



Turning a Blind Eye

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There is something curiously hypnotic about watching a homerun sail over the heads of befuddled outfielders and into a throng of crazed fans. Everything about the act, from the crack of the bat, to the deliberate homerun trot of the slugger, to the look of resignation on the face of the disgraced pitcher, fills a stadium with excitement. Perhaps the most important aspect of the homerun is its ability to elevate the status of the player hitting it. In a game that is supposed to be based on teamwork, the homerun allows a single player to transcend the team dynamic and become the king of the ballpark for a few brief moments. The homerun has also been of immeasurable cultural and historical relevance to the game; it was instrumental in both cementing baseball's status as the national pastime in the 1920's and resurrecting it from a premature death in the 1990's. Babe Ruth's mastery of the long ball ushered in a new age for baseball in which the men on the field were no longer mortals, but had ascended to the level of mythic heroes who put the hopes and dreams of entire communities on their shoulders. However, by the time of the strike shortened season of 1994, baseball had lost much of its innocence and many people viewed it as a purely capitalist endeavor in which terms like "labor" and "management" were as common as "stolen base" and "homerun." Baseball needed to recapture the brilliance of the early 20th century, in which baseball players with seemingly superhuman abilities transfixed the whole nation. The implicit and explicit pressure put on baseball players to perform in the post-strike era coincided with the increased use of performance

enhancing drugs like anabolic *steroids* and human growth hormones (1). As power numbers began to increase, fans returned to the stadiums, and owners and players laced their pockets with the increased profits. Owners saw no pressing need to tighten their drug testing policies, lest their business begin to suffer. By the time Sammy Sosa and Mark McGwire began chasing Roger Maris' single season homerun record in 1998, memories of the strike seemed to fade and were replaced with a palpable sense of joy and optimism. Baseball had returned in fine form, and no one in the United States bothered to ask any uncomfortable questions. Despite the current outrage surrounding *steroid* abuse in professional sports, it was this very same abuse, combined with implicit acceptance from both MLB owners and fans that allowed baseball to recover from its mid-1990's crisis and reemerge as the national pastime.

To truly understand the need for chemically induced greatness in baseball, it is necessary to understand the origins of the nation's love affair with the power hitter. In baseball's earliest days, it was a game that revolved around speed and strategy. The homerun was not the spectacle it is now, and ball games were won with solid base hits and sound fundamentals. In fact, the homerun was so insignificant that prior to Babe Ruth, the single season homerun record holder was Ned Williamson, with 27 homeruns. In 1920, Babe Ruth's first full season with the New York Yankees, he hit 54 homeruns, and essentially redefined the way the game was played ([Babe Ruth Statistics](#)). A slugger could now change the trajectory of a game with one swing. A three run lead did not mean much if the bases were loaded and a formidable player like Babe Ruth was in the on-deck circle. Ruth, or the newly appointed "Sultan of Swat", was a larger than life figure who was able to dominate the game in a way that made the mere mortals in the

stands watch with wonder (2). Babe Ruth was a perfect example of American exceptionalism and each tape-measure homerun he hit was yet another symbol of the nation's limitless potential. Babe Ruth and the legend that was spun around him made baseball fans think that anything was possible. As Kal Wagenheim states, "Ruth was a mythmaker's dream...He appealed to a deeply rooted American yearning for the definitive climax: clean, quick, unarguable" (4). In many ways, the legend of Babe Ruth was a curse to power hitters who followed him. Even when Ruth's records were broken, the new records were challenged by baseball purists who griped that seasons were now longer, stadiums were smaller, and pitchers were worse. In reality, the legend of Babe Ruth was greater than the man himself, and subsequent generations of ballplayers had no hope of ever catching up to it. This sad, but true fact may be one of the catalysts for the *steroid* crisis that followed over eighty years after Ruth's MLB debut.

