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Bonds parallels the Black Sox

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Bonds parallels the Black Sox
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There are times when it seems as if those people who live and work in and around baseball have developed flagellation into a high art form. The reaction to the indictment of Barry Bonds has been an interesting combination of glee mixed with lamentation. There is even a slight note of shock expressed over these developments. In many ways, it reminds me of the hypocritical and overblown reaction to the Black Sox Scandal of 1919 following the indictment of the eight players accused of fixing the World Series.

The Cook County grand jury was involved in a probe of the fixing of a Cubs/Phillies game, but, as testimony accumulated from gamblers, the grand jury's attention turned away from that game to the matter of the 1919 World Series. After three White Sox players confessed to fixing the Series and the news hit the public press, it seemed as if nearly everyone was outraged that something as sacred as baseball could be tampered with in this matter. The little boys of America had been betrayed. The National Pastime had been stained. The order of the universe had been shattered.

Newspapers and magazines filled their pages with the stories of betrayal by the players. Eight players were charged and were described by the press in terms approaching those used on the enemy in the recent war. They were called "gutter snipes," "traitors," "rats and barnacles," "fallen heroes," and "Black Sox," who had sunk to the "depths of depravity," and would be "scorned by thieves."

Something had to be done. The game had to be cleaned up. If a few innocent players suffered with the guilty, then that was too bad, but not too high a price to pay to rid baseball of its "rascals." A sacrilege had been committed against the game and nothing must stand in the way of a purging of the rotten elements from baseball.

There was great concern about how the public would react to the scandal. It was argued that only strong action could save the game and restore its integrity. The baseball owners panicked and did something they regretted for nearly thirty years. They hired Kenesaw "Mountain" Landis, a judge who had little respect for the law, used the court for self-promotion, and was erratic and

unpredictable in his decisions, to be the new Commissioner and erstwhile savior of baseball.

The public reaction was nothing like the official and press reactions to the scandal. Everyone knew that baseball attracted gamblers and that fixing games was not unusual. In the Polo Grounds, down the third base side, gamblers could be heard shouting instructions to players. It was a problem that baseball had lived with for years and about which fans didn't seem to be all that concerned. Hal Chase was known as the biggest fixer in the game, but no one ever stopped him. When the players were found "not guilty" many fans applauded. By the end of the trial baseball was experiencing a banner year for attendance. Fans enthusiastically signed petitions for reinstatement of the players who had been banned for life by Commissioner Landis.

The parallels to the current wailing and the calls to clean up baseball seem obvious. What was lost in the uproar in 1919 and is being ignored again in 2007 is the simple truth that the game of baseball is not in trouble. Barry Bonds is in trouble, other baseball players are in trouble, many athletes in many sports are in trouble, but baseball is not in trouble, at least not over the various drug related issues.

Baseball fans have accepted the fact that steroids, HGH, and other performance enabling and enhancing drugs are part of the current sports scene, and have been for several decades. Some athletes will use these drugs, some will be caught, others will not. This is true in baseball, football, track, and across the spectrum of sport. Fans accept this and keep their eye on the games and the performances, enhanced or not.

There is nothing at all special about the fact that this case involves baseball. The reaction will be to Bonds who the public has come to despise.

Does this indictment make baseball feel "slimy" or "slick" as one sportswriter has claimed? Is the future of baseball at stake, as many have claimed? No and No. The fans will be delighted if Barry Bonds is found guilty of perjury and obstructing justice. In the meantime, they will be at the ballpark or in front of their television and computer screens watching the games, enjoying the performances, perhaps wondering but not worrying about how the performances are achieved.

On the same day that the Bond's indictment was handed down in San Francisco, the Commissioner of Baseball, Bud Selig, reported

to owners that major league baseball has never been healthier than it is now. Gross revenue was \$6.075B and attendance was a record 79.5M fans. Selig predicts more of the same down the road, and it no doubt will come, barring a major and prolonged economic crisis. Gross earnings are very near those of the National Football League, and they are way above the \$1.2B in 1992 when Selig became Interim Commissioner for Life. And all of this has happened in the so-called "steroid era" during which the fans, the press, and baseball's hierarchy were fully aware of what was happening.

So let the U.S. Government continue its hysterical pursuit of drug dealers. Let's hope they will concentrate a bit more on the cocaine and heroin traffickers. And let the hysteria loose in the media run its course, and hope it does so before the entire matter begins to resemble justice in Salem, Massachusetts, over three centuries ago; Or even worse, before someone in baseball tries to turn George Mitchell into the next Kenesaw Mountain Landis.

Let the wheels of justice turn. Let the guilty be punished. Soon it will be spring and pitchers and catchers will be reporting to the camps in Arizona and Florida. Baseball will be back and the fans will be cheering the next home run and the next strikeout induced by a 95-mph fastball.

The game will go forward another year wiser and ready for the chase to October.

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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