

**Brian Chase**

Why in baseball is using steroids considered cheating?

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In 2004, an Associated Press poll found of 865 baseball fans surveyed, 61 percent thought those who had tested for steroids should be banned from the game.<sup>1</sup> Another poll in April 2005 found that two-thirds of the people surveyed thought players testing positive for steroids should be banned from the hall of fame.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, the majority of baseball fans consider taking steroids cheating. Why is that? Based on articles in today's sports magazines and various public displays at games, most baseball fans think that steroids give some players an unfair competitive advantage over others. But this response stems from the faulty underlying assumption that players have some "innate" ability or talent which is not dependent upon their environment. In fact, the only way steroids are different from other performance enhancers like protein shakes or nutritional supplements is because their side effects are worse and their performance enhancing effects are large. This efficacy, and the "steroid body" that goes with it, triggers fans' pharmacological Calvinism, the belief that taking a pill for any reason is bad, and leads to the media labeling the steroid culture and users as alien, which are the factors that truly keep steroids on the wrong side of public opinion and MLB policy.

Steroids, like many other drugs, have gone through waves of public opinion in their existence. Steroids and concern about them have been around since the early 70s, according to congressional testimony by Henry Waxman, a representative from California who is a member of the House Committee for Interstate and Foreign Commerce, which dealt with the steroid issue.<sup>3</sup> At that time, the use of steroids in

baseball was kept from the public, ostensibly to keep kids from using drugs as well.<sup>3</sup> By the late 1980s, according to a celebrated article on steroids by Tom Verducci in the June 3, 2002 issue of Sports Illustrated, steroids entered public consciousness as the drugs of a “renegade fringe” and Jose Canseco, who has now admitted to steroid use and written a confessional book about using, lost an endorsement deal because of steroid rumors.<sup>4</sup> Waxman reports that, similar to Barry Bonds today, fans “chanted the phrase ‘steroids’ when [Canseco] came to bat.” In 1991, Faye Vincent, commissioner of baseball at the time, issued a policy that labeled steroids illegal when taken for the purpose of enhancing performance. However, no major league testing of steroids was established, so players continued to use and reap the benefits.<sup>3</sup> At the same time as Vincent’s proclamation, Canseco was gracing SI as the “King of Swing” and he and his teammate Mark McGwire were glorified as the “Bash Brothers.”<sup>5</sup>

By the late 1990s, baseball’s inattention to steroids transferred to the fans as well. When McGwire and Sammy Sosa carried out the “Home Run Race” of 1998, they were chosen by SI as Sportsmen of the Year, and placed on the magazine’s cover as Greek gods, resplendent in togas and victory laurels.<sup>6</sup> The cover was representative of the feeling of the time: the increased slugging and home runs were cheered and glorified. At the time, McGwire was acknowledged to be taking andro, a supplement which is converted to a steroid once it is absorbed in the body, and has since been banned in baseball.<sup>7,8</sup> However, he was celebrated with each home run, and graced newspapers and magazine covers the country over as a good father and role model.<sup>9</sup> Compare that to Bonds today, who has not failed a drug test and is vilified at each city he plays in. According to Matt Morris in Sports Illustrated, who was McGwire’s teammate in 1998

and is on Bonds' team now, "The only time people ever booed Mark McGwire in 1998 – anywhere - was when he bunted the first pitch of batting practice. People loved him. . . . With Bonds, people are upset and are not happy for him."<sup>10</sup>

Steroids became vilified again by 2002, due to several factors: one, as early as 1995 stories like Verducci's began to come out, stressing the widespread nature of steroid use and the harmful and graphic side effects (one of the more memorable quotes from Verducci's piece comes from former MVP Ken Caminiti, who reports that after sustained steroid use, "it took four months to get my nuts to drop on their own."). Eventually, these articles, which labeled steroids as cheating and a huge problem in baseball, slowly raised the public perception of steroids as a problem again. Two, by this point steroids had become rampant in high school athletics, and parents concerned for their children also raised the cultural awareness of steroids.<sup>3</sup>

