

US: Baseball steroid report—reflection of a diseased social order

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The release Thursday of the so-called Mitchell report on the use of steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs in professional baseball has unleashed a torrent of media scandal-mongering and hypocrisy.

Most American newspapers gave the report banner headlines. Its author, former US senator, federal prosecutor and special envoy to Northern Ireland George Mitchell, had stressed in the report that, while there had been a “great deal of speculation” over which players would be named, he hoped that “the media and the public will keep that part of the report in context and will look beyond the individuals to the central conclusions.”

Of course, nearly every media outlet did the exact opposite, splashing the names and photographs of players identified as steroid users across their front pages. The *New York Times* even led its sports page with the headline “Naming names,” a phrase historically identified with the anti-communist witchhunts of the McCarthy era.

While 89 current and former major league players are named by Mitchell, the evidence gathered in his more than 400-page document—which took 20 months and cost \$25 million—consists largely of media reports, the admissions of steroid use by players who are already out of the game and allegations made by dubious informants. One is a former New York Mets’ clubhouse attendant, Kirk Radomski, who cooperated with the investigation as part of a plea bargain over his own conviction on illegal steroid distribution, and the other a former Yankees trainer, Brian McNamee, who acted similarly to avoid prosecution.

While Mitchell said he was not advocating individual punishment, there is something very reckless about this naming of names, with players finding themselves convicted in the court of public opinion without being afforded any real opportunity to defend themselves. While some, without doubt, did use these substances, others may find themselves caught up in the general accusations, with their reputations tarnished based on evidence that is scarcely probative.

While the media has whipped up a witchhunt atmosphere around this naming of names, the central finding of the report—that the use of performance-enhancing drug is endemic in professional baseball, present in all 30 teams—is undeniable.

President Bush weighed in on the subject Friday, telling

reporters that “steroids have sullied the game.”

Coming from the former co-owner of the Texas Rangers, Bush’s remark recalled nothing so much as the famous protest by Captain Renault in the film “Casablanca.” To paraphrase: “I’m shocked, shocked to find that steroid use is going on in the clubhouse!”

Bush continued by joining in the ubiquitous hand-wringing about the “message” that steroid use by major league baseball players sends to children. “I understand the impact that professional athletes can have on our nation’s youth,” he said. “I just urge those in the public spotlight, particularly athletes, to understand that when they violate their bodies, they’re sending a terrible signal to America’s youth.”

Of course, the dangers are real, particularly to the large numbers of high school age athletes who see performance-enhancing drugs as the short-cut to the big leagues. Mitchell’s report spells out the potential price to be paid for the use of these substances. Steroids users are at risk for “psychiatric problems, cardiovascular and liver damage, drastic changes to their reproductive systems, musculoskeletal injury, and other problems.” And for users of human growth hormone the risks include “cancer, harm to their reproductive health, cardiac and thyroid problems, and overgrowth of bone and connective tissue.”

But the use of these substances by major league players could not possibly have come as a surprise to anyone involved in the game. Home run records were falling at a rate totally out of sync with previous baseball history and athletes were being physically transformed, bulking up seemingly overnight.

Mitchell himself stressed that players who elected to take performance-enhancing drugs “did not act in a vacuum.”

“Everyone involved in baseball over the past two decades—Commissioners, club officials, the Players Association, and players—shares to some extent in the responsibility for the steroids era ... an environment developed in which illegal use became widespread,” the report states.

The reality is that the use of these drugs was not only known, but was either tacitly or directly encouraged under conditions in which baseball was coming under pressure from other sports, including football and basketball, and feared losing some of its market share, particularly in the wake of the 1994 strike. More

home runs was one way of getting the fans back into the ballparks.

The report added that players who do not use steroids or human growth hormone “are faced with the painful choice of either being placed at a competitive disadvantage or becoming illegal users themselves. No one should have to make that choice.”

