

MLB's cost of lost credibility keeps rising

by Tim Sullivan

The antidote for Barry Bonds is Rick Sutcliffe. The trouble is that Sutcliffe is retired.

No pitcher has faced Bonds more often without yielding a home run. No man has tempted fate so frequently and so favorably. In 51 career plate appearances against Sutcliffe, Bonds produced two measly RBI and struck out nine times.

Granted, all of these confrontations preceded Bonds' midcareer metamorphosis, his physical transformation from a sleek athlete to a bulging biology experiment. So maybe an asterisk is appropriate.

Sutcliffe threw his last competitive pitch in 1994, before Bonds struck 476 of his 735 home runs and long before Ken Caminiti's confession, Mark McGwire's credibility meltdown on Capitol Hill and the whole BALCO brouhaha.

And there is no antidote for any of that.

Baseball's record book has been rendered virtually meaningless by a generation of steroid frauds. Standards that had lasted for decades were breached so routinely during the last decade that we have been robbed of reliable guideposts to define greatness.

Sixty homers in a single season is still a feat, but it is no longer a source of fascination. Philadelphia's Ryan Howard struck 58 homers last year in his first full season in the big leagues, and in so doing still fell 15 short of Bonds' 2001 output of 73.

For those of us steeped in the game's statistical lore, this has all been a bit disorienting. Football would flourish if it offered only vicarious violence and gambling vehicles. Basketball attracts us with its artistic grace and its adrenal rushes. Yet for all of its theatrical tensions and poetic timelessness, baseball needs its numbers to be properly appreciated.

This is not a game for a single afternoon of sensory stimulation, but of many afternoons and nights of constant counting. You can't follow baseball casually and get much out of it; you need the context of probabilities and past performance. What makes Bonds' pursuit of Hank Aaron's career home run record so unsettling is not only that he likely succeeded through chemical shortcuts, but that he has simultaneously fractured our frame of reference.

Bonds is hardly alone here. McGwire, Sammy Sosa, Jose Canseco and Rafael Palmeiro certainly share responsibility for distorting the game's standards (as do the artificially enhanced pitchers who have corrupted the competition and largely escaped scrutiny). Yet because Bonds has achieved more and befriended fewer than his most notable contemporaries, and because he will start this season just 21 home runs shy of Aaron's record, he bears the brunt of our bewilderment.

Pandora's box has been flung open, and there's no closing it now. We can't roll back the clock to a more innocent age or create two sets of statistics based on presumed innocence and assumed guilt. We're basically stuck with what steroids wrought.

When Babe Ruth buried baseball's dead-ball era beneath an avalanche of home runs and restored confidence in the game in the wake of the fixed 1919 World Series, the revolution he embodied was a welcome source of wonder and signaled a paradigm shift within the sport.

Between 1919 and 1921, Ruth annually raised the single-season home run record from 29 to 54 to 59. The public enthusiasm this engendered prompted the construction of Yankee Stadium, influenced its influential pull-hitting contours and led to Ruth's surpassing his own standard yet again in 1927, with 60 homers.

In building ballparks that promoted power, replacing the dead ball with a more lively one and outlawing the spitball and related skullduggery, baseball owners forced a fundamental change in the game's strategy from "little ball" to the long ball. If this amounted to pandering, it was nonetheless enormously popular. Ruth revolutionized baseball the way "The Jazz Singer" did movies: He marked the point of no return.

Whenever baseball's rules are revisited, or new ballparks are designed, the aim is usually to create more offense. Reducing the height of the pitcher's mound, embracing the designated hitter (at least in the American League) and the industry trend toward bandbox blueprints all point to power as baseball's top priority. So, too, did the industry's neglect of its steroid problem.

If that neglect was willful, it was short-sighted. While the 1998 home run race between McGwire and Sosa surely sped baseball's recovery from the strike that wiped out the 1994 World Series, baseball has paid, and continues to pay, a steep cost in credibility.

That cost will only escalate as Bonds moves closer to Aaron's mark, and Commissioner Bud Selig struggles to reconcile his public role as baseball's top salesman with his private convictions and personal regard for Aaron.

Perhaps Selig should start by talking Rick Sutcliffe into a comeback.

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