

Mitchell's good calls

by *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

You can argue all day whether a pitch was a ball or a strike. But no one - not even Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig - can reasonably argue that steroids and the players who used them have not given baseball a black eye. It's a shiner so enormous that some people have compared it to the Black Sox scandal. Selig is the guy in charge. But to heal the wound and to restore integrity to baseball, he needs the full cooperation of the owners, the players union and the players themselves. That's the real message of former Sen. George Mitchell's steroids investigation that culminated Thursday.

Selig initiated the investigation and handpicked Mitchell. The report rightly held the league - which includes Selig - and its often recalcitrant union culpable, saying baseball was slow to act and the initial response ineffective. But the report correctly saved its harshest criticism for the union.

"The Players Association was largely uncooperative" in the inquiry, the report said. Selig "promised his full support and kept his promise."

Mitchell named names. Roger Clemens, Andy Pettite and pitcher Eric Gagne, signed by the Milwaukee Brewers to a contract just last week. Seven MVPs and 80-some players in all, more than half of whom are no longer active. Coming on the heels of the Barry Bonds indictment, the report cast a dark cloud, fair or not, on their individual achievements and the records of these and countless other players who weren't named.

But as titillating as the list of names was, the real meat of the report was Mitchell's conclusions. To his credit, Selig said at a news conference Thursday that he would follow the recommendations.

The U.S. Senate, which spurred baseball to adopt its comprehensive testing program several years ago by issuing an ultimatum to the union to cooperate or else, needs to make sure both sides remain sharply focused on what must be common goals. Fans should do the same.

Among the recommendations: that the league's drug testing be turned over to an independent body; that teams no longer be given 24-hour advance notice before tests are given (Selig said Thursday he already has ordered that); that the league increase efforts to educate players about performance-enhancing drugs; and that a Department of Inspections be created to monitor and investigate incidents.

Mitchell, fearing contentious disciplinary proceedings, urged the commissioner "to forgo imposing discipline on players for past violations" of the league's tough policy on performance-enhancing drugs except in cases where Selig determines the conduct was so serious that discipline is needed "to maintain the integrity of the game."

Selig said he will "deal with this on a case-by-case basis" and take appropriate action. That was the correct response. But as Selig pointed out, many of the recommendations will be subject to collective bargaining with the union. Given its poor performance in this inquiry, the Senate has good reason to keep a close eye on those negotiations.

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