

Let Steroids into the Hall of Fame

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Background on steroids In 1991, then-Commissioner of Baseball Fay Vincent added steroids to the list of banned substances under Major League Baseball's drug policy — although the league instituted no testing program at the time. The 1990s and early 2000s witnessed an explosion of home-run hitting, highlighted in 1998 by the home-run race between Sammy Sosa and Mark McGwire, both of whom used steroids. In the years since, Major League Baseball has cracked down on steroid use under scrutiny and pressure from Congress. Steroids, which increase muscle mass and endurance, can have dangerous side effects, including depression, mood swings, liver damage, and cancer.

When the Baseball Hall of Fame commemorates its 70th anniversary with an exhibition game in Cooperstown, N.Y., on Sunday, five of its members will play on the national field of dreams. At least two of them — Paul Molitor and Ferguson Jenkins — were busted in the 1980s for using cocaine. Molitor later said he was sure he wasn't the only player on the team using drugs.

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Narration

Given what we now know about baseball's drug habit, the remark sounds quaint. This week's report that Sammy Sosa tested positive for performance-enhancing drugs in 2003 is only the latest in a long string of revelations. Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, Alex Rodriguez, Manny Ramirez, Mark McGwire — what great players haven't been linked to drug use?

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Exemplification:
examples of athletes
who use drugs

Since the dawn of baseball, players have used whatever substances they believed would help them perform better, heal faster, or relax during a long and stressful season. As far back as 1889, the pitcher Pud Galvin ingested monkey testosterone. During Prohibition, Grover Cleveland Alexander, also a pitcher, calmed his nerves with federally banned alcohol, and no less an expert than Bill Veeck, who owned several major-league teams, said that Alexander was a better pitcher drunk than sober.

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Exemplification:
drugs athletes used
over the years

In 1961, during his home run race with Roger Maris, Mickey Mantle developed a

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sudden abscess that kept him on the bench. It came from an infected needle used by Max Jacobson, a quack who injected Mantle with a home-brew containing steroids and speed. In his autobiography, Hank Aaron admitted once taking an amphetamine tablet during a game. The Pirates' John Milner testified at a drug dealer's trial that his teammate, Willie Mays, kept "red juice," a liquid form of speed, in his locker. (Mays denied it.) After he retired, Sandy Koufax admitted that he was often "half high" on the mound from the drugs he took for his ailing left arm.

For decades, baseball beat writers — the Hall of Fame's designated electoral college — shielded the players from scrutiny. When the Internet (and exposés by two former ballplayers, Jim Bouton and Jose Canseco) allowed fans to see what was really happening, the baseball writers were revealed as dupes or stooges. In a rage, they formed a posse to drive the drug users out of the game.

But today's superstars have lawyers and a union. They know how to use the news media. And they have plenty of money. The only way to punish them is to deny them a place in Cooperstown. The punishment has already been visited on Mark McGwire, and many more are on deck.

This makes no sense. On any given day, the stands are packed with youngsters on Adderall and Ritalin (stimulants used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and college students who use Provigil (an anti-narcolepsy drug) as a study aid. The guy who sings the national anthem has probably taken a beta blocker to calm his stage fright. Like it or not, chemical enhancement is here to stay. And it is as much a part of the national game as \$5.50 hot dogs, free agency, and Tommy John elbow surgery.

Purists say that steroids alter the game. But since the Hall opened its doors, baseball has never stopped changing. Batters now wear body padding and helmets. The pitcher's mound has risen and fallen. Bats have more pop. Night games affect visibility. Players stay in shape in the off-season. Expansion has altered the game's geography. And its demography has changed beyond recognition. Babe Ruth never faced a black pitcher. As Chris Rock put it, Ruth's record consisted of "714 affirmative-action home runs." This doesn't diminish Ruth's accomplishment, but it puts it into context.

Statistics change, too. In 1908, Ed Walsh pitched 464 innings; in 2008, C. C. Sabathia led the majors with 253. So what? They were both first under the prevailing conditions of the time.

Despite these changes, or because of them, Americans continue to love baseball.

Fans will accept anything except the sense that they are being lied to. Chemical enhancement won't kill the game; it is the cover-up that could be fatal.

Thesis

Baseball, led by the Hall of Fame, needs to accept this and replace mythology and spin with realism and honesty. If everyone has access to the same drugs and training methods, and the fans are told what these are, then the field is level and fans will be able to interpret what they are seeing on the diamond and in the box scores. 11

The purists' last argument is that players' use of performance-enhancing drugs sets a bad example for young athletes. But baseball players aren't children; they are adults in a very stressful and competitive profession. If they want to use anabolic steroids, or human growth hormone or bull's testosterone, it should be up to them. As for children, the government can regulate their use of these substances as they do with tobacco, alcohol, and prescription medicine. 12

The Baseball Hall of Fame, which started as a local tourist attraction and a major-league publicity stunt, has since become a national field of dreams — and now, a battlefield. If it surrenders to the moralists who want to turn back the clock to some imagined golden era, and excommunicates the greatest stars anyone has ever seen, it will suffer the fate of all battlefields located on the wrong side of history. Obscurity. 13

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