

Congress grills baseball star Roger Clemens

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Major League Baseball pitcher Roger Clemens testified before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform on Wednesday in a hearing characterized by hypocrisy and grandstanding. Throughout the proceedings there was an element of bullying that at times descended to the level of a witch-hunt.

The hearing saw Clemens aggressively grilled by members of the committee over allegations that he had taken performance-enhancing drugs. Initially named as a drug user in the 2007 Mitchell Report, which named more than 80 professional athletes suspected of doping, Clemens has consistently denied the accusations made against him.

His chief accuser, Brian McNamee, a one-time New York City policeman and former personal trainer for the athlete, has alleged that he injected Clemens with both Human Growth Hormone (HGH) and steroids a number of times between 1998 and 2001. McNamee agreed to collaborate with investigators in return for a promise that he would not be prosecuted. The two men testified together before the committee at Wednesday's hearing.

Whether or not Clemens has used banned substances, the amount of time and resources devoted by the US Congress to his case and that of other individual athletes is grossly out of proportion to the intrinsic significance of the issues involved.

One can only marvel that Congress has decided to place so much emphasis on uncovering Clemens' possible drug use, given the many political and corporate scandals of far greater import that the same congressmen, of both parties, have failed to seriously investigate.

Clemens was questioned by committee members on Wednesday with a vigor and hostility which is rarely seen in a congressional hearing. In the full glare of a media frenzy, he was treated as a hostile witness,

berated by at one point by Congressman Elijah Cummings (Democrat of Maryland) and all but accused of committing perjury. "Mr. Clemens," the congressman intoned, "once again I remind you, you are under oath."

There could hardly be a more glaring difference between the third degree given to Clemens, whose actions have little significance for the lives of the vast majority of the US population, and the treatment, deferential to the point of cravenness, routinely given to Bush administration officials and corporate big wigs who appear before Congress.

No such aggressive questioning has been seen in the sporadic and largely ceremonial hearings on issues such as 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Abu Ghraib, secret CIA prisons, torture at Guantanamo, illegal government spying, Hurricane Katrina and corporate corruption scandals that have involved the theft of billions of dollars.

Committee Chairman Henry Waxman, a California Democrat, opened Wednesday's hearings by charging Clemens with lying in an earlier deposition. "During his deposition," Waxman said, "he made statements that we know are untrue. And he made them with the same earnestness that many of the Committee members observed in person when he visited your offices."

Waxman produced no substantive evidence to back up his charge, relying instead on "he said, she said" arguments and differing accounts concerning the use of HGH by Clemens' wife.

It appeared that Waxman and others were intent on extracting from Clemens an admission, or at least a statement of contrition. Hanging over the hearing room was the knowledge that Clemens faced the possibility of being charged with perjury, a felony that carries a punishment of up to 5 years in prison. The threat of potential criminal prosecution was personified by the presence at the hearing of Internal Revenue Service

Special Agent Jeff Novitsky and FBI officials who are currently going after Major League star Barry Bonds on perjury charges.

Clemens, for his part, defended himself in his opening statement, saying, “I have been accused of doing something that I did not do. I have been asked to prove that I did not do it. How in the world can I prove a negative? No matter what we discuss here today, I am never going to have my name restored. I know that a lot of people want me to say that I have taken steroids and be done with it. But I cannot in good conscience admit to doing something that I did not do, even if it would be easier to do so.”

When it came time to make his own statement, the accuser, McNamee, reiterated his previous charges against Clemens and added to them, saying, “I now believe that the number of times I injected Roger Clemens and Chuck Knoblauch was actually greater than I initially stated.” McNamee went on to say he had recently handed over to federal investigators syringes that he claimed to have used to inject Clemens with performance enhancing drugs in 2001.

The revelation by McNamee that he had previously withheld such evidence, in violation of his proffer to authorities, could open him up to criminal sanctions. But the FBI has said he will suffer no legal consequences.

During heated questioning of Clemens, the athlete’s attorney, Lanny Barber, rose to his feet and asked to speak on behalf of his client. Waxman refused, saying, “I’m sorry, the rules don’t provide for it.”

Rather than truly getting to the bottom of drug use in professional sports and combating the lure of steroids and other dangerous substances among young athletes—the avowed purpose of the baseball hearings—the committee’s actions have served only to divert attention from an unpopular war in Iraq, an unprecedented assault on democratic rights, and an economic crisis that has already seen record home foreclosures. At the same time, the politicians’ pursuit of individual athletes distracts from the social issues underlying the baseball scandal itself.

The reality is that professional athletes, no matter how many millions they are paid, are more the victims than the perpetrators in the doping scandal. The spread of performance-enhancing drugs in professional baseball occurred in a definite context. Particularly

after the 1994 players’ strike, the owners either directly or tacitly encouraged the use of drugs to produce more home runs and lure fans back into the ball parks.

This particular aspect of professional sports, moreover, cannot be separated from the general environment that prevails in a pursuit that, like all other facets of American life, is entirely dominated by the influence of corporate wealth and the official worship of money and power.

It is not surprising that certain athletes turn to doping as a means to gain an advantage in this high-pressure environment and navigate the thin tightrope that separates wealth and stardom from failure and obscurity.

Professional baseball and its recent scandals do not exist in a vacuum, but form one part of a broader culture in which the personal accumulation of vast amounts of wealth by even the most reckless and parasitic methods is considered the worthiest of ambitions. These are the conditions under which professional baseball players perform, and these are the pressures to which they respond.



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