

Bud Selig and steroids

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Bud Selig and steroids
APRIL 02, 2006

It is spring. Time of optimism and renewal. The flowers are in bloom. Spring training is over. Opening day of another baseball season is upon us. Everyone is in first place. Dreams of pennants in October are yet to be crushed. What possibly could dampen the mood as another baseball season opens? In so many ways it is the best time of year. Could it possibly last?

No!

Bud Lite is apparently determined to become Steroid Selig the Juice Detector. The Commissioner of Baseball is on the loose and ready to pounce, like a snowstorm in April.

In announcing his baffling decision, Baseball Commissioner Selig said, "Nothing is more important to me than the integrity of the game of baseball." Former Senator George Mitchell has been appointed by Selig to head an investigation of the use of steroids in baseball. What such a commission can accomplish remains a mystery, other than conducting a public relations offensive designed to reveal little while showing active leadership. Oh, yes, it can also serve to take the focus off of opening day, great baseball, and the fact that baseball has addressed the steroid issue by instituting a testing program. In turn it can refocus on the steroid issue and add little or nothing to what we have known for several years.

The investigation will look at the period from 2002 to 2006 which is the period in which the ban on performance enhancing drugs was put into the collective bargaining agreement. As such it will avoid much of what is now called the steroid era in baseball, but of course it cannot possibly isolate the investigation in that way.

Apparently, the Juiced Commissioner sees no public relations problem in choosing someone with an economic attachment to Major League Baseball to head the investigation. George Mitchell is a Director of the Boston Red Sox, a position whose reward is future stock options. He is also Chair of the Board of Disney whose subsidiary is ESPN. Mitchell has a vested interest in protecting the value of ESPN's programming product called Major League Baseball.

This is more than likely a case of an appearance of impropriety rather than an actual conflict of interest, but it once again reveals the magic touch Bud Selig wields in being able to not quite do the right thing, even when he wants to do it.

It is difficult to imagine that this probe can reveal much that is not already known. Baseball fans certainly understand that there have been a number of players that have used both legal and illegal substances to enhance their strength. Over at least the last two decades small bodied players have suddenly acquired a home run punch, sometimes for a season or two, and sometimes longer. This was attributed to either a juiced ball or a juiced player by those fans that follow the game closely. Perhaps the only area of the game that remains a mystery in this respect is the degree of steroid use by pitchers.

What is remarkable about all of this, aside from the actual issue of steroids, is how this case illustrates just how adept the people who run Major League Baseball are at trashing their own product. It has seemed through the years that baseball people have trained at some negative version of the Harvard Business School where geniuses in self-destructive management are cranked out expressly to work at MLB.

The prize action of self-destruction was the decision by Commissioner Selig to shut down the playoffs and World Series in the vain attempt to destroy the Players Association in 1994. Indeed, since the rise of Marvin Miller's power in baseball various Commissioners and owners have done their best to trash their product and to decry what a horrible business baseball really is. Red ink was everywhere, we were told, and that has turned out to be an accounting fiction rather than fact. Players were ingrates, didn't care about the game, and only cared about the money. This was the interminable cry of the 80s and 90s.

The World Series of 2001 was one of the best ever, rivaling that of 1991, as the winner was not decided until the final inning of the seventh game. No sooner had the game ended with the Luis Gonzalez's bloop single than Bud Selig, in yet another stunning display of leadership, announced that two franchises would be contracted. One of the greatest moments of the game was suddenly driven off the front pages by the misbegotten actions of the Commissioner.

Over the years Major League Baseball has produced more jeremiads than the Puritans of 17th century Massachusetts. The results are the same, with the charges of sin, the calls for reform, and the

relief from guilt that allows you to sin again. It is an old American ritual; perhaps this is what is meant by the term "national pastime" when applied to baseball.

Now Bud Selig has finally read a book, one that purports to detail the juicing of Barry Bonds. The book has made headlines. It reveals that Barry Bonds has taken steroids. Who is shocked? Apparently Bud is.

What is not clear is why this book, *Game of Shadows*, has led to the Commissioner's discovery of possible steroid use in baseball. Apparently Steroid Selig didn't read Jose Canseco's literary effort of last year. Somehow Bud must have missed Howard Bryant's *Juicing the Game* also from 2005. And now we also know that the Commissioner's subscription to *Sports Illustrated* ran out sometime before its cover story "Steroids in Baseball" on Ken Caminiti in June of 2002. That issue featured a column by Tom Verducci who reported that a player told him in 2001 that steroids were rampant in baseball.

So we now will be treated to a repetition of all the charges of the past several years, and all those who don't want Barry Bonds to set a new home run record can howl at the moon and demand the proliferation of asterisks.

It should be a great baseball season.

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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