

Major League Baseball suspends Ryan Braun for using steroids

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Ryan Braun, the 2011 National League Most Valuable Player, was suspended by Major League Baseball (MLB) for the remainder of the season (65 games) for using performance-enhancing drugs.

Braun, Yankee star Alex Rodriguez and more than a dozen other players have been targeted by MLB following reports by the *Miami New Times* in January that they had been connected with Biogenesis of America, a now closed “anti-aging” clinic.

Porter Fisher, a disgruntled ex-employee of Biogenesis, had provided Biogenesis records to the *Times* which described “the firm’s real business: selling performance-enhancing drugs.” Among its customers were about 20 MLB players.

In March 2013, MLB sued six people connected to the clinic, accusing them of damaging the sport by providing banned substances to its players. It is also believed that MLB was able to obtain additional records and verifying material from many of these six people including its owner, Tony Bosch, by leveraging this lawsuit to exact more incriminating information.

Braun is among several prominent major leaguers who have been linked to Biogenesis. Rodriguez, Melky Cabrera of the Toronto Blue Jays and four players on last week’s All-Star Game rosters—Everth Cabrera, Bartolo Colon, Nelson Cruz and Jhonny Peralta—were also reportedly connected to the clinic.

These players have all denied any wrongdoing, but as MLB’s investigation appears to be nearing its end, other suspensions and punishments are expected to be announced soon.

Any such actions would be subject to appeals and potential arbitration. In Braun’s case, however, he decided to forgo his appeal, accepting what would appear to be baseball’s version of a plea bargain.

Braun had been accused in October 2011, the season

he was named MVP, for having tested positive for elevated levels of testosterone after a playoff game. Ultimately, however, an arbitrator sided with Braun’s argument that the test sample had been improperly handled and voided the earlier suspension he would have had to serve.

Braun released a statement accepting his suspension. “As I have acknowledged in the past, I am not perfect,” he wrote. “I realize now that I have made some mistakes. I am willing to accept the consequences of those actions. This situation has taken a toll on me and my entire family, and it has been a distraction to my teammates and the Brewers’ organization.”

Braun, who signed a contract extension in 2011, is guaranteed 145 million dollars through the 2020 season. He will forfeit about four million dollars for the period covering his suspension.

Performance enhancing drugs have been an ongoing issue not only in baseball but throughout a wide range of other professional sports around the world. Three of the top track sprinters in the world, including the American Tyson Gay, recently revealed they had tested positive for banned substances, the latest in a long line of doping violations in that sport. The Tour de France, professional cycling’s showcase event, ended last week under a cloud of suspicion because of revelations this year of an elaborate doping program conducted over several years by Lance Armstrong, who won the Tour seven times.

In Major League Baseball it had been an open secret for many years that players were using steroids and similar performance enhancing drugs. Their use had been either tacitly or directly encouraged, particularly 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. Using steroids to inflate the number of home runs was one way of attracting fans back into the ballparks.

Although MLB “banned” steroids in 1991, it did not begin testing until after the 2003 season. In 2002 former Major Leaguer Ken Caminiti revealed that he won the 1996 National League MVP award while on steroids. In 2003 pitcher David Wells claimed that “25 to 40 percent of all Major Leaguers are juiced.” Former all-star Jose Conseco in 2005 published his tell-all book “Juiced” in which he claimed that as many as 80 percent of players used steroids and that he had done so for his entire career.

Conseco was called before congress in 2005, which was then targeting individual prominent players for questioning about their alleged steroid use. In his statement Conseco explained why professional athletes take steroids:

“Why did I take steroids? The answer is simple. Because myself and others had no choice if we wanted to continue playing. Because MLB did nothing to take it out of the sport....

“Baseball owners and the players union have been very much aware of the undeniable fact that as a nation we will do anything to win. They turned a blind eye to the clear evidence of steroid use in baseball. Why? Because it sold tickets and resurrected a game that had recently suffered a black eye from a player strike [in 1994]. The result was an intentional act by baseball to promote, condone and encourage the players to do whatever they had to do to win games, bring back the fans, and answer the bottom line. Salaries went up, revenue increased and owners got richer. But this comes with a cost.”

This cost that Canseco referred to includes serious medical risks for the players themselves: liver damage, mood swings, depression, aggression, heart disease and cancer.

For professional athletes, a very fine line separates the dizzy heights of stardom from failure and impoverishment. Enormous amounts of money are promised to the athletes who perform well. The athletes who do not perform well are abandoned and discarded, sometimes left with disabling and disfiguring medical conditions as the only reward for their efforts.

Undoubtedly many players have become convinced that using performance-enhancing substances offers the

best pathway to success and financial security. Owners, coaches, agents and everyone else connected to the game have proven more than willing to look the other way as long as profits are up.

In the final analysis, the fact that a significant number of top athletes in the US feel compelled to endanger themselves by using such drugs points to the huge pressures to which they are subjected: the unquenchable thirst of the owners for greater and greater profits, the “winning-is-everything” culture promoted incessantly by the media, and the increasing role of professional sports as “bread and circuses” in a period of deep political and social reaction all down the line.



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