

Baseball has sold its soul

by Various Sports Writers

When baseball sold its soul, it sold too cheap. It bargained away more than a century of tradition and generations of goodwill in exchange for a few fleeting thrills and implausible deniability.

And the costs of steroid complicity keep climbing, with no ceiling in sight. Alex Rodriguez's coerced admission that he indulged in performance-enhancing drugs leaves no fewer than 103 as-yet unnamed major league players sweating disclosure of their own positive tests. It finds many of the game's most cherished records rendered meaningless by a generation of frauds. It has reduced the erstwhile national pastime to a credibility category only slightly above that of professional wrestling.

If you love the game, you have to hate what has happened to it, and you should probably hold those charged with its stewardship in profound contempt. It's not that A-Rod seemed above suspicion "he wasn't; or that anything he did will have any immediate bearing on attendance" it won't; but his fall from grace forfeits baseball's best chance to flee the toxic residue of Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, Mark McGwire, Rafael Palmeiro, et al.

It is as maddening and melancholy a moment as baseball has experienced in the nine decades since the 1919 World Series. And the storm is likely to get worse before the clouds lift.

When you make a deal with the devil, it is generally prudent to study the fine print, but baseball has persistently failed to see past its bottom line, even with its integrity at stake. In averting its eyes from rampant chemical cheating, and then dragging its cleats toward tardy and inadequate testing, the game's management and labor executives betrayed their trust and damaged a cultural institution important to millions.

Now, bound by their own commitments and burdened by their own neglect, those same stewards, principally Commissioner Bud Selig and union chief Don Fehr, are powerless to take the steps required to speedily put their largest image problem in the past. In losing control of the 104-name list of those implicated in what was supposed to be confidential testing, they have lost control of the steroids story.

Evidence that should have been destroyed has since been subpoenaed. Names that should have been zealously guarded have been subject to ever-widening circulation. Sports Illustrated cited four unnamed sources in breaking the Rodriguez story, which tells you that someone has an agenda and a lot of other someones have had access to some pretty sensitive information.

That Rodriguez's name has been the only one to leak is curious, but that drip could turn into a deluge at any moment. Less than a week before training camps open, baseball must brace itself for more bad news "â€"

maybe a trickle, maybe a torrent " unable to take evasive action.

It was exactly this nightmare scenario " an endless and agonizing flow of disturbing headlines " that prompted me to recommend that Selig declare a general amnesty in December 2004. Admittedly simplistic, the idea was twofold: 1) To invite players to come forward en masse, without fear of retribution, instead of watching them emerge from the shadows in a slow, shameful procession; 2) To change the subject from steroids.

Selig politely heard me out, but he pursued another path.

"There's only one thing that cures it " a very tough program," Selig said that day. "... The one thing I can't live with is that someday, when I'm done being commissioner, a wife or daughter says, 'You people knew and you didn't do anything.' "

Yet rather than invoke his "best interests of baseball" powers and exacerbate conflict with the Players Association, the commissioner left it to Congress to bully baseball toward more serious scrutiny of its performance-enhanced players.

This spawned the Mitchell Report, which would implicate Clemens, and led to the arrogant administrative bungling which allowed 104 positive test results to remain on record for federal agents to find through their BALCO warrants.

Boston pitcher Curt Schilling, one of the game's most reliable sources of self-interest, says he wants all 104 names disclosed in order to free those players who tested clean of guilt by association. Doing so would serve the purpose of getting all of the bad news out at once, but it would also run counter to the anonymity the players were assured in agreeing to the testing in the first place.

Selig can hardly consider releasing the names without jeopardizing the fragile trust he has forged with the union. Fehr could not consider such a move without incurring the wrath of many of his constituents. Much as revealing the names might serve baseball's interest in closure, to say nothing of Schilling's thirst for vindication, Selig and Fehr have an obligation to respect the privacy they've promised.

The government, however, is not bound by baseball's agreements in its high-profile efforts to protect public health. Nor are the lawyers defending Bonds and other steroid suspects likely to withhold information that might provide favorable context for their clients.

Today, Alex Rodriguez is caught in the cross hairs. Tomorrow, there may be others.

When baseball sold its soul, it should have paid more attention to the price.

Tim Sullivan writes about sports for The San Diego Union-Tribune.

Copyright 2009 The San Diego Union-Tribune. Distributed By Creators Syndicate Inc.

Baseball has sold its soul by Various Sports Writers