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McGwire & the HOF; Urban Meyer & Nike

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
McGwire & the HOF; Urban Meyer & Nike
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I assume that you are sleeping better knowing that the baseball writers of America have sent a message. What that message might be, I am not certain, but there is comfort in knowing that a message has been sent. This week's announcement of the Baseball Hall of Fame voting saw Mark McGwire, once regarded as a Hall of Fame lock, receiving only 23.5% of the votes from the writers.

Did this happen because McGwire used steroids? Maybe he did, and maybe he didn't. Nothing has been proven and, indeed, if he did use steroids that would not have violated baseball drug policy at the time. What he did use was androstenedione, a pre-steroid which was banned in many sports, but which was perfectly legal in baseball. It works much like a steroid and indeed this is why it is banned in many venues.

When Andro was found in Mark McGwire's locker, was there any suggestion that he was doing anything wrong? Very little. It did set off a brief discussion about banning Andro in baseball. This was followed by a discussion of other bodybuilding substances and supplements, such as Creatine, which was reported in wide use in sport. Sammy Sosa, McGwire's home-run-chase partner, was one who admitted to using Creatine.

Performance enhancement substances were out there aplenty, and we can assume that many were being used. Did anyone, at the time, suggest that Andro or Creatine invalidated Sosa and McGwire's home runs? If there was, it was largely unheard. On the contrary, the baseball writers and baseball executives were just pleased as punch that Big Mac and Sammy were "saving the game."

On the face of it then, it would seem that the Hall of Fame vote did not stem from a performance enhancement transgression. What then was this week's message sending about? Perhaps it was Mark McGwire's appearance before the Congressional Committee hearings in March of 2005. At this farcical "dog and pony show," McGwire refused, as he said, to talk about the past. It was his rather abstruse way of pleading the Fifth Amendment, which in my view he should have done, along with all players called before this fishing expedition and publicity stunt by Congress.

For some reason McGwire's quasi-Fifth Amendment position infuriated sportswriters. I am not sure why. It reminded me of the hearings before Senator Joseph McCarthy when people took the Fifth Amendment, only to have the Senator denounce them as "Fifth Amendment Communists." It was a clever way of changing a constitutional protection into an admission of guilt. McCarthy used to say that these people refused to answer questions because to do so would prove their guilt. McGwire got the same treatment. Refusal to talk about the past was taken as evidence of guilt and steroid use, a reckless form of justice applied by less than brilliant writers and commentators. McGwire clearly is a "Fifth Amendment Steroid User."

What then is the message? Don't expect justice in the press. You are guilty without proof. Constitutional protections can't be used when dealing with baseball and steroids.

Furthermore, if we assume that McGwire, Bonds, Sosa, and a raft of other home run hitters used steroids, does that diminish their hitting achievements? How many pitchers used steroids or other performance enhancing substances, and would that negate any edge hitters might have gotten from steroids? We know now that pitchers test positive for illegal substances more frequently than hitters. We know that singles hitters are just as likely to use performance enhancement substances as power hitters. We know that marginal players are more likely to use performance enhancement drugs than the elite of the sport.

So why single out McGwire in this way? It is hypocritical in some cases, self-righteous in other cases, and just a simpleminded attack on constitutional rights in yet other instances. It was not a good day for Mark McGwire. It was not a good day for baseball. And it was not a good day for the Bill of Rights.

On another front, on Monday, the Florida Gators hammered the hapless Buckeyes from THE Ohio State University at THE University of Phoenix stadium. The most telling moment came in the post-game interview on FOX when Gator Coach Urban Meyer thanked two important contributors to the championship run: Gator Nation and Nike. Note also that the soon to be canonized Pope Urban, during the interview, was wearing a black leather BCS championship jacket adorned with the Nike Swoosh. Those people at Nike don't miss a beat in the marketing game and that is no doubt why Meyer thanked them. Or did Pope Urban thank Nike because he pulls down a half-million dollars from Nike for his endorsement of their products?

This Nike championship jacket affirms Pope Urban as a true sportsman, a leader of men, a classic role model, a mythic symbol of commercial corruption in intercollegiate athletics and all that intercollegiate athletics has become in the early 21st century.

The only other person Pope Urban should have thanked is Nick Saban, the latest poster boy for excess. "Saban money" has set a new standard, and although the University of Florida President Bernie Machen denounced the Saban deal, expect the Gators to set a new standard of their own, with "Urban money."

It was indeed a great night for anyone working in higher education in America.

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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