The *steroid* abuse in the 1990's did not only happen because ball players were chasing a legend. It was also directly tied to the changing dynamics of the game itself. Baseball has always been and will always be a business, but the sheer size and profitability of this business has evolved considerably in the years since Babe Ruth's retirement. During the late 19th century and early 20th century, baseball was a spectator sport that drew its revenue from fans buying tickets to watch baseball games. The lack of radio and television coverage limited the way in which people could interact with the game in both a literal and commercial sense. Owners were initially concerned that licensing their games to radio stations would keep people from attending games and would therefore reduce their profits (Hauptert). The owners were sorely mistaken, and the broadcast of baseball games on the radio and then on television, drastically increased the

commercial possibilities of America's pastime. Soon, baseball revenue started to expand well beyond ticket sales and started to come from a wide variety of mass media outlets. As Michael J. Hauptert states, "Many tertiary industries have grown around the demand for baseball, and sports in general, including the sports magazine trade, dedicated sports television and radio stations, tour companies specializing in sports trips, and an active memorabilia industry." An interesting side effect of this business growth was the realization by players that they were vital to the profitability of the industry and should be treated as such. Star power was now a bankable asset and the headlines in the sports sections of newspapers were just as likely to be about a contract dispute or huge free agent signing than about a walk off homerun or no hitter. With salaries and corporate profits rising to stratospheric levels, the need to preserve the popularity and commercial viability of the game became essential.

By the 1994 strike shortened season, the capitalistic nature of baseball had grown to the point that owners and players were locked in a fierce labor dispute. The actual details surrounding the contract negotiations are not as important as the fact that they focused almost solely on money and the ability of both the players and owners to maximize their respective salaries and revenues. Owners wanted to impose a salary cap to curtail the rising cost of running a baseball team and baseball players were opposed to such a move because it would limit their ability to sign massive long-term contracts. The battle played out over several months and the only result was the loss of public faith. In earlier labor disputes, the public often sided with the players, but in 1994, the blame seemed to be equally distributed between the players and owners. As Tony Gwynn stated, "They just looked at us and the owners as millionaires fighting with billionaires.

You couldn't talk to them, but you couldn't blame them, either. When we walked out, we lost them and it took a good five years to even think we could get them back" (Bryant 46). In other words, when the players finally decided to strike, America simply decided that baseball in its entirety was in the wrong. The fact that the public had not acquitted either side is important in establishing that both the owners and players had a vested interest in making sure that the post-strike era gave the fans a reason to return to the ballparks. Baseball needed a renaissance on the level of Ruth's first season with the Yankees, or a performance like that of Roy Hobbes from The Natural, to resurrect itself from the abyss.

The connection between the 1994 strike and *steroid* use can be viewed as a simple issue of marketing. In the years prior to the strike, players and owners had lost sight of branding their sport, and the result was a massive industry that had managed to disillusion its primary consumers. As Howard Bryant writes, "Baseball had a century-old advantage over every other sport, a historical hold on the public that gave the sport emotional, nostalgic, even familial connection to the fans...yet it was woefully inept at promoting itself" (70). The era of nostalgia and emotion needed to be recaptured, and the ideal way to accomplish this was to create a sense of awe and wonderment in the fan base. With this in mind, both players and owners put a premium on performance. Statistical analysis and other high-level mathematical methods were introduced to the game and a player's performance was quantified using dozens of different metrics. Hand eye coordination and a relatively fit body were no longer the only ingredients needed to succeed. Baseball had long avoided the taint of *steroid* abuse because "...of its reputation as a skill sport instead of one that relied primarily on brute force" (Bryant 91), but with

the sport in danger of becoming irrelevant to the public, players began muscling up. At first, the change in the average player's body proportions was the result of weight training and legal supplements like creatine. One of the first players to publicly use creatine was Brady Anderson, a fairly mediocre leadoff hitter for the Baltimore Orioles, who prior to 1996, had never hit more than 21 homeruns in a full season (Brady Anderson Statistics). After starting a regimen of intense weight training and creatine use, Anderson experienced explosive power that allowed him to hit 50 homeruns in the 1996 season. The creatine that Anderson was using allowed his body to regenerate adenosine triphosphate (ATP) at a higher rate, allowing his muscles to recover faster and expend more energy per unit time (Bryant 93). Although creatine was not specifically banned by the MLB prior to the 1996 season, it was relegated to bodybuilding and marathon racing. However, after Anderson's astonishing year, MLB players realized that chemical solutions could allow them to increase their offensive output. This could be described as the informal start of the *steroid* era, as players began searching for even better chemical means of enhancing their performance.

