



Moral of the Story



The Ethicist's take on the news

May 19, 2009, 7:00 AM

Is Manny Ramirez Really All That Bad?

By RANDY COHEN



Paul Buck/European Pressphoto Agency

Manny Ramirez of the Los Angeles Dodgers.

For baseball fans dismayed by players who use steroids, human growth hormone and other banned substances, [Manny Ramirez](#) is this season's designated pariah, while Roger Clemens has locked up that spot for the old-timers game by being linked to performance-enhancing drugs by his former trainer [Brian McNamee](#) and in Jeff Pearlman's new book "[The Rocket That Fell to Earth](#)". Are we right to condemn such players as unethical?

There are potent arguments against the use of these substances, invoking respect for the law, esteem for baseball's history, regard for the players' health and concern about poor role models for young fans. But to frame this problem as one of individual moral failure is neither persuasive nor apt to yield an effective solution.

Some critics assert that drugs can so alter player performance as to undermine the game itself. Assumptions about player prowess are reflected [even in baseball's physical design](#): the height of outfield fences, for example, was set long before hitters bulked up on steroids. The distance between the bases, 90 feet, elegantly balances human running and throwing ability. There would be fewer successful plays at first if a drug-fueled hitter could run 80 miles per hour: with players so swift, the base paths would have to be extended by, oh, let's say half a mile, making it a tough toss from third and a disappointing view for people in the stands, even from the good \$50,000 seats at the new Yankee Stadium. (I may be off about the price. They could cost \$100,000.)

But drugs do not and will never let players run 80 miles per hour or make them invisible or enable them to fly. (The game would be more entertaining if they did.) The boost that performance-enhancing drugs provides is significant, particularly for athletes competing at the highest levels, but limited. Even with the infiltration of banned substances, the single-season

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Next Post:

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August 10
17

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August 05
14

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August 03
107

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July 29
44

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More thoughts on yesterday's post, on whether Henry Louis Gates should sue.

July 27
1,177

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Tag List

HEALTH AND MEDICINE	2	DAVID LETTERMAN	2
PRESIDENT OBAMA	2	SARAH PALIN	2
STEROIDS	2	TELEVISION	2
MANNY RAMIREZ	2	PHOTOGRAPHS	2
SPORTS	2	NEDA AGHA-SOLTAN	2
ECONOMY	2	BARACK OBAMA	2
LAYOFFS	2	MICHAEL JACKSON	2
GUNS	2	FUNERALS	2
GUN CONTROL	2	DEATH	2
GENERAL MOTORS	2	TEXT MESSAGES	2
HUMMER	2	SOCIAL ETIQUETTE	2
SCALPING	2	TECHNOLOGY	2
CONCERT TICKETS	2	HEALTH POLICY	2
MILEY CYRUS	2	PRIVATE INSURANCE	2
TICKETMASTER	2	HEALTH CARE REFORM	2

Archive

Select Month

About Randy Cohen

Randy Cohen has written humor articles, essays and stories for numerous newspapers and magazines. His first television work was writing for "Late Night With David Letterman," for which he won three Emmy Awards. His



home-run record only climbed from Babe Ruth's 60 in 1927 to [Barry Bonds's 73 in 2001](#) — not to 500.

Sports evolve, and technology plays its part. In modern professional basketball, peach baskets are out and video replay is in, as is footwear so high-tech that James Naismith, the game's inventor, would barely recognize [those things on LeBron James's feet](#) as shoes. For that matter, Naismith would be astounded by the size, strength and speed of today's players and the transformation they have wrought upon the game, changes that do not bespeak ethical failure or foretell the game's demise.

It is difficult to see a profound moral distinction between pharmaceutical science and other equally sophisticated technologies that yield even more significant improvements. In some sports, the most advanced approaches to training and diet apply biological research and computer analysis. As a consequence, Roger Bannister's record in breaking the four-minute mile ([shown here](#) with predictable and annoying "Chariots of Fire" music) is now [Hicham El Guerrouj's 3:43 mile](#). Bicycle racers train in wind tunnels, and bicycles themselves have gotten lighter and stronger, going from steel to aluminum to titanium to carbon fiber. Many athletes wear contact lenses, and there's nothing natural or traditional about that. More extreme still is [Tiger Woods's Lasik surgery](#), a deliberate and successful attempt to improve his vision to 20/15 — better than normal — a change he himself says has improved his game. If laser surgery, why not steroids?

