

The Alex Rodriguez affair

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A great deal of hypocrisy surrounds the season-long exclusion of professional baseball player Alex Rodriguez for allegedly using banned performance-enhancing drugs (PED). The 38-year-old third baseman, once celebrated as the game's greatest star and lavishly paid for it, has been turned into a pariah, with the media and Major League Baseball (MLB) denouncing him for destroying the "integrity of the game."

Rodriguez may very well be guilty of the charges against him. The *World Socialist Web Site* does not offer a moral amnesty to star athletes who succumb to the pressures and turn to cheating. However, there are far more fundamental issues involved in the case of Rodriguez that go to the character of professional sports under contemporary capitalism and the entrenched corruption that affects virtually every aspect of American society.

The domination of professional sports by massive corporations and representatives of the US plutocracy, who own the teams, and the sheer scale of the money in play in one way or another befouls virtually everyone involved. The Rodriguez affair is not simply, as baseball Commissioner Bud Selig and countless sports commentators have sanctimoniously claimed, the tale of a talented athlete who cheated for fame and money.

The demonization of Rodriguez is being used to conceal how the drive for profit by team owners, investors and the corporate media has degraded the character of professional baseball. In return for multi-million-dollar contracts, the owners demand a level of performance over a brutally long season—often financially punishing those who succumb to injury or slump—that places immense pressure on the players to turn to performance enhancing drugs.

The New York Yankees, who signed Rodriguez to a 10-year \$275 million contract in 2007, have made no secret that they would like to unload the salary of the

player, who is nearing the end of his career and no longer producing as he did earlier on. Team owners stand to save \$30 million from his suspension next season, and the Yankees are expected to move to void the remainder of his contract, which obligates them to pay Rodriguez \$61 million for the 2015 and 2016 seasons.

MLB arbitrator Fredric Horowitz hit Rodriguez with a 162-game ban—the longest punishment for alleged doping in the league's history—based on accusations not only of banned substance use, but also for allegedly impeding the MLB investigation of Biogenesis, an "anti-aging" clinic in Coral Gables, Florida. Baseball officials say the clinic provided Rodriguez and other ball players with testosterone injections, human growth hormones and other banned drugs.

Unlike the other 20 players caught up in the investigation, who accepted suspensions of 50 to 65 days last season, Rodriguez appealed his original 211-game suspension. At least part of the venom directed against him seems to stem from his attempt to mount a legal defense, including his demand that Commissioner Selig testify at the arbitration hearing on the investigation. Rodriguez's lawyers maintain that Selig and MLB (i.e., the owners) relied on known criminals and \$125,000 payoffs to obtain stolen information as part of their probe.

After the arbitrator's decision, Rodriguez warned about its implications for other players, saying, "This injustice is MLB's first step toward abolishing guaranteed contracts in the 2016 bargaining round, instituting lifetime bans for single violations of drug policy, and further insulating its corrupt investigative program from any variety of defense by accused players, or any variety of objective review."

This appears to have been verified by a *New York Times* article Wednesday noting that Horowitz's decision set a precedent for Major League Baseball's

use of the so-called “just cause” section in its Joint Drug Agreement with the Players Association and provided “a new standard for the penalties the commissioner can mete out for behavior like Rodriguez’s.”

Raised by a single mother in a working class neighborhood of Miami, Rodriguez, by his junior year in high school, showed such great baseball talent that he was already projected to be the first player drafted by MLB once he completed high school. Of his pursuit to succeed, Rodriguez said, “I was in a full sprint to make sure my mother never worked again.”

Upon graduating high school in 1993, Rodriguez was indeed the first player drafted. He debuted in the Major Leagues in 1994, only the third 18-year-old to do so since 1900. During his 19-year career, he has been selected to play in the All Star game twelve times and named American League Most Valuable Player three times. He has had more seasons with 100 or more RBIs (runs batted in) than any other player.

In describing Rodriguez’s single-minded focus on baseball, his former wife Cynthia said, “Everything was about growing him as a baseball player. He wasn’t learning anything but how to hit the fastball... What happens to everything else? It’s stunted, completely.”

Rodriguez was traded to the New York Yankees in 2004 and named the American League MVP in both 2005 and 2007, the same year the Yankees signed him to a new ten-year \$275 million contract that included multimillion-dollar incentives for breaking the home run records of Willie Mays (660), Babe Ruth (714), Hank Aaron (755) and Barry Bonds (762).

The anticipated revenue that would be generated from increased attendance, television ratings and merchandising as Rodriguez approached these records was expected to greatly exceed the cost of his contract. The Yankees owners hoped to cash in on Rodriguez, the “clean” home run king, as opposed to Barry Bonds, who was tainted by the steroid scandal.

In February 2009, after first denying it, Rodriguez admitted that he had used drugs “under enormous pressure to perform” while he was with the Texas Rangers between 2001 and 2003. His stock remained high during the 2009 season, when his 30 home runs and clutch post-season hitting led the Yankees to a World Series championship. It soon plunged, however, as his output and post-season play declined over the last

four years due to age and injury.

All of the players in the Biogenesis case had for several years repeatedly passed what MLB had always described as a very aggressive drug testing policy. This policy was implemented in response to what had become known as the “steroid era” of baseball (1995-2005). This era began in the aftermath of the 232-day strike by players in 1994, the longest in baseball history, which resulted in the only time the World Series was cancelled.

The owners tacitly promoted the use of steroids to inflate the number of home runs in order to attract fans back to the ballparks following the strike. In the thirty-year period prior to the strike, only three players had hit 50 or more home runs in a season. After the strike, players hitting 50 or more home runs became almost commonplace.

In 2005, Congress began an investigation of steroid use in baseball, targeting and subpoenaing several prominent players, including former All-Star Jose Canseco, who had written the book *Juiced*, in which he claimed that up to 80 percent of Major League players were on steroids and that he had taken them during his entire career.

In explaining to the congressional panel why he took steroids, Canseco stated, “The answer is simple. 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. 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.”



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