

A sport diminished

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

There are several ways to consider the bizarre spectacle of a House committee grilling superstar pitcher Roger Clemens and his former trainer, Brian McNamee, over allegations Clemens used steroids and human growth hormone. One is to wonder why Congress is trifling with a sports scandal. Another is to note that for all the hoopla, little new information came to light.

But one can hold both those dismissive views and still come to a more far-reaching conclusion about the import of the hearing: It diminished everyone. It diminished Clemens, whose bluster was baffling, given what he was expecting lawmakers to swallow: the contention that he had never heard of HGH, despite allegations by both McNamee and Clemens' close friend and teammate, Andy Pettitte, that he was a user - and despite his own wife's admission of HGH use. It diminished McNamee, who was lambasted for holes in his own testimony and for seeming to plan to betray Clemens for years by storing bloody syringes and gauze pads as evidence of his drug use.

It diminished Congress, with lawmakers showboating in ridiculous fashion - one telling Clemens he was sure to get into heaven, if not the Baseball Hall of Fame; another screaming at McNamee for undermining a "titan" like Clemens; still others asking the legendary pitcher idolatrous fan-club questions.

But most of all, the spectacle diminished Major League Baseball. The sport absolutely had it coming.

Past decades in baseball are remembered for their singular moments on the field - Boston's Carlton Fisk trying to will a home run ball to stay fair with body language in the 1975 World Series; Toronto's Joe Carter's joyous romp around the bases after his hit clinched the 1993 World Series; etc.

The modern era will be remembered for off-field farces such as Clemens declaring Pettitte had a habit of "misremembering" things and slugger Mark McGwire's evasive "I'm not hear to talk about the past" declaration at a 2005 congressional hearing on steroid use.

It didn't have to be this way. The explosion of home runs in the mid-to late-1990s - and the sudden profusion of hulking players with the physiques of NFL linebackers - demanded explanation. Former Sen. George Mitchell's recent report demolished the argument that coaches, team owners and Commissioner Bud Selig just didn't know what was going on. Instead, the signs were everywhere. Syringes in players' lockers. Packages from mail-order pharmacies being delivered to clubhouses. Unusual injuries related to rapid muscle growth.

But from Selig on down, no one did anything - because home runs, especially the riveting 1998 record chase involving McGwire and fellow steroid suspect Sammy Sosa, helped win back fans embittered by the

cancellation of the 1994 season due to a labor dispute.

The result of this blithe indifference to mass cheating is that a stench hangs over the national pastime. It is a stench that will take a long, long time to fade.

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