

# Baseball milestones: Barry, Alex, and Tom

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
Baseball milestones: Barry, Alex, and Tom  
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Over two weeks ago before taking a short vacation to escape the heat and humidity of Florida, I saw the Barry Bonds home run that tied Henry Aaron. That same day Alex Rodriguez hit his 500th home run and all those fans with steroid anxiety suddenly discovered a new hero. Even before Bonds had officially passed Aaron, A-Rod became the Great Clean Hope who would surpass "Mr. Bonds," as Bud Selig so warmly called him, and bring the home run crown back to the kind of people who hold it by divine fiat. The next day Tom Glavine won his 300th game, becoming only the fifth left-hander and the twenty-third member of that exclusive club. Two days later back in San Francisco Barry Bonds hit the home run that put him ahead of Henry Aaron in the record books, if not in the hearts of all Americans.

Asterisk or not Barry Bonds now has the numbers. Anyone can dispute the significance of those numbers, but no one can change them. Only two numbers will change. The number of home runs that Bonds hits in his career and that is already changing, and the number of people who saw Barry Bonds hit the record breaking home run. It is now estimated that several hundred thousands of people believe they were there in Fulton County Stadium that night when the Hammer passed the Babe. Within another decade or two, a similar number will believe they were there in San Francisco to see Barry Bonds' most famous home run. One wonders if there has ever been another four-day stretch like this one in the history of baseball.

Alex Rodriguez's achievement may prove to be the most remarkable of all if he continues to homer at this pace. In some ways, it is remarkable that there have been so few suggestions that A-Rod has had some artificial assistance with all these home runs. Anyone doing anything out of the ordinary these days seems to be open to questions about enhanced performance. There are hints that A-Rod's home runs may provoke another book from Jose Canseco but even in what passes for reality in our world, it is difficult to imagine that this will be taken seriously.

As for Tom Glavine, Mets fans, Brave fans, and indeed baseball fans in general could not find a better choice for this position among the elites of the game. Glavine has been a master on the mound relying on precision and guile to put together his 300 wins. His demeanor on the field is something to be admired and

emulated. His pitching was marked by consistency at a very high level.

One of my favorite moments from Tom Glavine's career came in the strike year of 1994 and its aftermath when Glavine was one of the most visible players on the negotiating team. In one of the lowest points in Atlanta Braves history the fans booed him heavily the first few times he pitched after the strike and the boos did not cease throughout the season.

Then came the playoffs and the World Series. When Glavine took the mound and pitched a masterpiece over the Cleveland Indians, 1-0 in game six of the World Series, the crowds changed their boos to cheers. Glavine was MVP of the 1995 World Series as the Braves won their only World Series in the amazing run of NL East pennants. It had to be a sweet moment for him and it was one that I savored as I watched.

Barry Bonds is clearly the most controversial of these three great players, and it is also true that he is the greatest player of the three. One need only look at the massive array of numbers that Bonds has accumulated over the years. Seven MVP's is four more than anyone else in the history of the award. He is the only member of the 500/500 club, won eight gold gloves, twelve silver sluggers, and made thirteen all-star appearances. Bonds was twice NL batting champion, is the all-time home run leader, the single season home run leader, the single season walk and intentional walk leader. He hit over 30 home runs in 13 consecutive seasons, is the single season on-base percentage leader at .609, and is the career walks leader. He has five 30/30 seasons something done before only by his father, and is a member of the 40/40 club.

By any measure, Barry Bonds is a Hall of Fame Player, but by other measures, he is the villain of the performance enhancement era in baseball. There has been more discussion of Bonds' hat size and shoe size than any person in history. His misdeeds alone do not account for the controversy. Barry Bonds has added to his bad reputation by not getting on with the press. The portrayals of Bonds as arrogant, surly, and rude seem to have been sustained by his own behavior. This has added to the hostility of both press and fans, and the unwillingness to cut him some slack on the performance enhancement front.

In the end, it is very difficult to come to any accurate assessment of his place in history. What we know for certain is that he has set amazing records, that he has not been convicted

or tested positive, and that leaked grand jury testimony indicates that he did use performance enhancing drugs.

What we do not know is how these performance enhancers may have affected the records he has set. Several questions are worth asking in this respect: How much distance do performance enhancement drugs add to a solidly hit ball? Is the distance enough to account for more home runs? How far did Bonds' home runs go, and if you subtract that distance from each would that keep the ball on the warning track? How many pitchers that Bonds faced used performance-enhancing drugs? What impact would this have on the calculations?

How much value should be added to the achievement by the fact that Bonds in the most recent seasons sees only a handful of pitches in the strike zone in a game? Did previous home run hitters such as Ruth and Aaron face this same sort of paucity of hittable pitches? Does this add to Bonds' achievements? Does the use of many more relief specialists make Bonds achievement more impressive? Do the smaller ballparks make it less impressive? Was the ball juiced in the steroid era?

There are no answers to many of these questions and they are raised only to point out how difficult it is to compare performances between different eras in sport. Beyond the specific numbers there is little else to go on, but then all numbers are gathered only in context.

So celebrate all three of these achievements. Think what you will about the quality of any of the achievements or individuals. Just count yourself lucky to have seen any or all of them.

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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