Of course, steroid usage is not just baseball’s problem. It has plagued sports both in the US and internationally for nearly two decades, since Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson was stripped of his medals at the 1988 Summer Olympic Games for “doping.” Similar scandals have surfaced in football, the Tour de France cycling race, tennis and over a dozen other sports.

At the heart of this phenomenon is a more general crisis of a culture and society in which profit is king and fraud commonplace.

The influence exerted by the relentless striving at the top for greater personal wealth and the predominance of commercial interests in every field of human endeavor sucks everything and everyone into the vortex of the mad scramble for profits.

The *New York Times* reacted to the Mitchell report with an insipid editorial titled, “Say it ain’t so, Roger, Barry, and...” The implicit comparison of the allegations against Roger Clemmons, Barry Bonds and scores of other players with the “Black Sox” scandal of 1919 falls flat. Baseball has come a long way since the days of “Shoeless” Joe Jackson.

While there was never a “golden age” of baseball, the amount of money split between the eight Chicago teammates to fix the World Series would be regarded in professional baseball circles as a pittance. On the same day as the Mitchell report was released, it was announced that Alex Rodriguez had reached a 10-year deal to stay with the Yankees that could top \$314 million.

Such salaries are of course dwarfed by the profits raked in off the game by team owners and media conglomerates. Meanwhile massive amounts of public money are poured into the building of new stadiums for the privately owned teams—\$370 million for the Florida Marlins, officials in Miami announced this week—in which cheaper bleacher seats are eliminated for corporate sky-boxes, with attendance by corporate executives and their well-heeled clients written off as a business expense and tax break.

Yet public attention—as well as resentments and anger—is invariably directed against the players rather than the owners and the very nature of professional sports.

For the players themselves, the line separating careers offering massive financial rewards and a fall from grace—and back into the minor leagues—is exceedingly thin. Baseball, it is said, is a game of inches. The difference between a superstar and what is considered a mediocre player can be as little as five successful “at-bats” out of 100.

Highly gifted athletes, they find themselves turned into a combination of entrepreneur and saleable commodity, in which

everything must be done to maintain the competitive edge. At the same time, because of the way the game is elevated to an importance totally out of proportion to its intrinsic significance, the players find themselves cast as role models, placed under the enormous pressure of living lives under relentless media scrutiny.

They play through injuries and pain and, undoubtedly, many become convinced that the performance-enhancing substances offer the only way to hang on. Managers, club owners, agents and everyone else connected to the game have proven more than willing to look the other way as long as the players keep delivering the strikes and runs that generate profits.

The most serious maladies affecting America’s “national pastime,” will not be cured by Mitchell’s proposals for expanded drug-testing, a baseball “department of investigations” and lectures on the perils of steroids.

The intersection of professional athletics and the mass media have created an enormously profitable instrument for mass stupefaction. Millions are encouraged to live their lives vicariously through millionaire athletes, who are turned into popular icons, only to be demonized when caught in one or another inevitable scandal. These morality plays then become the means for diverting popular attention from the real crimes being carried out against working people both at home and abroad. This is the social importance of baseball to the ruling establishment, and why a state figure like Mitchell is employed in this investigation and why the president is compelled to pronounce on the matter and a congressional committee to convene hearings.

Of course, when Mitchell spoke of the “environment” that promoted the use of these drugs, he should have looked further a field than the major league clubhouses. The entire US economy has been on what amount to steroids for decades, the latest “performance-enhancing substance” consisting of subprime mortgages, which yielded massive fortunes for Wall Street’s elite, before taking their ever more terrible toll.

As for Mitchell’s warning that the use of these drugs “poses a serious threat to the integrity of the game,” such a threat deserves to be placed in the context of a government and ruling elite that has gutted the integrity of every democratic institution in America.

In the end, the question posed by the statements of distress and outrage over the Mitchell report comes down to: why should anyone expect baseball to be any different than the rest of capitalist society?



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