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Barry Bonds at 750

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Barry Bonds at 750
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It has been a summer of milestone achievements in baseball, with the promise of more to come. Sammy Sosa reached the 600 home run mark two weeks ago and Frank Thomas reached the 500 home run level this past week, on the same day that Craig Biggio reached the 3000 level in hits. Alex Rodriguez will reach the 500 home run level sometime in the next month and Ken Griffey should reach 600 home runs before the end of the season. Gary Sheffield will reach 500 home runs late this season or early next season. These are exclusive clubs in the baseball world, although some have suggested that home run inflation has devalued these marks.

The most significant milestone lies ahead as Barry Bonds moves slowly and inexorably to the all-time career home run mark of Henry Aaron. (As of this writing, he is at 750). It is simply a matter of time before he ties and then passes Aaron's mark of 755. It is also a matter of considerable controversy and an occasion for a torrential downpour of self-righteous blather from sportswriters, fans, moralists, racists, and the self-appointed guardians of America's children. Some qualify in more than one category.

It is fascinating that in a country where there are drugs for all ailments, real and imagined, and the sale of these drugs is in the billions of dollars, there should be such an outcry about athletes who seek a boost from the pharmaceutical industry. In a country that pushes performance enhancement drugs of a wide variety as a matter of course, one wonders what all the fuss is about over Barry Bonds and others seeking to enhance their performance in athletics. I would venture to guess that those who are in the target demographic for Viagra and its chemical cousins are among the mass of American males denouncing Barry Bonds in stadiums and on talk radio across the land.

A stint in front of a television set on any given evening in America will reveal just how much Americans are told they need this or that drug in order to perform at the highest possible level. These advertising campaigns have in recent years moved from promoting over-the-counter drugs, to promoting prescription drugs. Just in case your doctor does not know about the new miracle drug for curing hang-nails, you can now go the doctor armed with the latest information. This is progress.

There is considerable debate about the home run record that Bonds will set, and indeed about the home run achievements of other players over the past two decades. Some are suggesting that an asterisk is needed in the record books. That idea should have died with Ford Frick, the Commissioner who first suggested this idiotic idea when Roger Maris broke Ruth's single season record. Asterisks have never appeared in the record books and they never should.

Those who care about such matters as season and career records know the context of achievement and make their own judgements about the various comparisons across time. The game changes, the venues change, the equipment changes, the training methods change, the technical knowledge about hitting and pitching change. All these affect play and alter hitting and pitching balances. Steroids and human growth hormones, not to mention the gene doping that lies ahead, all affect play in some way, although exactly how remains one of the great unknowns. Down the corridors of time baseball fans and baseball historians will make their judgements and voice their opinions, and a consensus is not likely to be achieved.

As for now, the Bonds saga will continue to be debated and punctuated with controversy. Will the Commissioner attend the game when Bonds breaks the record? Should the Commissioner be in attendance on that occasion? Should Hank Aaron be in attendance when his record is broken? Should the fans cheer, boo, or walk out? If the record is to be broken outside of San Francisco what will the fan reaction be? How much security will be enough for such an event? Should the Commissioner ask the Giants to hold Bonds out of the line-up so the record can only be broken in San Francisco?

So the debate goes on and on.

A few months ago, I developed a scenario that I thought was very likely. I believed that when Bonds got within a very few home runs of the record, he would be indicted. This would lead to an indefinite suspension pending the outcome of the case. In the end, the record would not be broken, as the case would drag on until Bonds could no longer get himself into physical condition to return to the game. The Bonds haters would be happy, the Commissioner would not have to take a stand on the record, and Bonds supporters could spend the next century or two claiming, "Barry was robbed."

It now appears this is not going to happen, but there are still a few days remaining before Bonds gets to 754, the last time for interdiction.

When Bonds breaks the record, it should be recognized as a great achievement. Barry Bonds is a great baseball player and has been for several decades. I was in the Baseball Hall of Fame last week and as I wandered into a section featuring charts of all-time hitting and pitching records, and career hitting and pitching leaders, I was struck by how many of these lists contained the name of Barry Bonds at or near the top.

Barry Bonds is clearly one of the all-time great baseball players. How you factor in his personality and his alleged performance enhancement drug use is a matter for debate. His place in history is not.

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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