

Some Perspective on the Steroid Era

For baseball fans, December is the time of year when the hot stove heats up as rumors and confirmations of trades and free agent signing take our attention away from less important things like work or the holiday season. This is a fun and welcome distraction, but the newer December ritual of reporters and baseball people of a certain age, most recently Tommy Lasorda, making pronouncements about how steroid users, according to their subjective definition, do not belong in the Hall of Fame, has become tiresome.

Steroid abuse was a serious problem, and remains a less serious problem, but it is also part of the context in which baseball was played during the steroid era. Obviously not every player in the years from roughly 1994-2004 took steroids, but many did and many others turned a blind eye to it. Similarly, while not every owner, former star, manager, announcer and the like actively encouraged it, few did much to try to stop steroid abuse. Steroid use is therefore best understood as a systemic problem in baseball during those years. Accordingly, laying the blame on a few unpopular players and barring them from the Hall of Fame is not justice in any meaningful sense.

The problem facing Hall of Fame voters is that they are being asked to make decisions regarding steroid abuse based on incomplete information. This is ironic in a game where every pitch is now documented, recorded and coded. Nonetheless, the information that voters have regarding who used steroids, and perhaps more importantly, who did not, is spotty at best. It is based on the Mitchell Report, newspaper articles from the era, rumors and, in some cases, such as Lasorda's view of Mike Piazza, suspicions and gut feelings.

This makes it possible and necessary for Hall of Fame voters to be very subjective. Voters who never liked Rafael Palmeiro, for example, can claim that he only ran up Hall of Fame numbers after he started taking steroids, while those who disliked Jeff Bagwell can put more credence on the rumors of his steroid use than voters who liked Bagwell do. One result of this is that popularity and likability has become very important for the Hall of Fame. The primary victims of this are Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens. Bonds and Clemens both had Hall of Fame careers before they started steroid use, but they have become the players most identified with the steroid era, and are both likely to suffer because of this. However, it is significant that Bonds and Clemens were both very unpopular with the media for most of their careers. It seems obvious that if Bonds and Clemens had better public images and had spent more time giving reporters what they wanted, their Hall of Fame chances would be better.

There are few good options facing Hall of Fame voters. A blanket exclusion for known steroid users is a bad idea, because only some steroid users were caught. It is inevitable that even if Bonds, Sammy Sosa, McGwire and others of that ilk are kept out of the Hall of Fame, that somebody will get in who used steroids at some point. However, excluding people based on rumors and circumstantial evidence, such as putting on weight and muscle, is also unfair and may end up keeping innocent people out.

One tempting solution is to simply elect nobody from the steroid era. This is also a flawed approach, because it is patently unfair to people who excelled and who are almost universally believed to have not used steroids. Mariano Rivera and Greg Maddux are examples of that type of player.

Some perspective on the steroid era is also needed. Decades from now, it will be clear that steroid use was widespread in the ten years or so beginning around 1994, and that management never confronted this, and in some cases all but encouraged steroid use, during these years. Statements from old timers decrying steroid use may give way to more relevant statements from players and others from the era discussing the pressure to use steroids and the widespread notion that was the expectation for big leaguers. Fans too may have to confront the extent to which we were hesitant to recognize the problem.

The steroid era may become viewed as just another flawed period in baseball history, comparable perhaps to the first decades of the the twentieth century when gambling and betting on baseball was a serious problem that was not addressed until after the 1919 World Series, or to the 1950s-1970s when amphetamine use was widespread. Baseball fans and Hall of Fame voters have also had to wrestle with the fact that the biggest problem in baseball history, that changed the nature of competition on the big league level, gave some players an unfair advantage and was morally indefensible, was not substance abuse of any kind but more than half a century of apartheid in big league baseball.

We have a Hall of Fame filled with many players who played in a segregated era and said nothing, who either took amphetamines or looked the way while others did and probably even players who said nothing about the gambling and betting on baseball they saw around them. This reflects in imperfection and evolution of baseball. The steroid abusers reflected the imperfection of a more recent age; and keeping the best of them out would be a shortsighted attempt to erase a real and significant part of the game's history.

Lincoln Mitchell

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