 to 2005, the doping was clearly central to the development of modern athletes.

1886 24-year-old Welsh cyclist Arthur Linton dies during a race from Bordeaux to Paris. The death was reportedly related to typhoid fever, but he was also believed to have taken trimethyl, a performance-enhancing stimulant.

1889 French physician Charles-Édouard Brown-Séquard, extracts testicular fluid from dogs and guinea pigs and injects it into himself. Brown-Séquard claims to feel years younger with renewed energy after the injections.

1935 German scientists develop anabolic steroids as a way to treat hypogonadism or testosterone deficiency.

1940-45 Nazis test anabolic steroids on prisoners, Gestapos and Hitler: testosterone is used by German soldiers to promote aggressiveness and physical strength throughout the war effort. Hitler's mental state toward the end of his life also exhibits characteristics that scientists normally associate with heavy steroid use including: mania, acute paranoid psychoses, overly aggressive and violent behavior, depression and suicidal ideologies.

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1954 At the same time the U.S.S.R. begins to dominate the sport of powerlifting, a Soviet team doctor later reveals his team's use of testosterone injections to U.S. weightlifting doctor John Ziegler. Ziegler begins work on creating a technique which produces a compound with the muscle-building benefits of testosterone without androgenic side effects, such as prostate enlargement. This is known as a landmark pioneer moment in steroid use and chemical alterations of testosterone.

1975

The International Olympic Committee institutes a drug-testing policy for participating athletes and adds anabolic steroids to its list of illicit or banned substances, barring users and future competitors from participating in the games.

1984-96

The Bay Area Laboratory Co-operative was a San Francisco Bay Area business which supplied anabolic steroids to athletes. The BALCO scandal involved the use of banned substances that would otherwise benefit performance amongst professional athletes. The scandal itself stems from a 2002 US Federal Government Investigation of the laboratory. Starting in 1984 by Victor Conte and his wife, BALCO began as a vitamin shop in California, an initial business venture by the couple to provide for their family, after a year of clean operation, Conte closed the shop and started BALCO as a sport supplement company in neighboring the neighboring town of Burlingame. Conte had no formal training, but devised a system of testing athletes for mineral deficiencies in order to maintain a perfect balance of minerals in the body. Through regular urine and blood testing, Conte would monitor and treat mineral shortages in athletes, elevating their level of physical wellness dramatically. By the summer of 1996 NFL linebacker Bill Romanowski was added to BALCO's client list. Following Romanowski's addition to the client list, Conte begins to acquire additional high-profile athletes with his untraceable substance cocktail and doping program.

1988

Ben Johnson's, American sprinter, gold medal is stripped after the anabolic steroid Stanozolol is detected in a urine sample.

1990

The Anabolic Steroids Control Act is introduced by Congress. The Act classified steroids as a schedule III-controlled substance, making trafficking those illicit substances a felony, not a misdemeanor.

1991

German scientists develop anabolic steroids as a way to treat hypogonadism or testosterone deficiency.

2002

Ken Caminiti, retired third baseman, admitted to using steroids in 1996, the same year he would win the National League MVP title. "I've made a ton of mistakes. I don't think using steroids is one of them," Caminiti said. "He estimates that at least half of his fellow big leaguers are regular juicers," the June 3 issue of Sports

2005

Jose Canseco's, The Oakland A's 1986 rookie of the year, writes and publishes a tell-all book, Juiced: Wild Times, Rampant 'Roids, Smash Hits, & How Baseball Got Big. Canseco catalogued his own drug abuse by and alleged of those same drugs by home run kings Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa.

When McGwire released his book, he inspired an investigation by the United States Congress into doping and steroid use throughout Major League Baseball. The MLB reached an agreement to change its drug testing policy in January of that same year, but Canseco's tell-all book reopened the conversation as Canseco had accused players across the major leagues. Congress subpoenaed Canseco, Jason Giambi and Mark McGwire, who all testified before a Congressional committee investigating steroid use. Curt Schilling, Sammy Sosa, Rafael Palmeiro, and Frank Thomas were also subpoenaed to appear at the March 17 hearing of the House Government Reform Committee along with Players' Association Head Donald Fehr, Baseball Executive Vice Presidents Rob Manfred and Sandy Alderson and San Diego General Manager Kevin Towers.

