Congressional sports show plays out of its league

by The Indianapolis Star

In a word, grandstanding.

Obviously not busy enough with taxpayer concerns, the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform capped an intensive investigation last week with more than four hours of made-for-TV testimony from a famous pitcher and a man who claims to have injected him with booster drugs.

Ho-hum matters such as war, the economy and, well, government reform took a holiday as politicians pursued a problem that would seem to be Major League Baseball's rather than the public's.

The pursuit failed to ferret out the truth between Roger Clemens' denials and the assertions by his erstwhile trainer, Brain McNamee. But in the best traditions of Congress, it managed to be partisan.

With Republicans generally taking Clemens' side and Democrats McNamee's, the interrogation foamed with high dudgeon and betrayed supposedly inquiring minds that were already made up.

And there was no worse offender than Rep. Dan Burton, D-Ind., who made highlight films coast-to-coast with his flaming, one-sided denunciation of McNamee. Add that outburst to a long list of past episodes - missing votes to play golf, opposing lobbying reform, hiring relatives - for which the 12-term representative has earned his state unwelcome notoriety.

In their defense, Republicans objected to spotlighting Clemens at the expense of broader issues raised by the Mitchell report on drugs in baseball. Still, Congress' role in the whole affair is at best a questionable call.

A stellar exception to the overall silliness was Rep. Mark Souder, R-Ind., whom Committee Chairman Henry Waxman, D-Calif., said was one of the few members to have read the depositions in the case. Souder called those documents "devastating" to Clemens and termed it no accident that The Rocket let it be known he was on personal terms with President George W. Bush.

Pardon talk is in the air because this dubious spectacle carries the threat of perjury charges for anybody who has lied. Given that Waxman already has expressed regret for holding the hearing and subjecting Clemens and McNamee to a show trial worthy of a mob boss, prosecution would be a true farce. Sadly, though, it would be consistent with the transparent behavior displayed so far by public servants who would be stars.

Meanwhile, over in the Senate, they're looking into the New England Patriots' spying scandal. Sleep well, America.

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