

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

Last week's release of former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell's report on the widespread use of performance-enhancing drugs in baseball hit like a bombshell.

If sports talk radio and letters to the editor are any gauge, the evidence that the cheaters included everyone from the modern era's greatest slugger (Barry Bonds) and greatest pitcher (Roger Clemens) to dozens of stars, journeymen and fan favorites changed the public debate. The familiar argument heard before Dec. 13 - that many, perhaps most fans were indifferent to the controversy over steroids and human growth hormone - disappeared. Taking its place: the collective realization that there's a taint on just about everything that's happened in baseball since the mid-1990s.

Unfortunately, this sea change doesn't seem to have registered with many players and teams. Blitheness and expedience have been all too common.

New York Yankees pitcher Andy Pettitte admitted taking HGH, but said it was to help him heal from an injury, not gain a competitive advantage - as if he were following the recommendations of a doctor, not buying the drug on the black market. That's bad enough, but Pettitte couldn't even bring himself to offer a real apology, saying, "If what I did was an error in judgment on my part, I apologize." If?

The Baltimore Orioles put out an obsequious, even bizarre statement about admitted steroids user Brian Roberts that called critics of their player "cruel." The Los Angeles Dodgers - perhaps the team most implicated in the Mitchell report - initially responded by saying, "Never again." Owner Frank McCourt vowed to work to "rid the game of these substances." Four days later, the Dodgers became the first team to sign someone named in the report, catcher Gary Bennett - a player who refused to come clean about the extent of his HGH use.

This cavalier attitude was on display even before the Mitchell report's release. Just before it came out, the Houston Astros and Milwaukee Brewers eagerly pursued and landed two players - Miguel Tejada and Eric Gagne, respectively - who were widely expected to be named in the report. (They were.)

Ho-hum. So what if baseball is in the middle of its greatest crisis since the 1919 World Series was fixed. So what if young fans are likely to grow up believing every player is a cheat. At least until the players union allows blood tests to catch HGH users, it's business as usual.

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