Today, the pendulum of steroid tolerance has swung back the other way. The MLB established testing of major leaguer players for steroids in 2002, and toughened the policy in 2004 after 5 to 7 percent of players tested positive.<sup>3</sup> Besides the Associated press polls quoted above, there are countless public displays of fan hatred of steroids. When Barry Bonds played in Philadelphia on Sunday May 7, people held foam syringes with "Cheater" labeled on them, signs that said "Bonds Cheats" and "Fraud."<sup>10</sup> These allegations refer to the 2003 trial of Victor Conte, an alleged steroid distributor, and his company BALCO which saw several players go before a grand jury to testify about their steroid use, among them Jason Giambi and Bonds.<sup>11</sup> The leaking of that testimony in early January of 2005 caused the media phenomenon that was the "steroid scandal." Congress took time from its busy schedule to deal with the scourge of steroids, holding a

congressional hearing on March 17, 2005 with former and current MLB players Rafael Palmeiro, Sammy Sosa, Curt Schilling, Frank Thomas, Jose Canseco and Mark McGuire. Palmeiro, during that hearing, shook his finger at Congress and declared that “I have never used steroids, period.”<sup>12</sup> A few months later, on Aug. 1, Palmeiro was suspended from baseball for 10 games for testing positive for steroids.<sup>13</sup>

If Congress is taking the time to study steroids in baseball, there must be a strong groundswell of outrage among the voting populace. So why do so many consider steroids cheating today? The first and most basic reason people view steroids as cheating is because they feel it gives players abilities that they otherwise would not have had. This is the position of every poll or article researched for this essay in the national sports media over the last four years. Again, the signs displayed in Philadelphia are representative. One 60-foot long sign said “Babe Ruth did it on Hotdogs and Beer. Aaron did it with class. How did you do it?”<sup>10</sup> This question rests on the assumption that Bonds’ steroid use differentiates him from Aaron and Ruth, who set career home run records without steroids.

But to simply say steroids enhances players’ performance is easy. The deeper question behind that answer is “Why does that matter?” That question involves a number of different aspects of what it means to be a baseball fan. First among them, perhaps, is the notion of fairness. The US culture in general holds fairness as one of its central tenets, as part of the Puritan Work ethic and the capitalist ideal: everyone must deal fairly, so everyone has their shot to succeed if they work hard enough. That ideal is held to as strongly in baseball as any other sport. The problem with steroids, then, is not just that users have an unfair advantage over non-users. Widespread steroid use limits the free

choice of non-users, because if they want to make a living they are almost forced to start taking injections, and having to deal with the side effects. This is called “free choice under pressure” by Thomas Murray (as reported by Peter Kramer).<sup>14</sup>

There is certainly supporting evidence for Murray’s complaint. Caminiti provided a quote in the Verducci article that would make Murray shudder: "If a young player were to ask me what to do, I'm not going to tell him it's bad. Look at all the money in the game: You have a chance to set your family up, to get your daughter into a better school.... So I can't say, 'Don't do it,' not when the guy next to you is as big as a house and he's going to take your job and make the money." A minor leaguer named “Pete” to hide his identity also admitted he was forced into steroids: "Listen, this is not my choice. I'd rather not [use]. I discussed it with my wife, and she understands. When you want to get to a higher level of competition, it's pretty obvious that it's worth trying."<sup>4</sup> Even the most talented baseball stars are not immune. According to Mark Fainaru-Wade and Lance Williams, the writers of *Game of Shadows*, a book that documents Barry Bonds’ alleged steroid use, Bonds started steroids after witnessing Mark McGwire’s popularity during his home run chase and wanting that kind of adulation for himself. At the time, he was a well-rounded player who did not hit as many home runs per year as McGwire, but allegedly using steroids, he remade himself to be a home run machine who eventually broke McGwire’s home run record in 2001.<sup>15</sup>

There’s no question, then, that the more players use steroids, the harder it is for others to stay clean. What are the implications of that for players, and what are players’ responses? At the physical level, this spiral of steroids forces players to endure the side effects of steroids when they otherwise might not. At the level of consciousness, players

have their free choice limited by steroid-fueled competition, and free choice is also something this country values. How do players respond to these concerns? By claiming that steroid use supports American values.

