

Keep the jock straps, Barry, but I'm selling The Ball

by Mike Nadel

CHICAGO - Barry Bonds certainly has the right to hoard remnants of every steroid he "accidentally" has used, every piece of body armor he has donned and every mirror he has smooched.

And I certainly have the right to deny him - and the Baseball Hall of Fame - Home Run Ball No. 756 if I catch that sphere-shaped winning Lotto ticket.

What's his is his, what's mine is mine and ne'er the twain shall meet.

Bonds has spent years putting together an impressive shrine to himself. He has been collecting baseballs, bats, caps, cleats, jerseys and jock straps. He has been saving recordings of his enablers chanting his name at Whatever It's Called These Days Ballpark. He has been socking away containers of "the cream" and "the clear" - or, as Barry likes to call those steroids, "arthritis balm" and "flaxseed oil."

Just about every artifact having anything to do with his record-setting career, Bonds has locked away in a vault guarded by several small armies, two dozen snarling pit bulls and Jack Bauer.

After Bonds breaks Hank Aaron's home run record, won't he send some items to Cooperstown? Please. He's more likely to kiss Jeff Kent on the lips.

"I'm not worried about the Hall," he told The Associated Press. "I take care of me."

Is that the quintessential Barry Bonds quote, or what?

Well, I'm here to say: "I'm with you, BB!"

When his San Francisco Giants come into Chicago for a July 16-19 series with the Cubs, there's a decent chance Bonds will be in position to hit his historic home run into the bleachers or onto Sheffield Avenue.

A month ago, when he seemed to be launching a bomb every night, I thought the record would be long gone

before he arrived at Wrigley Field. Given his recent homer-a-fortnight slowdown, however, mid-July now looks quite plausible.

I like money every bit as much as Barry Bonds does, and catching his baseball would be a fine way to close our net-worth gap - if only by .001 percent or so.

Were I to snag that treasure, shouldn't I give it to the Hall of Fame? Again, I present Barry's words of wisdom: "Doesn't everybody have the right to decide to do it or not do it."

I actually agree with Bonds 100 percent on this point (and, frankly, that scares me more than a little bit).

Remember all the righteous indignation that took place during the Mark McGwire-Sammy Sosa duel of 1998?

No, not the outrage over two probable 'roid users chasing one of baseball's most hallowed records, because there was none of that from the awe-struck public and fawning media (yours truly pleads guilty, too). I'm talking about the heated debate concerning the rightful owner of the record baseball.

On one side, we heard: "It belongs in the Hall of Fame!" On the other, we heard: "No way. I'm selling it for big money!"

I pitched my tent in the latter camp back then, and I'm pitching it there it again as Bellyachin' Barry nears Hammerin' Hank.

If the Hall gets the ball, it will sit in some glass cube so passers-by can nod their heads and go, "Uh-huh. Kind of looks like a baseball."

If Bonds gets the ball, it will sit in his vault so he can laugh hysterically and shout: "Mine! Mine! All mine!"

If I get the ball, I can sell it and use the money to put my kids through college so they can become better contributors to society. I can donate cash to charity. I can retire early and give my time to altruistic causes. Even if I spend a little of the dough on the plasma TV I've had my eye on, wouldn't I be serving the greater

good by not surrendering the ball to the Hall of Fame or Barry Bonds?

OK, it's realism time: If Bonds does, indeed, come to Wrigley with a chance to eclipse Aaron in July, I won't be standing on Sheffield, wearing Barry-brand armor and jockeying for position with the rest of the millionaire-wannabes. I'll be in the press box doing my columnist duty, recording the moment for posterity (and, of course, making fun of Barry's hat size).

You, on the other hand, have every right either to hang with the Sheffield ballhawks or pay beaucoup bucks for a bleacher seat.

If you're fortunate enough to catch that ball - and smart enough not to throw it back, thus ignoring idiotic Cubbieland tradition - I encourage you to use the proceeds from your haul to better yourself, your loved ones and society.

Oh, and never forget (plasma TV ... hint, hint) that I'm your biggest advocate.

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