

Even 'Innocent' Are Guilty in Steroid Mess

by Mike Nadel

Everybody's dirty. Either they have gulped down steroids or injected themselves with human growth hormone or popped amphetamines from jars labeled "Good," "Better" and "Yowza!" Or they have chosen to stay silent despite knowing teammates and opponents who cheat, making them guilty by association. As we learn more and more about Major League Baseball's latest performance-enhancing headache - this involving Jason Grimsley, a reliever with a career 42-58 record whose only notable accomplishment was pilfering Albert Belle's corked bat from the Comiskey Park umpires' room 12 years ago - here are five points to ponder. 1. The reaction of Grimsley's fellow ballplayers has been as predictable as it has been sad. Most are outraged not because he cheated but because he ratted out others to the feds. When those names become public, things really will get interesting. Speaking to reporters Wednesday, White Sox reliever Jeff Nelson perfectly captured the typical big-leaguer's thinking: "For him to get caught and then basically throw other guys under the bridge, that's just wrong. Even though we're all on different teams, we're all a big family. This is a big fraternity, and you just don't do that. It's something the sport doesn't need." Wrong! What baseball doesn't need is more hiding, covering up and excuse-making. What baseball does need - what it has needed for decades - are more ballplayers (preferably clean, active ones) to name names. Maybe if a few respected players (under the protection of anonymity) had gone to the authorities over the years, baseball wouldn't be neck-deep in quicksand with no rescuer in sight. 2. MLB really can't put asterisks next to the long-ball feats of Barry Bonds, Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa and other super-sized sluggers because pitchers have been every bit as fond of performance-enhancers. It's possible - likely, even - that most of Bonds' home runs since 1999, when he reportedly started cheating like crazy, were hit off of pitchers who were at least as juiced as he was. All you need to know about the breadth of the problem is that Felix Heredia was caught last year. Felix Heredia! I guess the steroids didn't take. OK, one might ask, shouldn't there be an asterisk on the whole era? My response: Which era? Way back in 1970, Jim Bouton's "Ball Four" detailed the rampant use of amphetamines. You can bet your sweet asterisk that records were tainted well before Jose Canseco's first 'roid rage episode. 3. No amount of cheating and substance abuse should surprise us. When Sosa got nabbed for bat-corking in 2003, Cubs president Andy MacPhail mentioned baseball's "culture of cheating." Last year, White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen said cheating is bad only if the cheater gets caught. Though both statements sounded stupid, both reflected a baseball history full of spitballs, loaded bats and stolen signs. The 1919 World Series was fixed. Hit king Pete Rose bet on games involving his own team. So naturally (or unnaturally), Barry Bonds, Gary Sheffield and even Jason Freakin' Grimsley can rationalize ingesting or injecting anything to gain an edge. As for substances, the sport long has embraced snuff, chew, smokes, caffeine, booze and greenies. Human growth hormone, Deca Durabolin (Grimsley's steroid of choice), androstenedione and numerous other fun-filled chemicals simply joined the parade late. Yes, ever since Abner Doubleday threw out the ceremonial first syringe, baseball hasn't exactly been Role Model Central. 4. This season's achievements by the likes of Albert Pujols, Jim Thome and Brandon Webb have been hailed as highlights of the "Clean Era," a reference to MLB's new testing standards for steroids and amphetamines. I haven't laughed so hard since my 853rd viewing of "The Jerk." HGH is every bit as prevalent today as steroids were yesterday. Baseball doesn't screen for human growth hormone because the tests are more invasive, less conclusive and non-union-approved. After the steroid policy was enacted, Grimsley turned to HGH - as dozens (hundreds?) of others surely have. Bank on this: Plenty of rich ballplayers pay big bucks for HGH and designer drugs that are out of testing's reach. Cheaters always find ways to cheat. That's what makes them cheaters. So if you want to believe baseball is clean, go right ahead. Maybe the 'Roid Fairy will leave a Rafael Palmeiro baseball card under your pillow tonight. 5. Although Grimsley has everybody talking about baseball's woes, HGH and other performance enhancers are popular in football, track, cycling and countless other pursuits in which athletes will do anything to reach the big time. Meanwhile, you, Mr. and Ms. Sports Fan, cheer the cheaters and fill their wallets. I and others of my ilk publicize their exploits - as if an athlete's accomplishments really are more significant than those of everyday heroes such as cops and firefighters, teachers and nurses, cancer patients and soldiers. The clean competitors? They're the worst enablers of all because they refuse to rid their own sports of the stench. They're all dirty. Every stinkin' one. Copley News Service

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