

8-28-1998

Sport, the Asterisk, and PEDs

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Sport, the Asterisk, and PEDs" (1998). *On Sport and Society*. 494.

<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/494>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
AUGUST 28, 1998

The Ghost of Ford Frick has been seen lurking around the baseball diamonds these days ready to bestow an asterisk on some record setting player. Urged on by his fellow members of the fourth estate the Ghost of Frick may visit us again with an abomination on the order of his asterisk of 1961. To do so today would make no more sense than it did then.

Baseball Commissioner Ford Frick said that if Roger Maris broke Babe Ruth's record in a 162 game season, the record should carry an asterisk as Ruth set the single season home run record in a 154 game season. There never really was an asterisk in the record books and of course it was a ludicrous pronouncement by Frick.

Now there are reporters suggesting that if Mark McGwire, breaks the home run record there should be an asterisk because McGwire is using a testosterone enhancing drug, androstenedione. One wonders if the same argument applies to Sammy Sosa and many other players who are using creatine, an energy supplement that builds muscle mass.

It might also be important to know if the pitchers are using either of these drugs, and if this would negate or multiply the effects on home run hitting.

Androstenedione is banned by the International Olympic Committee, the National Football League, and the NCAA. It is considered an anabolic steroid by the IOC and the side effects of the testosterone production are considered potentially dangerous. It can increase plasma testosterone levels by as much as 237% and peak levels may remain elevated for up to three hours.

As for Creatine, which is a much more popular "energy supplement" among athletes worldwide and is used by large numbers of baseball players it is legal and has not been banned by the IOC, NFL, or NCAA. However this week the Italian Olympic Committee drug enforcer Ugo Longo reported to his bosses that creatine should be banned. His logic is that it is widely used, its long-term effects are not known but suspect, and it significantly increases muscle mass and therefore is tantamount to doping.

As to availability, there are over 450 sites on the web, many of

them are commercial ventures, where you can purchase andro. Creatine too is available on the web at discount prices and delivery to your door is guaranteed. Creatine commercials appear daily on ESPN.

In America, this is as it should be. This is a society where there is a drug for all reasons, seasons, and ailments. Drugs cure everything from headaches to depression, enhance performance from the board room to the bedroom, or just make you feel better. "Better living through chemistry" was a marketing slogan for Dupont but it came to have a much wider meaning in the counter-culture of the Sixties. Performance enhancement is also promised from a variety of other sources such as the Breakfast of Champions which was the first such product peddled to me as a child.

In the decade of the Fifties it was uppers, bennies, speed, and a raft of other little goodies that flooded suburbia to help everyone get through four o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon. In the Sixties LSD promised mind expansion, new insights, and spiritual enhancement. A veritable plethora of pharmaceuticals were spread before a generation seeking to break the bonds of tradition and get in touch with themselves.

And all the while the general public was bombarded on television, radio and in the print media, as well as other entertainments of mass culture, with messages about the miracles, cures and relief that some drug or another would bring. Commonplace use of nicotine, caffeine, and alcohol, along with assorted uppers and downers were, and still are, a given in American society. There are advertising messages about how to gear up or wind down delivered in the most glamorous of packages.

In the athletic world there was little difference. Athletes endorsed cigarettes, chewing tobacco, and beer. Today we see Nolan Ryan reminding us of his fastball and telling us how to minimize the pain and stiffness that follow a good workout. Pete Rose told us with a wink and a nod about the "greenies" that filled the locker rooms of baseball in the seventies. Even the great Babe Ruth indulged in massive use of a drug, and it was illegal during much of his career. To hear some of the legendary stories about the great hitter one would think that alcohol was a performance enhancing drug at least in his case.

This is a society that is schizophrenic about drugs. On the one hand there has been an enormous amount of lamentation about the

use of drugs in the Olympics even the legal ones. On the other hand in practice there is a mass use of drugs across the society, with viagra being the most recent craze.

The response to the stories about McGwire and Sosa, about androstenedione and creatine, reflect our ambivalence. Some have called on McGwire to cease and desist, others have argued he is doing nothing illegal. On the other hand in most sports those who use andro are banned, while creatine seems headed to banning in some sports. Few are defending Randy Barnes who has been banned from international competition in track and field for use of androstenedione. Most however understand the lure, the willingness of athletes to endanger themselves in the pursuit of victory.

At the same time few people would give up their non-essential drugs, and few would require an asterisk after the records of Ruth or Rose because they used drugs, legal or illegal.

But what about the kids? What about role models? What are we telling the kids? I would suggest that the message being sent by McGwire and Sosa and all those hundreds of thousands of people across the world using andro and creatine is no different than the message of the basic sporting ethic in America.

Winning is the most important thing and anything you can do to get a winning edge, you must do. To do anything else is to risk losing, which, as we all know, is worse than death. Winning is the only thing.

Put the asterisk next to Lombardi's name.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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