Here's one response with ethical implications: Lasik surgery is safe; steroids present serious health risks. And while an individual player may reasonably accept that peril, he unethically imposes it on all other players: they simply cannot compete against this incredible, drug-altered specimen. In football, for instance, the number of 300-pound players [increased from 10 in 1986](#) to more than 300 by 2004.

Even if you regard such developments as morally dubious, the way to curtail them is not by denouncing putative failures of individual rectitude — baseball has tried that for years with unimpressive results — but to recast the issue as one of workplace safety.

Hockey shows what can be achieved by this shift. An N.H.L. player who wore a helmet was once mocked as timid. [Helmet use is now required](#) and ubiquitous. This change was not achieved by Congressional bloviating about the players' ethical obligation to be role models for the kids or to stop endangering teammates by pressuring them to conform to a manly bareheaded style. Instead, hockey's authorities — owners and unions, managers, coaches and officials — established and enforced a helmet rule as a matter of employee health and safety. To refuse to wear one today would seem not immoral but dimwitted (perhaps the consequence of frequent blows to the head).

The absence of a helmet is easier to detect than the presence of HGH, but the same strategy is applicable: clear rules, consistent enforcement (and requisite testing), appropriate penalties and a moratorium on consigning transgressors to eternal hellfire. If those who govern baseball show a persistent concern for the well-being of the players and a respect for the fans' faith in the integrity of the game, they can create conditions in which right conduct can flourish, something the owners have failed to do with their a-few-immoral-apples approach.

We admire athletes who work hard, even risking injury, to improve their play. It is oddly paradoxical to damn those who do just that — albeit pharmaceutically. Instead, baseball authorities must prohibit actions that are unduly dangerous, whether taking drugs or playing after a concussion, or that mar the beauty of the game (jet-packs worn by outfielders, handguns for pitchers who want to intimidate a batter), not because such things are unethical but because they are unwise.

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[baseball, Manny Ramirez, sports, steroids](#)

fourth Emmy was for his work on "TV Nation." He received a fifth Emmy as a result of a clerical error, and he kept it. For two years, he wrote and edited News Quiz for Slate, the online magazine. Currently he writes The Ethicist for The New York Times Magazine. Each week, in Moral of the Story, he will examine a news story from an ethical perspective.

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BY RANDY COHEN

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BY RANDY COHEN

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BY RANDY COHEN

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BY RANDY COHEN

In ethics, cuteness doesn't count; teaching a tailgater a lesson.

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BY RANDY COHEN

Innovating yourself out of a job; a bike leads to a free ride.



Feeds

[The Moral of the Story RSS](#)

From 1 to 25 of 209 Comments

1 2 3 ... 9 Next »

1. May 19, 2009
7:36 am
[Link](#)
- This is a classic essay - well reasoned, fair-minded, clear. It opened my mind (I have been a firm critic of players using steroids and other PEDs). It does indeed seem that we moralize a great deal about athletes: we may not be able to do what they do but damn if we don't know how to run our lives better and criticize every mistake they make. The only counter-argument not mentioned here about which I am still torn is the effect on young athletes. Surely the influence of pro athletes matters, if it leads 1 youngster to start messing up his body with drugs.

— *hazbin*

2. May 19, 2009
7:47 am
[Link](#)
- I am paying a lot of money to see these baseball players, whether it is cable TV fees or stadium admission prices. Players that use these substances are a lot better. I want to see good players, so I want the professional athletes to use these substances. Who wants a team composed of puny, pencil-necked geeks?

— *Larry fine*

3. May 19, 2009
7:59 am
[Link](#)
- Simple truth beyond humor beyond intellectual arguemnets steroid use taints the game in three primary ways:
- 1) It skews records. A flyout to right becomes a homerun. Simply put more muscle means more power.
 - 2) It shows that players will break the law to succeed. It undermines honesty.
 - 3) It helps players steal money. This is the one argument I have not seen picked up. Contracts are guranteed, based on performance, paid for by the fans. If Manny hits 308, 35 and 120 he makes more than if he hit 290, 25, 98. He has effectively stolen the money.
- A real fine would be negating the contract, suspending the player and subjecting them to the fine that would be given to a druggie on the street.
- But in a league with a players union (protecting their rights don't you know) that will never happen. Therefore we will continue to see drug use and cheating lining the pockets of uneducated men with lot's of talent hitting a ball.

