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Steroids, success, and ethics

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Steroids, success, and ethics
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This week Rafael Palmeiro met the wrath of the Canadian baseball public in Toronto where he was booed loud and long for either lying to the Congress and the public, his steroid use, or both. This is the most severe crowd disapproval he has experienced and he found it quite difficult to endure. Even the use of ear plugs did not seem to help.

Since the revelations of Palmeiro's test failure for steroids, the one-time candidate for the Hall of Fame has seen his batting skills nearly vanish. Some will speculate that this is a result of the fact he is no longer taking performance enhancing drugs, with the possible exception of Viagra, and some will agree with Palmeiro that he has lost his concentration.

Whatever the causes the baseball poster boy for Cuban-American baseball fans seems now to be in free fall. His public appearances have become increasingly difficult and he has been relegated to the Orioles bench. Those "zero-tolerance on drugs folks" are no doubt delighted with this development, especially with the fact that the public seems finally to be showing their disapproval of steroid use in baseball. The fact that this level of disapproval may just be a Canadian phenomenon may mean this conclusion is a hasty one.

For an interesting contrast one need only look at the case of Jason Giambi. Over the off-season when the BALCO story broke and the confidential grand jury testimony was all over the front pages and the sport pages, Jason Giambi found himself in the steroid spotlight. He made a public appearance in which he refused to acknowledge use of steroids and then apologized for something he would not identify. Spring training and the first half of the season produced a staggering performance on the field by Giambi. He was booed, denounced in the media, and was put forward as the object lesson for all young potential steroid users. It was clear to all that Giambi could not perform without "the juice" and now his career was about to end. At one point the Yankees seemed ready to send him to the minor leagues.

Then after the all-star break something happened. The Jason Giambi of previous years returned to Yankee Stadium. The hits started coming, the home runs flew out of ball parks around the

league, and the RBI totals shot up. What happened? Was Jason back on "the juice" or did Giambi finally get his head straightened out? Or did he have early season injuries that finally eased? Or had the press and public scrutiny gotten into his head? Maybe Jason Giambi was performing exactly as many players have always performed, having a bad first half and a good second half of the season.

Two things interest me about all this. Almost no one, not even his brother, is accusing Jason Giambi of being back on steroids or any other performance enhancing substance. I find that amazing, knowing what we know about his past and given the analysis of Palmeiro's collapse. Of even more interest, the fans are cheering Giambi as much or more as they ever have. Jason Giambi is once again a Yankee hero. All is forgiven. Why?

Those who have been around sports for any length of time know one basic truth. Athletes who perform well are given free passes on most everything else in their lives. From education, to behavior, to a variety of lawless activities, the great athlete, from the earliest inklings of greatness, is not required to live by the same standards as other members of society. All they need to do is keep winning.

Once winning stops, once there is a decline in performance, the rules change.

Another case in point, this one on the down side, made headlines this past week. Sidney Ponson has been arrested twice for DUI in the past several months. He also had off-season legal problems in Aruba. Sidney Ponson clearly has an alcohol problem and needs treatment. Alcoholism is a disease and Ponson needs help. On Thursday the Orioles made the first move to dump Ponson who has slightly over eleven million dollars remaining on his Oriole contract.

Are the Orioles more concerned about the \$11M or about Sidney Ponson? How many Hall of Fame pitchers, hitters, or managers were alcoholics and tolerated by their teams? If Sidney Ponson's record were 15-7 rather than his current 7-11, there would likely be more discussion of Ponson's health, of the "concern" the Orioles have over his future as both a person and not just a baseball player. One can almost hear Peter Angelos saying, "What's important here is the life of Sidney Ponson, not his future on the baseball field, and that is why the Orioles are standing with him and will help him put his life back together."

Instead the Orioles are seeking to put Ponson on the human trash pile while saving themselves a cool \$11M. Winning is in fact often the only thing or at least the other thing, next to money.

And speaking of winning, one more outrage from the land where winning trumps ethics on a regular basis, intercollegiate athletics. There was looting reported in New Orleans this week on the campus of UNO. Monte Towe, the head of basketball at the University of New Orleans reported that those representing other schools have already approached his star player. College basketball recruiting has long been a land of sharps, sharks, and bottom feeders. It is not all that surprising that it has produced the worst sports story of the week. So far.

There are lessons on ethics everywhere these days.

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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