The minute that creatine emerged as an effective and publicly tolerated supplement, players began experimenting with other more potent and illegal drugs. The baseball drug testing policy seemed ideal for players who wanted to challenge Congress' 1990 ban on *steroid* sales and consumption (Bryant 90). Because *steroids* were hardly an issue in Major League Baseball before the post-strike era, the MLB did not even test for them, and very few minor league systems tested for them either. Baseball players who wanted to have a Brady Anderson style renaissance in their game had nothing to fear except the possible health side effects. Even these fears were mitigated by silent *steroids*

spokesmen like Jose Canseco, who literally extolled the virtues of using *steroids* in moderation. In his confessional biography, entitled “Juiced,” Canseco writes, “Think of steroids like alcohol: one or two drinks a day is fine, but if you sit there are knock down twenty drinks a day, your liver is going to turn on you” (181). These very same rationalizations were used by Canseco to talk to young players in the clubhouse. In an environment in which veteran players were already having success with *steroids*, and there was no effective doping policy in place, it was only logical that young players looking for an edge began using banned substances. Even wholesome role models like Mark McGwire, who would not look out of place on a Wheaties box (a product that resides in the homes of many children all across America), supposedly took advantage of chemical enhancement (3). As Canseco writes, “That’s right: After batting practice or right before the game, Mark and I would duck into a stall in the men’s room, load up our syringes, and inject ourselves” (8). It is unclear to what extent the owners participated in the active use of *steroids*, but it is undeniable that at the very least, they implicitly approved its use by turning a blind eye. Canseco asks sarcastically, “Is it all that secret when the owners of the game put out the word that they want home runs and excitement, making sure that everyone... understands that whatever it is that players are doing to become superhuman, they sure ought to keep it up?” (9). Owners can attempt to deny their culpability, but the correlation between the shocking increase in power numbers in the mid 1990’s and skyrocketing revenue tell a different tale.

In the months since the Mitchell Report’s release, the media has been filled with articles and interviews indicating that MLB owners are in full support of a strict drug testing policy that specifically targets performance-enhancing compounds. However, this

delayed reaction seems incredibly disingenuous considering that the owners spent the previous decade reaping the financial windfall of increased offensive output. The numbers tell the tale. In 1990, the top ten homerun hitters and run producers in Major League Baseball hit a combined total of 371 homeruns and drove in 1134 RBIs respectively. By 1999, the top ten homerun hitters and run producers put together 443 homeruns and 1403 RBIs respectively (Gillette 25). This chemically fueled increase in performance was financially beneficial to both owners and players. Over the course of the 1990s, the average player salary (adjusted for inflation) rose from \$810,953 to \$1,864,385 and during an almost identical period, revenue from television broadcasts rose from \$465,000,000 to \$1,310,000,000 (Hauptert). With attendance numbers and television revenue skyrocketing, there was really no reason for the owners to question the growing *steroid* culture in the clubrooms. Even if the owners were not actively encouraging *steroid* use, they were certainly giving tacit approval by allowing baseball's lax drug testing policy to stand. This is clearly evidenced by baseball's response, or lack of response, to a local reporter's discovery that Mark McGwire was using a testosterone-boosting drug called androstenedione during his historic 1998 season. The drug was technically not illegal and was only banned seven years later in 2005, but the discovery should have at least prompted baseball officials to take a closer look at the supplements that players were using. Instead, acting commissioner Bud Selig refused to take any action against McGwire, lest his record setting 1998 season be smeared by scandal (Fainaru-Wada 14). As Fainaru-Wada writes, "Fans loved the long ball; crowds were packing the parks; the rancor of the strike was being forgotten; McGwire and Sosa were bringing baseball back from oblivion's edge" (14). Essentially, players were enjoying the

benefits of *steroids* and owners had absolutely no financial or ethical incentive to intervene.

The intersection between player irresponsibility, owner greed, and fan indifference was glaringly obvious during the 1998 season in which Sammy Sosa and Mark McGwire were locked in a season long chase to break Roger Maris' single-season homerun record. The legend of Babe Ruth weighed heavily on baseball in the years following the 1994 strike. In order for baseball to shed its negative image, it needed a soul-lifting spectacle like Babe Ruth to capture the attention of the masses. Increased offense was definitely doing part of the job, but the homeruns needed to be part of a compelling narrative to give them a sense of gravitas. The McGwire/Sosa chase provided this narrative. Mark McGwire was the friendly, redheaded, giant whose adoration of his son captured the hearts of Americans. Sammy Sosa was the God-loving, charismatic Dominican import who charmed the nation with his unbridled enthusiasm. Both of these players seemed like ideal candidates to assume that mantle (no Micky Mantle pun intended) that Roger Maris occupied for 37 years (4). More importantly, they were appealing enough for rumors of their *steroid* use to be irrelevant. Jose Canseco had already made not-so-public comments about McGwire's history of *steroid* use and reporters had already questioned his use of androstenedione. Sosa was also not free of scrutiny as many observers questioned how he managed to redefine his body and power numbers after nine major league seasons as a relatively slim and compact man (Bryant 136). However, despite these concerns, everyone bought into the spectacle. For the first time in the history of the MLB, multiple teams averaged 40,000 attendees per game, and broadcast rights were being sold to international markets in East Asia (Bryant 153). In the