— *Shaun*

4. May 19, 2009
8:02 am
[Link](#)
- This is a stretch. Comparing shoes and helmets to chemically enhancing your biological makeup is ludicrous. So when Nike's new air pump comes out, can we finally switch from hormones to somatic gene therapy? Cause I'd love to be able to have my blood hold 10% more oxygen than everyone else.

In Bill McKibben's book "Enough" (2003), he cites a study in 1995 where researchers asked 200 Olympic hopefuls if they'd take a drug that would guarantee them a 5-year winning streak and then kill them. Almost half said yes.

Biological performance enhancements goes beyond ruining the game... it makes us less human. We must continue to chastise those that do it. Otherwise our kids will do worse.

-
5. May 19, 2009
8:26 am
[Link](#)
- This is a side point: Steroids may help current players skew records, but, as others have pointed out, the exclusion of African-Americans early in baseball's history has also skewed records.
- This hardly makes steroid use acceptable, but perhaps it ought to have some influence when it comes to discussions of inclusion in the Hall of Fame.

— tlp

-
6. May 19, 2009
8:26 am
[Link](#)
- You seem to forget that every game has a set of rules that determine the game. You break the rules, you are NOT playing the game. Taking banned drugs is against the rules. It gives an unfair advantage to the players who break the rules.
- Personally I think it would be interesting to have both the regular Olympics and "Enhanced" Olympics (where anything, including drugs, can be done to improve performance is allowed). Then we could see how much difference it makes.
- Jay Lagemann

— Jay Lagemann

-
7. May 19, 2009
8:27 am
[Link](#)
- Isn't it cheating? Is there no moral component to willfully breaking the rules of a game in order to get ahead of the competition? It is a sad state of affairs if you truly believe it is morally acceptable to cheat.
- New sneakers, bikes, etc are available across the whole pro field, and are within the rules. The use of steroids and other such substances is outside the written rules of the game and therefore not available to honest players.
- Steroid use is like corking a bat or fixing a race. Yes, there is indeed a moral component to this, and any form of cheating!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

— Greg

-
8. May 19, 2009
8:31 am
[Link](#)
- I agree with the essayist. It's not that big of a deal. Generally speaking, MLB has changed very little because of steroid use. Players are not stealing the money from fans, as one comment suggests. Fans are willingly giving their money to MLB teams. If anyone is taking our money unwillingly, it would be the owners that pay big salaries and turned the other way when steroid use was rampant. Manny himself may or may not have used steroids—we don't really know—but this fact does not detract from the fact that he, like A-Rod, Clemens and Bonds, is one of the game's best players. To put this debate in perspective—it seems to me that more Americans are upset about steroids than they are about the torture of detainees in US custody. Now that's a true commentary on our ethical situation.

— ron

-
9. May 19, 2009
8:37 am
[Link](#)
- It's worth noting that the helmet rule in hockey had a grandfather clause; older players who hadn't worn them before could choose not to wear them, but rookies had no choice. It wasn't a sudden conversion.

— Joe

-
10. May 19, 2009
- I was beside myself with joy and excitement in October

of 1975 when the Big Red Machine won the World Series.

I experienced the same emotions in July of 2006 when cycling's Floyd Landis won what was perhaps the most dramatic single day of racing ever in the Tour De France, which allowed him to win the whole Tour.

When it came out that Landis had won because he had almost 3 times the normal amount of testosterone in his body, indicating doping, I was broken hearted. He cheated.

When it came out that Pete Rose had bet on baseball, I was disappointed. He broke the rules.

I still love Pete but would not cross the street to talk to Floyd.

Bats, gloves, helmets, carbon fiber, and even bets are one thing. Chemical manipulation is another.

- John

—*john purdue*

11. May 19, 2009
8:44 am

[Link](#)

There's one way to put the Tiger Woods approach to the test: have other golfers compete while wearing some sort of vision-enhancing goggles that will give them the same sight ability that Woods' laser surgery supposedly gives him.