The '94 Strike and Why It Happened

On August 12, 1994, the eighth work stoppage in baseball history would hit the MLB and would result in the remainder of the season being canceled, including the post-season and World Series. For 232 days both work and play stopped. What started as a response to an alarming financial situation in the baseball industry turned into a disagreement over collective bargaining rights, negotiation of wages or conditions of employment by the MLB players union, with a deal adamantly rejected by the Players Association. In continued negotiations, team owners chose to withhold the \$7.8 million they were required to pay into player's pension and benefit plans from the previous agreement. The cancellation of the season meant a net loss of approximately \$810 million in both players' salaries and ownership revenue. Prior to October 2, the final scheduled day of the season, players had been losing salary pay collectively at a rate of \$4.4 million a day.

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Further, out of the 28 teams in the MLB in 1993, 19 failed to match the previous season's attendance. Following the strike, in 1995, only 13 of the 28 teams matched the previous season's attendance numbers. The strike enraged many fans who perceived players who held out during the strike to be greedy, but proved that the strike itself was, in some capacity, beneficial to the league once play did continue. Once the 1995 season did get underway, team members and team management were both called out by upset fans, both on and off the diamond

for being "greedy" and "selfish."

During the 1995 season, certain fans took to demonstrations against teams, the league, and the players. In one such event, fans wearing T-shirts that had "Greed" written on them rushed the field at Shea Stadium and tossed \$160 in one-dollar bills at players' feet before they were eventually escorted out of the facility. Other fan-bases took to throwing things onto the field and causing delays for games. Some strew messages on billboards, banners, and signs at games. Others even went as far as flying banners over the stadiums with messages: "Owners & Players: To hell with all of you!"

Baseball in America was walking on thin ice, and the league needed to turn things around in terms of attendance or else it would once again fall into the trap.

The '98 Home Run Race

The event that would ultimately silence many critics of the game was the 1998 home run race between the first baseman of the St. Louis Cardinals Mark McGwire and the right fielder of the Chicago Cubs Sammy Sosa. The '98 season ended with both players breaking Roger Maris's historic 1961 single-season home run record of 61 home runs. Maris beat Babe Ruth's previous 1927 record of 59 home runs. Maris's record was

held for nearly four decades until Sammy Sosa reached Maris's milestone on September 25, 1998, breaking McGwire's standing record of 65-home runs. McGwire broke the record less than an hour later and would also hit two home runs in each of his next two games to achieve his home run record of 70.

For baseball, the '98 home run race meant a resurgence to the sport. It injected new blood into the veins of the MLB and gave the league, owners and players something to look forward to and cherish. Throughout the steroid era, power hitters would dominate the league, putting up astronomical numbers and flirting dangerously to all-time leaders. The '98 home run race also gave owners a way to throttle profits with more fans lining up to see sluggers go after one more at-bat. In St. Louis alone, the Cardinals was able to get 541,083 more people in the ballpark than the year prior. The Washington Post reported in July of that same year that the home run race put baseball back in a financially positive place: "Attendance so far is 36.3 million and could surpass the mark of 70 million established in 1993 and restore the game to fiscal health after the four-year hangover left by the 1994-95 players strike that canceled the '94 World Series." The Washington Post also reported in September 1998 that "McGwire's and Sosa's home runs have helped revive a sport that seemed in decline four years ago when a labor dispute forced the cancellation of the 1994 World Series. Until this season, attendance remained below 1994 levels. Fans seemed to be coming back a bit at a time, but because of Sosa and McGwire, they started to come back in a rush." Fans and owners alike latched onto the home run race drama. Those that could make the games would drive for hours and pay hundreds of dollars to watch batting practice and every at-bat, the rest watched on television.

Clearly baseball needed a boost. Significantly, however, the majority of the players involved in this "baseball mania" were either doping or linked to steroids in some way. Over the years, they would be added to the infamous list of players who would have tested positive for steroid use.

How 'Roids Re-invented Player Physiques and Stat lines

Science tells us that steroid use and home run numbers are directly correlated. According to the Journal of Sports Medicine & Doping Studies 2015, "Approximately the same time steroids use was suspected to have increased in MLB, there was an increase in the number of home runs (HR) per season, as well as the highest HR totals per player per season." The study goes on to explain that at the time of the steroid era were also increasing in size of the average hitter. Researchers theorized that there would be an overall increase in home runs hit, batting average and isolated power throughout the steroid era.

