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Barry Bonds hits No. 715

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Barry Bonds hits No. 715
MAY 28, 2006

It pains me excessively to admit this, but Commissioner of Baseball Bud Selig and I agree on something: Barry Bonds' arrival at the number 714 and 715 in home runs is not the occasion for celebration.

It seems as if we were both wrong as Bonds neared the 714 mark and there was considerable public excitement, at least by the media. Then as the "Bonds Watch" rambled on and on the public interest waned. Bonds chasing Ruth began to resemble an endless slow moving freight train whose caboose was nowhere in sight. Those who watched the lumbering events must have felt like they were being subjected to the Chinese water torture.

Bonds is now number two on the all-time home run list, still some forty behind Hank Aaron. It would seem foolish to celebrate someone moving into the number two position on any list, but clearly for the baseball public 714 remains a magical number. Ruth's achievement is still regarded as formidable and therefore Bonds passing Ruth is a significant milestone and achievement.

As to all the negatives surrounding Bonds, including steroids and his personality, at least for a few brief moments during the run to 715, these were set aside. In Philadelphia on May 7, with Bonds sitting at 712 home runs, attendance took a forty-percent jump. The crowds on that Sunday night and for the previous games in the series were vocal and were heckling Bonds. The signs in the stands made repeated references to steroids, as well as negative comparisons to both Ruth and Aaron.

But in the end Philly fans, as Bonds said, did not match the vitriol of Los Angeles, and when 713 came the crowd paid tribute to the feat. Bonds hit a 450-foot plus drive off the facing of the third deck and a McDonald's sign. It took the air out of the place as it went on its majestic flight. After his final at bat in the eighth inning there was a massive exodus. The fans had been waiting around in a blowout game only to see Bonds.

Then it was back to San Francisco and the more appreciative Giant fans. Two nights later, 714 appeared to be happening until Cub outfielder Juan Pierre jumped and grabbed the high fly just before it cleared the fence in deep center. The crowd let out a

collective sigh of disappointment. In the week following 713, Bonds had only one hit. At times the frustration began to show.

When the Giants went back on the road to Houston the atmosphere was decidedly less joyous. The ugliest incident occurred there, when Russ Springer threw several pitches at Bonds until he finally hit him. Springer was thrown out of the game, and the crowd gave him a standing ovation. This was the third time in a row that Springer hit Bonds since Bonds homered off him in May of 2001.

As this freight train lumbered on an air of sadness settled in over the proceedings. Bonds was clearly struggling with his body as well as his mind. He appeared at times to be both frustrated and depressed. It is difficult to tell if the public vilification was pressing down on him, or if it was the betrayal by his body that made him a sad and nearly sympathetic figure. Albert Pujols captured the essence of the moment when he said: "I don't ever want to be in the life he's having."

When Ruth hit 712, 713, and 714 there was no unusual pressure. They all came the same day, May 25, 1935. They were part of a four-for-four day at the plate against the Pirates at Forbes Field. The last of them, 714, was the longest, indeed one of the longest ever hit at Forbes Field, a Ruthian Clout. It went over the upper deck in right field and came to rest in a small park across the street from the stadium. In another nice touch, the last two of Ruth's homers came off Guy Bush who had been one of the 1932 Cubs heckling Ruth just prior to his legendary "called shot" during the World Series.

For Bonds, 714 finally came in the Bay Area in Oakland rather than San Francisco nearly two weeks after 713. On Saturday May 20th Bonds homered off Oakland's Brad Halsey in the second inning. It was another eight days when 715 left the park in San Francisco off Colorado pitcher Byung-Hyun Kim in the fourth inning on Sunday May 28.

By this point the crowds were becoming less delirious with each at bat. When 715 left the park the crowd rose to watch it soar into the center-field stands. In the previous days the crowd in San Francisco came to its feet each time Bonds came to the plate and stood throughout the at-bat. Fatigue was plaguing more people than Bonds and the press. ESPN had been less insistent on cutting into its programming for every Bonds plate appearance. I don't even know if they were "live" on Sunday.

So it's over. Whatever it was. Bonds can now relax. The press can go back to whatever it does on a daily basis. Fans can continue to debate the steroid factor and its impact on this achievement. Bonds will no doubt continue to hit more home runs although given the breakdown of his body it is questionable if he will hit another forty-one home runs to pass Hank Aaron. If he approaches that record it will be interesting to see how the baseball public will react. It will also be very interesting to see how Henry Aaron will react.

As for me, I must say I still wonder what all the fuss has been about as Bonds remains forty home runs shy of the career record. More important, it seems to me, is the spectacle we have watched over the past several weeks. It was sad and depressing, while at the same time clear evidence that Barry Bonds is one of the great home run hitters, indeed one of the great hitters, of all time.

Bonds is resented by some and hated by others for three reasons: his public persona is that of a jerk, he operates under the shadow of charges that he used performance enhancing drugs, and, like Hank Aaron, he is an African American surpassing the achievements of Babe Ruth. Each of these three factors shaped the reaction to Bonds' achievement, although how much each weighed in the mix I do not know.

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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