RE: contracts and 'roids, there's no "stealing" involved. If a baseball player gets a higher salary because he's able to whack the ball further on 'roids, he's still doing what he promises to be able to do in the contract. He's simply lying about the source of his ability to do that. Maybe more analogous to lip-synching in the music industry. Britney doesn't steal money (kind of), she just "lies" about the source of her ability to sing and dance at the same time. Fans still get to see Manny deliver, just as fans still get to see Brit sing (kind of) and dance.

—*chris*

12. May 19, 2009
8:52 am

[Link](#)

I like how the author lists the potent arguments at the beginning but then ignores them for the rest of the essay, as though they don't really count in the first place.

It's also intellectually sloppy. Two examples:

1) "It is difficult to see a profound moral distinction between pharmaceutical science and other equally sophisticated technologies that yield even more significant improvements."

Actually, no. It's not difficult at all. Baseball bans, and has always banned, sophisticated technologies, like titanium bats and vaseline balls. Even astroturf, which doesn't change the level playing field for any one player or team, has been rejected. And he forgets the rather obvious problem with federal statutes surrounding drug laws.

2) "The absence of a helmet is easier to detect than the presence of HGH, but the same strategy is applicable: clear rules, consistent enforcement (and requisite testing), appropriate penalties and a moratorium on consigning transgressors to eternal hellfire."

Excuse me? Don't we already have clear rules? There's a damned list with all the drugs banned on it. How clearer than that can you get? And isn't shunning a powerful negative reinforcement tool to punish transgressors? It's very simple. You cheat, you don't get the rewards others earn by not cheating.

Manny chose to cheat. Why he did it can be explained very simply: he hoped to gain personal rewards by getting a leg up in the competition. Every profession faces the same sorts of moral dilemmas: the banker who is tempted to cook the books to make an ugly balance sheet look better, the lawyer who conceals crucial evidence to gain a competitive advantage in a high profile case, the scientist who fabricates experimental data to make a name for himself and gain notoriety. We appropriately punish these individuals because they betray the ethics of their profession. Usually, it's one strike and you're out in such instances. That ballplayers get 3 chances is already overly generous.

Manny has nobody to blame but himself for the predicament he finds himself in.

— *kevin*

13. May 19, 2009
8:53 am

[Link](#)

In my youth, we regarded athletes solely for their performance. Sportswriters kept the lid on stories about betting, bennies, breads and booze. The writers' livelihoods depended on our loving those players without reservation. And, truth be told, many of the players and writers were actually decent human beings.

Today three things have changed. First, obscene amounts of money are involved. If you need evidence that huge gobs of money is a corrupting influence, look no further than Major League Baseball. Second, players who have been idolized since the age of eight (or less), seem to require much more stroking and petting for their fragile egos. I don't understand that dynamic, but it is what it is. Last, everyone in baseball (particularly) is doing everything they can to destroy the game. The goose that lays the golden egg is on everyone's radar, as all want a piece - not soon, not later, but NOW. Those involved have either gotten a lot stupider or a lot meaner, probably both.

The PED catastrophe is merely a symptom of any or all of the above. They use the drugs in order to maintain their numbers so that writers and fans will notice them so their legacy will become immortal. Except when they get caught. Barabara Tuchman said it best with the title of her wonderful history of politics - The March of Folly. One after another, the greats (or near-greats) of the game follow one another into questionable places and practices because of ego, selfishness and bad judgment. Fans put up with it because of the game, but we shouldn't.

One other thing - many sportswriters today didn't grow up with the game, and they treat it as just another business, commodity or subject. So the intricacies of the game, which SHOULD monopolize the time of players and writers and everyone else, has become simply another facet of the business (make that BIG Business) of professional sports. With all these distractions, our leisure time pursuits are a lot less fun and fulfilling.

— *Porzitsku*

14. May 19, 2009
8:54 am

[Link](#)

We need to stop focusing on individual players and whack the team owners. Until they feel the pain they will turn a blind eye to the situation. I think a \$ 500,000 fine for the first offense would grab their attention, followed by \$ 1 million fines for each failed drug test thereafter. The money collected could be used for drug prevention programs in schools.

There is no place for humor with drugs when children are exposed to the situations.

John

15. May 19, 2009
8:55 am

[Link](#)

The arguments made by Cohen in this piece are certainly bizarre. Baseball players who take steroids are doing the same thing that hitters do when they use corked bats or pitchers to when they doctor the baseball with substances — they are trying to gain an advantage on their opponents by engaging in behavior that is illegal within the sport. Players are permitted to wear glasses or undergo lasik surgery or wear improved footwear. There is really no analogy here.