absence of a smoking gun, everyone in America was content to give the dueling sluggers a pass and allow them to continue their summer of greatness. As Bryant points out, “The two sluggers had undone years of enmity, creating a positive atmosphere around baseball that would stand for years.” (137). Quite simply put, despite growing concerns about performance enhancing drugs, the entire baseball machine, which included players, fans, owners, and the press, unconsciously colluded to keep the attention on balls sailing out of stadiums and not on syringes in locker rooms.

The world of baseball has changed since 1998. Although business continues to boom, both owners and some of the greatest players in the league have been embarrassed by revelations of rampant *steroid* use. Images of icons like Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa testifying before Congress have replaced images of their historic chase of Roger Maris’ record in America’s collective consciousness. The most disturbing aspect of these revelations is not that America’s favorite athletes were probably cheating, but that this cheating was both accepted and essential to baseball’s post-strike resurgence. The blame for the *steroid*-era in baseball cannot be laid at any one person or institution’s doorstep. By 1994, years of labor strife between the players and owners had created a toxic atmosphere that infected the game and its fans. Instead of spirited competition on the field, the average fan was treated to legal jousting between millionaires and billionaires. The players and owners had a lot to make up for and needed to tap into the magic that Babe Ruth brought to the ballpark seven decades earlier. Unfortunately, the Babe was no longer around and his legend proved elusive. Science had not figured out a way to clone the Babe, but it had figured out a way to artificially tap into his physical power. It was almost as if *steroids* were dropped into the middle of a perfect storm. Baseball players

came back from the strike chasing massive multi-year contracts and endorsement deals, owners were deeply invested in making sure that Americans began consuming the game again, and fans were thirsting for demonstrations of excellence on the field that would remind them of baseball's long forgotten golden era. *Steroids* were the answer to all of these concerns and wound up saving a game that was on the verge of dying. The anti-*steroid* movement that has followed the release of the Mitchell Report is merely a ten-year delayed response to a problem that was too profitable to tamper with. If the Ruth era was symbolic of an innocent and growing nation that was looking for magic, the *steroid* era was a symbol of a capitalistic and morally ambiguous nation that was looking for instant gratification (5).

Appendix

1. *Italicise*. I used this every time the word “steroid” came up. This allows the reader to casually skim over the word, making him/her casually ignore it, just like people ignored the steroid issue during the 1990’s.
2. *Antomasia*. I used this to show how influential Babe Ruth was as an emerging power-hitter.
3. *Parenthetical*. I used this to emphasize a sarcastic afterthought.
4. *Humor*. I specifically used baseball humor to allow the reader to chuckle and take a break from the seriousness of the paper for less than a sentence.
5. *Antithesis*. I used this to underline my point that the improved performance resulting from steroid use was not as special as Babe Ruth’s natural talent, but that it was necessary for reviving baseball after the 1994 season shortened strike.

This paper uses a variety of rhetorical devices in order to show that steroids were technically responsible for rescuing the game of baseball. The main problem with this paper was finding a way to combine historical information, emotional editorializing, and statistical analysis into a cohesive argument. The paper begins with a general discussion of baseball and the reasons why its most cherished fan experience is the homerun. I

establish Babe Ruth as the archetype for the heroic homerun hitter and suggest that in his absence, baseball slowly moved away from the sense of magic and excitement that he brought to the game. I give a concise description of the cultural and monetary trends that led to the strike of 1994 and suggest that baseball was in such a serious crisis that it needed to resurrect the spirit of the Babe in order to win fans back. The rest of the paper is a very tight statistical and factual analysis that uses arguments of facts/reason to try to establish a positive correlation between steroid abuse, increased offensive output, and increased revenue. In order to make my deeper point about steroids being tacitly approved by owners and casually accepted by fans, I needed to weave in anecdotal evidence provided by Jose Canseco and call upon specific examples of owner indifference. My paper ends with an acknowledgement that our current outrage over steroid abuse is disingenuous considering that virtually everyone involved in baseball in the 1990's either implicitly or explicitly condoned it. Essentially, my paper is an argument of the heart that takes the form of a factual narrative.

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