

## Wake-up Call on Steroids

The familiar smell of peanuts, popcorn and beer are in the air. The umpire yells "Play ball!" The 2005 Major League baseball season is officially underway. And so is the dark little melodrama that continues to hold center stage at every ballpark, health club, dinner table, poker game, and bar across America: the steroid controversy. It is certain to endure throughout the long, hot summer, alongside timeless debates about home run hitters, favorite teams, late season trades and the Most Valuable Player awards. The reason, in large part, is because the scrutinizing eyes of the sports fans everywhere will be affixed like lasers to the performance of those athletes most closely identified with steroid use.

The "say it ain't so" chant of the crowd resonates with the increasing speculation that an undetermined number of players, including some superstars, have used illegal strength-enhancing drugs to elevate their athletic prowess. In the past several years we have been witness to a dramatic assault on many of baseball's most coveted records, seemingly in tandem with the increasing size and muscularity of the record slayers. Some athletes who never achieved the pinnacle of success during the 'prime' years, have suddenly compiled their best personal stats as they approach the age of 40.

In the aftermath of the recent Congressional hearings, the media dissected the testimony of hulksters Jose Canseco, Raphael Palmeiro, Sammy Sosa, Curt Schilling and especially the "I'm retired" Mark McGwire. Big Mac's earlier denials of steroid use became all the more suspect by his refusal to provide direct answers to committee members' questions. Some maintain that his poor performance virtually slammed the door on Hall of Fame enshrinement and a meaningful legacy.

The assault on the present-day boys of summer has been misdirected. The drug epidemic did not mushroom because of the cheating ways of a few players. The poisoning can be attributed to a total lack of responsibility starting at the top of the pecking order and spiraling downward: Major League Baseball, the player's association, team owners, upper management, managers, coaches and yes, even the fans.

Is there an owner, manager or coach in organized sports today who can truthfully issue a credible "no" to the question of whether they ever had knowledge that a particular player on their team used steroids? If not, then why has it taken so many years to implement measures to confront the problem? The answer is really quite simple. Where would be the motivation? Baseball is about the business of making money. It is a form of entertainment. Make no mistake why the word 'business' came to follow the word 'show' in "show business."

Ballpark attendance and revenues are up. Fans still marvel at the excitement of the titanic home run. Owners know this and are only too eager to accommodate the ticket holders by building smaller parks. Protecting records does not enter into their equation. From the baseball big wigs perspective, it has always been about money and always will. The practice was clearly to look the other way and see no evil - up until now, of course.

Most of us believe that professional athletes care about their sport. I believe Mark McGwire cares about baseball and was proud to play for the St. Louis Cardinals. I don't believe his intent was to cheat the fans or himself. The majority of today's athletes are far more in tune with their body than those who played in the years of Williams, Mantle, Mays and Aaron. Many incorporate weight training, adhere to strict conditioning programs, retain personal trainers, utilize the latest nutrition supplements and work out far more diligently in the off season than athletes from previous generations ever did.

Gone are the days when ballplayers would arrive at spring training camp out of shape. Derek Jeter once said that no player is guaranteed to have a job each spring. Everyone must make the team. The business is also about performance. Unfortunately, as the level of competition only intensifies, some have chosen to take whatever measures are necessary to gain "the edge."

We have all permitted the virus to spread and remain unchecked. Our reasons were self-serving and classic: denial and blame. Unless the right anecdote is found, the end result will prove more self-destructive to our sport than any illegal drug pumped into the veins of an athlete. For the present, no prescription is available.

There is no magic answer to the problem. There never is. Major League Baseball, in conjunction with the support of each team, the players association, the media and the fans, must find the remedy. The potential health risks associated with steroids are well documented. This is a wake-up call for all of us. Now that so many eyes are finally watching, perhaps steroid use will eventually fade into oblivion.

**By-Line: John Esposito is a freelance writer who lives in New Providence, NJ.**