Holding up hockey as a an aspirational standard for baseball is equally ludicrous. Yes, players wear helmets (as do batters in baseball), but most refuse to wear faceguards, resulting in numerous facial injuries. The league does nothing to prevent this. And if hockey is seriously interested in “employee health and safety” why doesn’t it stop the constant fighting that occurs during games? What other major sport, other than boxing, tolerates fistfights during a game?

— Greg

16. May 19, 2009
9:04 am

[Link](#)

The difference between Tiger Woods getting lasik surgery and Manny Ramirez taking PHD’s is that in the game of golf, all players are allowed to undergo such a procedure while in baseball, Ramirez’s actions are prohibited. The key word here is unfair. Tiger Woods can get the best technology, the best surgeons, the best coaches and caddys because he is the best, he’s been the best and he will be the best for a long time. He has earned his money and has applied it to his game in a fair and balanced manner. Manny went to an out of network medical provider and bought PHD’s behind the back of the MLB and its fans and deliberately deceived the baseball populous. I understand not scapegoating the few that get caught—after all, there is a larger baseball-culture issue here—and I agree with the healthy employee approach, but the parralel between carbon fiber bikes and PHDs is completely absurd.

— Dave

17. May 19, 2009
9:10 am

[Link](#)

The article glosses over the Golden Rule. Giving oneself an advantage through the wonders of medicine puts all other players at a disadvantage.

This was never more apparent than when the Barry Bonds Circus was in town. We witnessed an already HOF-bound player past his “power prime” gain 70 pounds of muscle in a seriously abbreviated period of time and hit 27 more HR’s than his personal best. If you haven’t seen the pictures of Bonds pre-juice, Google it - the transformation is astounding.

The upper hand in athletics - and life - is only honorable when accomplished within the confines of the rules. We’ve seen bankers vilified for raking in the long green under dubious circumstances - and I’m talkin’ the Madoff end of the spectrum - so why can’t the mob gather with torches and set fire to all the miscreants who’ve jobbed the system and broken the rules?

While the leadership of baseball is far too greedy to suspend/ban all juicers - and frankly, there wouldn’t be too many players left - the folks in YOUR industry should unite and ensure none of them ever step foot in Cooperstown.

— M

18. May 19, 2009
9:11 am

[Link](#)

“It is difficult to see a profound moral distinction between pharmaceutical science and other equally sophisticated technologies that yield even more significant improvements.”

Wow. What insight. New basketball shoes are pretty much the same thing as performance enhancing drugs. Of course, the new basketball shoes don't twist your body's systems into knots, or cause early death.....

You also miss another point about Manny: he malingered in Boston, in order to get a new contract. His lack of character in one area is now known to be demonstrated in another area.

With all due respect, Mr. Cohen, you should stick to humor. On your attempt at a serious discussion, you are O for 4.

— *F. R. Pamp*

19. May 19, 2009
9:23 am

[Link](#)

Clearly, the author has never competed against doped athletes. neither have several of the people posting. when an athlete dopes, they substitute drugs for discipline and dedication. They take the short cut to “greatness” but are nothing more than cheaters.

As a competitive cyclist I can appreciate the talent and dedication it takes to be as good as many of the riders are. I've competed against doped athletes and can tell you that seeing someone use drugs because they can't compete any other way undermines your love for the sport.

Now, every time I see an outstanding performance I wonder if it was real or doped.

A doped performance is no better than a staged movie scene: it's just not real.

By accepting this type of behavior randy cohen undermines every person who has ever tried to play fair, every person who has competed clean, every person who wants to be an athlete but does not want to damage their body and health with drugs.

How can you call yourself an ethicist?

— *robinette*

20. May 19, 2009
9:23 am

[Link](#)

Brendan says it well. Of course records of the past are broken by new training methods, new tracks and venues, and equipment of the future. What has not changed is the even playing field on which the events are held, and the exemplary goal of honest competition. Cheating with steroids ruins all that. It is time that we make this clear to athletes and, by example, to our children.

— *Dennis*

21. May 19, 2009
9:27 am

[Link](#)

This is more than a stretch, it's ludicrous. Your arguments would be far better for getting rules enacted (such as the transition to helmets).