The research team failed to prove its hypothesis of more home runs being hit in the steroid era: "there was no statistically significant difference between the steroid era and the other 10-year time frames (the steroid era, 1993-2002; post-steroid era, 2003-2012; pre-steroid era, 1973-1982.) However, the team concluded through statistical analysis that "there was a significant increase in players who hit more than 40 HR in a single season during the steroid era compared to before and after this time period."

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Allegations Against Bonds, McGwire, and Sosa

The Game of Shadow: Barry Bonds, BALCO and the Steroids Scandal That Rocked Professional Sports is a best-selling book that chronicled the alleged extensive use of substances that helped players achieve success in the game: steroids or performance-enhancing drugs and Human Growth hormone. It was written by Mark Fainaru-Wada and Lance Williams, reporters for the San Francisco Chronicle, and provided the

basis for the greatest collection of evidence of steroid use by Barry Bonds. Bonds' record still stands through controversy over the possible use of performance-enhancing drugs among the trio of hitters (Sosa, McGwire and Bonds) that picked up speed and mass speculation when Bonds hit 73-home runs despite having never hit as many as 50 in any other season.

In a headline that read "Sosa Is Said to Have Tested Positive in 2003," The New York Times reported that Sosa joined the group of ballplayers like McGwire, Roger Clemens, Barry Bonds, Alex Rodriguez, Manny Ramirez and Rafael Palmeiro, who all tested positive for performance-enhancing drugs, even when Sosa was quoted saying he had "never taken illegal performance-enhancing drugs."

Former Democratic United States Senator George J. Mitchell of Maine launched a 20-month-long investigation into players' illegal doping. Mitchell sent a letter to Sosa asking for an interview or clarification of the allegations presented in a list of specific questions on ever using steroids or other performance-enhancing substances without a prescription during his major league career. However, neither Sosa nor Bonds responded to the letter.

Mitchell Report

The report to the Commissioner of Baseball of an Independent Investigation into the Illegal Use of Steroids and Other Performance Enhancing Substances by Players in Major League Baseball, the 409-page report released on Dec. 13, 2007 covers the historical use of illegal performance-enhancing substances by players and the effectiveness of the MLB Joint Drug Prevention and Treatment Program to combat the issue. The report also analyzes and advances certain recommendations of the handling of past illegal drug uses and future prevention of the practice amongst players. In addition to the recommendations listed in the report, the report also names 89 MLB players who are alleged to have used steroids or performance-enhancing drugs in their time in the league.

Throughout the Congressional hearing on

steroid use in the major league, McGwire stated that any answer he gave regarding alleged steroid use would not be believed by the public-at-large anyway, regardless of the context added. Bonds later admitted to taking steroids but claimed to not know he was taking a steroid.

Essentially, every athlete named in the Mitchell report had some sort of an investigation into illegal substance, illegal drug or non-prescription use. All 89 players named in the report had their reputation and career forever shadowed by its remarks. In essence, the higher you were in the baseball upper echelon of individuals destined for the hall of fame glory, the harder you fell after the report came out. Following its release, MLB increased testing and increased punishments for those who tested positive for the human growth hormone and performance-enhancing drugs.

McGwire was never named by an official investigation, but on January 11, 2010, McGwire admitted to broadcaster Bob Costas of the MLB network that he did, in fact, take steroids throughout this career, including the 1968 record-setting season. Both Bonds and Sosa have been linked to illegal use of steroids in the Mitchell report. Jose Canseco admitted that he "would never have been a Major League-caliber player without steroids."

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Conclusion

The reaction by MLB and the Players Association to combat the steroid problem in professional baseball suggests that owners, players and even fans have a skewed perspective. The truth is that juicing found its way into not only the veins of potential hall-of-famers, which have forever tainted what would have been stellar careers, but the baseball industry itself. The industry only cared to attempt to rehabilitate itself based on the traditions of the past and the condition of the sport it had thrown away in favor of historic records, large accolades and big checks. Only when historical records were challenged or broken did the MLB or media truly question how players were able to achieve that sort of prestige. Even then, the home run race of Bonds and McGwire created a sort of sports telenovela for the nation and the game saw a resurgence of popularity when records like the all-time home run record were being challenged. Anabolic steroids or non-prescription drug use offered a clean means of publicity. Even when players and league leaders were subpoenaed to testify before Congress, the hearings only elevated the game that much higher into the American media digest and also popular culture.

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