

A-Rod and steroids

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
A-Rod and steroids
FEBRUARY 13, 2009

Just when it seems that the drug issue in sports is about to slip out of the headlines, and just when it seems that the revelations about steroid use in baseball are coming to an end, something happens. This time an Olympic Gold Medal collector is photographed filling those massive swimming-developed lungs from a bong. Then the man who was going to remove Barry Bonds from the top of the home run charts and make any asterisks irrelevant is hung out to dry by another leak of confidential information from a sealed grand jury report.

First to the more serious case. Alex Rodriguez has admitted to the use of performance enhancing drugs after Sports Illustrated reported that Rodriguez was one of the 104 baseball players who tested positive in the confidential drug testing done in baseball in 2003. Rodriguez told ESPN's Peter Gammons that yes he did use performance enhancing substances for approximately three years beginning in 2001 when he was with the Texas Rangers. For the past week everyone and their dog has had something to say in interviews or on blogs about this "shocking" admission.

What interests me is not the admission, but the process that has led to this fiasco. It begins with the fact that for decades baseball players and other athletes have been using an assortment of performance enhancers. Over the years only the type of substances has changed. It is also likely that non-detectable substances are still being used across the sporting spectrum. No one should be surprised by Alex Rodriguez's admission, by the 104 who tested positive in baseball, or the countless others who have tested positive in all sports. And don't forget all those who have been users but who have not tested positive. This is a simple reality.

There seems to be a consensus in the public forums that this is wrong, and so there has been an attempt to try to stop it. Testing has become more widespread, and no doubt this has had a deterrent affect on some athletes. Others, certain they can beat the system, have, no doubt, continued to try to do so. Some will be caught, others will not, but it is clear that if this is a problem it is being attacked and perhaps even contained. There are groups and agencies spending millions of dollars to try to catch up with the doping technology, and there are others who

are doing their best to educate athletes to the dangers of doping.

This is about all that can be done. It is also all that should be done. To continue to probe the past and play "gotcha" with athletes accomplishes very little, except to smear reputations and diminish the positive aspects of sport. We know that baseball results and records have been skewed by drug use. We do not know in what ways and how much. Statistics tell us very little when so many other factors beyond performance enhancing drugs affect the numbers.

So back to the Alex Rodriguez case where there are other questions to be asked. In whose interest is it that his name was made public? Who are the four sources for the SI story and what were their motives? How is it that sealed records of the grand jury leak out to the press? Why only this one name and not the other 103? Is it because no one really cares about the 103 and the only thing driving this story is sensational revelation for a jaded media and public?

The 2003 testing done in baseball was part of a confidential testing program used to determine how extensive the use of drugs was in the sport. No players were to be identified. This was part of an agreement between Major League Baseball and the Player's Association. Who is responsible for what has happened to the test results and what were the obligations of MLB and the MLBPA?

The test samples used were to be anonymously tested. Why then did someone, or a group of someones, make a record which identified the samples? Then, after the testing was completed, why were the samples not destroyed along with all records? No one has come forward to identify himself or herself as being responsible for this decision, let alone to explain why the decision was taken.

Anyone who believed that these records would be confidential in the first place was incredibly naïve. "Trust" is a word that apparently never entered the equation, although there is now a great deal of talk about the violation of a "sacred trust" by the athletes who joined the doping culture.

The other revelation of the past two weeks showing Michael Phelps sucking on a bong reminds me of the film, "Dumb and Dumber." Phelps is in the lead role as "Dumb," taking a hit at a party where no doubt everyone had their cell phone cameras

poised to record the action for posterity. The role of "Dumber" is played by all the media goofs who somehow find the use of marijuana the crime of the century that tarnishes the purity of an Olympic hero. Certainly these geniuses must know that the sweet smell emanating from the Olympic village and from college campuses across America where athletes are sometimes seen, is not the smell of maple syrup.

Of course you could count on the fact that someone would "one up" the stars of the new "Dumb and Dumber" and become "Dumbest." Enter the Milwaukee Admirals Hockey team which announced that it will hold "Don't Be Like Mike Night" on February 19. The Admirals website reveals that anyone who is a graduate of DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education), or whose name is Mike, Phelps, Mary Jane, Cheech, Chong, Weed, or anyone who has won a gold medal in the Olympics will get into the game for two dollars. Admirals President Jon Greenberg says that like Nancy Reagan he wants to encourage people not to do drugs. The Admirals will be giving some lucky fan a Weed Wacker courtesy of National Ace Hardware. There are other features on this historic evening that may be worth a trip to the website to discover, although it might be better to just say no.

Thursday Jim Rome said that clearly the Michael Phelps story has "jumped the shark." The same can also be said about the never ending story of steroids in baseball.

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