But the rules are in place. The substances are and were banned. If breaking the consensus about how to play isn't an ethical failure, what is?

And you gloss over a big ethical point. Users of steroids not only cheat the game, but they cheat other players (taking their jobs and pay) and pressure the other players to risk their health and off-field lives to compete.

Cheaters have always gotten beaten up, thrown out, or strung up, for good reason.

— *Pilgrim*

22. May 19, 2009
9:31 am

[Link](#)

This article is a great example of cultural decline. We should just have robots out there playing.

There are some things we want to keep the same. It is the link to our history. Baseball is best played and appreciated when it's done naturally the way we did it in little league.

Lying
cheating
drug use
deception

The new baseball? Randy Cohen Baseball

Give me Willie Mays, Roberto Clemente, Brooks Robinson
Al Kaline, Catfish Hunter etc.

Randy keep your Manny and his kind because you represent DECLINE

Rafael

— *Rafael Esparza*

23. May 19, 2009
9:32 am

[Link](#)

A player can shoot heroin into his eyeballs - it doesn't matter. The owners know where their bread is buttered, and so do the fans. There will be boos when Manny comes back. Wait, however, until he starts hitting home runs. Let's see how long the boos last.

— *Bruisers*

24. May 19, 2009
9:37 am

[Link](#)

Some thoughts:

I agree with essentially all of Cohen's arguments. I have some issues with the comments:

1. The "won't someone think of the children" argument annoys me to no end. Parents do at least in theory have a role in their children's lives, no? Why not exercise that influence and actually do some parenting?

2. All kinds of things skew records. It is widely believed that baseball introduced a new ball in the 1990s. The pitching mound was lowered after the ludicrous pitching-heavy 1968 season. The number of games has changed. Black players can now play. Baseball records are fun, but maybe it's time to desacralize them.

3. The stealing argument is worth exploring. I don't know that I really have a response to it, though I guess I don't have a ton of sympathy for billionaire owners. Call me a socialist.

4. Honesty I don't particularly care about in this context.

5. As for the argument that steroids, or gene therapy, make us less human, that's a slippery slope. Does a replacement knee make my grandfather less human? Would gene enhancement to cure sickle-cell anemia make a person less human? What about to remove a gene that raises the risk of fatal breast cancer? The implications of new medical technologies are far-ranging, and I'm hesitant to risk dehumanizing or demonizing those who seek a healthier or more fulfilling life.

— *Grant*

25. May 19, 2009
9:38 am

[Link](#)

The logic employed in this article is flawed: regardless of what professional athletes admit, or what their attorneys allow them to admit, they are well aware of the potential adverse health impacts to the use of pharmaceutical drugs in their attempt to play better. To think otherwise is simply ridiculous. These people are adults with not only the same access to the internet as the rest of us, but also a bevy of doctors, trainers, and support staff all interested in their performance. It is simply incomprehensible to me that anyone can claim they “do not know what they put in their bodies.”

Given that these athletes must be presumed to know what they are consuming, changing the argument for why the league seeks to crack down on steroid use is no better than demonizing individuals. It is, in fact, worse. This is because athletes already ignore the known health impacts of steroid use. However, if they see their fellow players demonized (i.e. losing the esteem of their fans who make them superstars), there is a better chance they will choose not to use, or stop using, steroid.

This article is more of the same blather that has occurred by sports-interested folks for years and I am absolutely sick of it. Admit it, there are cheaters in the league, and it detracts from the “beauty of the sport” (assuming there is any beauty in such a slow boring game). It is my humble opinion that the writer of this article has a harder time dealing with the fact that his or her heroes are cheaters than the outward perception of the sport as a whole.

The sad fact is that cheating is rampant in most sports. Cyclists have cheated, by means including the use of steroids, for generations. Countless olympic athletes in a variety of sports have been caught using steroids. It has not stopped anything as the use continues.

The difference with American baseball is that we continue to try to mute the issue by ignoring it, as we previously did, or attempting to change the topic of conversation, as this article suggests. Muting the issue will do nothing, and will likely make the drug use worse. Accept the fact that many baseball players cheat, cheating is never pretty, and then place the onus on the players who are caught cheating. After all, they are the ones getting paid millions of dollars. They are the ones who must take responsibility for their lack of regard for their persons, their sport, and their fans.

— Adam

1 2 3 ... 9 Next »

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