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Congress, McGwire, and steroids

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Congress, McGwire, and steroids
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For those of us who spent a significant part of our professional time and energy in the study of the 1950s, the current hysteria over steroids in the House of Representatives evokes definite historical memories. For some of us it even recalls memories of childhood when "Point of Order Mr. Chairman" was shouted across the schoolyard. This is not to equate the hearings of the House Committee on steroids in baseball, with Sen. Joseph McCarthy's hearings on Communists in government. It is however meant to draw some parallels and raise some questions.

Congressional hearings can be extremely dangerous or at least treacherous territory. They are not trials and do not operate by the rules of evidence or the rules of questioning in a trial. Constitutional protections are minimal once the witness accepts a line of questioning. When dealing with a hostile panel it is always best to refuse to testify from the beginning by pleading the Fifth Amendment. It is also prudent to bring a lawyer to the proceedings.

When the House opened its hearings on steroids in baseball it was clear that this was a proceeding that lacked any real purpose other than to buy face time for obscure congressmen who would be better left in obscurity. The opening statements made a mishmash of baseball history, drew false analogies across a wide spectrum, and left us with a primary message that is simply false. Over and over again House members uttered their mantra: "Steroids Are BAD."

My conservative guess is that that no less than fifty percent of those on the House panel, and probably closer to seventy-five percent, have in fact taken steroids. A large portion of the American population has taken steroids. Those little magic medications are used for a wide range of treatments from pain relief to the acceleration of healing, and much much more.

Steroids are not bad. Abuse of steroids is bad. Abuse of alcohol is bad, abuse of painkillers is bad, and abuse of self and others is bad. Excess is bad. Unsupervised use of medication can be fatal. But steroids are not bad. They can be dangerous, they can be harmful, and they can be a healer.

It was not an auspicious beginning. Then Jim Bunning appeared to continue down the garden path to baseball hell. The former pitcher seemed to be further developing his image as the inarticulate and bumbling Senator from Kentucky, an image he had so amazingly displayed in his near fatal run for reelection last fall. Stumbling over his facts and words Bunning reassured us all that in the good old days nothing like this happened in baseball, and that in the good old days baseball skills waned with age.

He might have added that in the good old days players were not nearly as well conditioned, knew little about human kinetics, and played the game with inferior equipment. The House members nodded their approval as their former colleague threw all those fat platitudes into the strike zone. It made you want to run and get a bat.

As for the day itself the players were battered around if they were thought to be uncooperative and fawned over if they were thought to be clean patriotic Americans or had already spilled the steroid beans in a book. Special disdain was reserved for Fehr and Selig who were chastised to no particular end by several committee members. In the end these two men were intimidated into changing the drug rules a bit, and to the satisfaction of no one. This was akin to President Truman saying he had already cleaned the communists out of the State Department and expecting that somehow this would satisfy Sen. McCarthy.

The highlight was Mark McGwire's appearance. The former poster boy for all-Americanism, fatherhood, and baseball had a curve of his own for the House members. Saying he was not there to talk about the past but only to look forward to the future, McGwire would not speak about his own use of steroids, nor that of anyone else. Forgetting that there is no crying in baseball McGwire provided a bit more drama to the television audience routinely titillated by cable television news.

In the end it proved disastrous for the image of the former home run king. From the New York Times to the obscure newspapers of the hinterland, Big Mac was under attack. Dave Anderson of The Times was on CNN to proclaim McGwire's guilt, and almost universally the press piled on with a chorus of "guilty, guilty, guilty." McGwire would have been better off pleading the Fifth, an amendment defined by Joe McCarthy as "refusing to testify on the grounds that you are guilty." Fifth Amendment Communists,

McCarthy's quaint term, could have been replaced with Fifth Amendment Juicer.

McGwire now knows better than most how dangerous a congressional hearing room can be. No evidence is offered, nothing is admitted, but the conclusion across the board is guilty. McGwire, it was said, had shamed himself, and like Joe Jackson had crushed the dreams of little boys. In short McGwire turned out to be the St. Patrick's Day turkey carved and served up to a hungry public and press.

As for the man who wasn't there, Barry Bonds, the fallout from the steroid witch-hunt seems to be finally taking its toll. His knee has required more surgery, the public criticism has intensified, his former mistress is presented by the press as the bearer of truth, while Bonds is presumed to be the most guilty of all.

Could it be, like those government employees of the Fifties who were run out of their jobs or driven to madness or suicide, that Barry Bonds will succumb to the pressures of the righteous? Could a glorious baseball career end in tragedy or in ashes? Those who are in the public chorus chanting the mantras of guilt will wait and hope, asterisks in hand, to feast upon Barry's tattered career.

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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