

Superstars very different from us, aren't they?

by Mark Zeigler

The first interview Roger Clemens granted after being implicated in baseball's Mitchell Report in December was with Mike Wallace of "60 Minutes." It opened with Clemens sitting in his sprawling house, saying:

"I'm angry that (with) what I've done for the game of baseball ... I don't get the benefit of the doubt. The stuff that's being said, it's ridiculous. It's hogwash for people to even assume this.

"Twenty-four, 25 years, Mike, you'd think I'd get an inch of respect. An inch."

And there it is: the sense of entitlement, the feeling of invincibility, the aura of superiority.

To Clemens, this has never been about whether he used anabolic steroids or human growth hormone, but whether he deserved to be accused of using anabolic steroids and human growth hormone. This has never been about syringes and shady trainers, but about the cult of sports personality that consumes this country.

Seven Cy Young awards, 354 career wins, 4,672 career strikeouts, a 1.87 earned-run average at age 43, a man who made \$28 million last season for four months' work ... isn't that worth something?

Don't they know who he is?

"It's the culture of sport in America," says Steven Ungerleider, a noted sports psychologist based in Eugene, Ore., who also is an anti-doping expert. "Athletes are put on a pedestal, idolized and worshipped. And then they surround themselves with folks who give them this false sense of reality, a false sense of security, who give them a sense of invincibility.

"Their whole life takes on a sense of living in a surreal bubble, and they lose touch with reality. They just live in a different world than the rest of us."

It played out again Wednesday, on both sides of the table, as Clemens appeared before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform to answer questions about whether he was injected with steroids and HGH, as former trainer Brian McNamee alleged in the Mitchell Report.

Clemens visited more than 20 members of Congress in the days before the hearing, with reports of him signing baseballs and posing for snapshots, and some of their questions Wednesday reflected that. Rep. William Lacy Clay, D-Mo., asked Clemens which uniform will adorn his bust in the Hall of Fame.

And in his opening statement, Clemens talked about having "the privilege and honor to visit our troops in Kuwait, Qatar and Afghanistan, and salute them as our nation's true role models." He also mentioned his foundation and helping "special needs youngsters."

A few paragraphs later, he lamented: "But here we are now, with me being accused of using steroids and cheating the game of baseball."

As if one had anything to do with the other.

We've seen this before. Barry Bonds expressed outrage about being indicted for allegedly lying about his steroid use. So did track star Marion Jones, hiring a high-powered legal team and PR firm to issue one vehement denial after another. So did Lance Armstrong and fellow Tour de France champion Floyd Landis.

The little guy who gets caught doping often clears his throat, wipes his eyes, apologizes and begs for forgiveness. Wednesday, Colorado Rockies reliever Matt Herges admitted he used growth hormone, as the Mitchell Report alleged, and reached "the point where I know what I did was wrong 100 percent, no excuses, no justification, no rationalization."

Superstars deny, deny, deny.

They do so for two reasons. One, certainly, is that they have far more to lose - in terms of career accomplishments and future endorsement possibilities - than the backup catcher who spent eight seasons in the minors.

The other is that they deny, deny, deny because they can. Or because they think they can.

Theirs is a parallel universe with a warped perception of reality. Early in his career, the 6-foot-4, 235-pound Clemens complained about having to carry luggage through airports. The names of his four children - Koby, Kory, Kacy and Kody - start with K because he ranks among baseball's all-time strikeout leaders. His contract

with the Houston Astros in 2006 was for exactly \$22,000,022 in honor of his jersey No. 22.

His wife admitted in a statement Wednesday that she once had McNamee inject her with growth hormone. McNamee says she wanted it to sculpt her body for a Sports Illustrated swimsuit edition photo shoot.

Clemens, 45, is blessed with an ability to throw a baseball extremely hard extremely accurately, and for that he is treated as a deity in a country where the average public school teacher makes about \$50,000 - or about \$42,000 less than Clemens made last season per out.

He also possesses an almost maniacal competitive drive. There is no predicament, no bases-loaded jam in the seventh game of the World Series, that he can't extricate himself from, or so his illustrious athletic career has led him to believe.

Mix that blind confidence with a supreme sense of entitlement with two decades of fawning fans and seven-figure paychecks, and you can see how a man might believe he is above suspicion, let alone the law.

Blame the Rocket for gazing out from his pedestal, high above the clouds, and seeing nothing but clear skies. Blame a sports-obsessed culture for putting him there.

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