On drugs â€¦ still

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

The guilty plea of Kirk Radomski - a Long Island, N.Y., weight trainer who worked in the New York Mets' clubhouse for 10 years - is the strongest evidence yet that the abuse of performance-enhancing drugs by pro baseball players remains pervasive. In copping to drug-distribution and money-laundering charges, Radomski detailed how he had sold anabolic steroids, human growth hormone, or HGH and amphetamines to "dozens" of unnamed major leaguers. Court documents show prosecutors have an array of banking and phone records tying Radomski to players.

Even more direct evidence may be pending. Radomski spent the 16 months between the initial raid on his home and his guilty plea last week secretly assisting the feds - raising the specter that we could someday see grainy videotapes of famous jocks meeting with their turncoat dealer.

So much for the widespread assumption that increased testing and stiffer penalties had deterred players' use of performance-enhancing drugs. More attention should have been paid last year when then-Arizona Diamondbacks pitcher Jason Grimsley told federal investigators he was only one of "boatloads" of players to use HGH, which cannot be detected by current tests.

Because HGH both builds muscles and helps tired muscles recover, it is popular with pitchers as well as hitters. Perhaps the reason home runs are down from the years when bulk-building steroids were more common is because pitchers and hitters are now cheating equally.

Against this backdrop, it's baffling that so many in the media - especially sports talk radio - take out their fury over this abuse of the national pastime on one man: Barry Bonds. The San Francisco Giants slugger may be linked by vast evidence to steroids and is a surly lout, to boot. But he is a symptom of baseball's problem, not the problem.

Bonds, owner of a record seven Most Valuable Player awards, is the most celebrated active hitter. But for some reason, the most celebrated active pitcher - Roger Clemens, owner of a record seven Cy Young awards - gets a pass, despite being named as a user in legal documents in the Grimsley case and despite a freakish late-career improvement even more dramatic than Bonds'. Inexplicably, the New York Yankees team - the most famous franchise - also gets a pass, even though it employed a trainer named Brian McNamee linked to distribution of performance-enhancing drugs.

And even more inexplicably, baseball Commissioner Bud Selig - by far the most powerful man in the sport - gets a pass, even though he ignored the warning signs for nearly a decade before finally being shamed into a crackdown by Congress.

Bonds is now closing in on the revered Hank Aaron career home-run record. When he hits homer No. 756 this summer - as now seems inevitable - it will be seen, correctly, as a black eye for baseball. But it will be a black eye the sport richly and collectively deserves.

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