For example, a value much appreciated in sports is the desire to win above all else. Players that have that desire, like Michael Jordan in basketball, are often revered. So a baseball player might argue that he simply wants to win at all cost, even sacrificing his body to steroids to win. Just because another, non-user does not want to win enough to take steroids, that doesn't mean the user should be punished for it. This argument pops up a lot among players defending steroid use, like Jose Canseco or Caminiti in the Verducci interview.<sup>4</sup> And there is a parallel case: players often hurt their quality of life in sports due to injuries but consider it worth it for the success they had. Curt Schilling chose this path when he underwent damaging surgery to freeze a tendon in place so he could pitch in the 2004 World Series.<sup>16</sup> And old football players, especially running backs and large linemen, are reported to have horrible health issues after retirement, due to the beating they take from football, and the weight they put on to play it, yet we do not discourage youth from playing football or baseball so they have healthier lives.<sup>17</sup> So why take that position with steroids? As far as Murray's argument about limiting free choice, that sword swings two ways: players quoted in the Verducci article talk about how using steroids is a player's personal choice.<sup>4</sup> So are you going to limit the user's choice to use, or the non-users choice not to use? Either you do not have free choice or have it under pressure. Which is better? Those who need marijuana for medical conditions would definitely say free choice under pressure.

There are other problems with the argument that using steroids is cheating because they give a competitive advantage. The biggest fault with it is that steroids are not the only thing in baseball that gives a competitive advantage when there was none before. Revenue and payroll differences and environmental factors like the skill of the training staff and the quality of the facilities can cause “unfair” competitive advantages between teams and players as well, but those discrepancies are considered part of the game. The responses to this argument are that taking a substance is fundamentally different from working out more or on better facilities because you do not have to work as hard to get the same results as someone not on steroids. But some players use a good diet to get into better shape, or take legal supplements to make their workouts more effective. This is exactly the way steroids work – they help to build muscle faster in conjunction with exercise and weightlifting, so those that work out the most are going to get the most out of steroids. Should the MLB disallow all possible supplements and mandate player diet and workout regimens to eliminate the possible advantage? Ultimately, you cannot justify getting rid of steroids because they give a competitive advantage, because baseball operates by identifying and using competitive advantages.

This argument applies to a side issue of the steroid debate, which is the sanctity of statistics. There is a national debate right now whether baseball statistics and records set during the “steroid era” of the last 15 or so years should have an asterisk placed next to them, denoting that they were made by players on steroids. It has been publicized by SI,<sup>18</sup> and fans jeering Bonds in Philly last weekend held up asterisks to protest his passing of Babe Ruth in the career home run standings.<sup>19</sup> But as has been brought up by several online journalists, Ruth’s record should have an asterisk too, because during his career,

black players were not allowed to play with whites. If the talent pool for baseball was expanded to include blacks in Ruth's day, would the subsequent increase in pitching quality have decreased his home run totals? Probably, given that immensely talented pitchers like Satchel Paige later came out of the Negro Leagues. You cannot divest a baseball statistic from the time it was created in, and you cannot ever completely compare performances from wildly different eras because the context always matters. Steroids are a part of today's context just as segregation was a part of Ruth's. Any notion to the contrary is silly.

Despite the arguments above, most people would remain convinced that taking steroids was cheating. Why is that? There are three primary reasons: one is the notion of pharmacological Calvinism, two is the influence of the press on public perception of steroids, and three is the labeling of drugs in general and those who take them as alien. These are the real reasons that taking steroids in baseball is considered cheating today.

A brief aside before examining each of these factors in turn is that the policies of the MLB are not on that list. This is because the history of steroids clearly shows that even when the MLB declared steroids illegal, it was not until public perception and alienation of them was established that the MLB responded with major league steroids testing. At the time of the Home Run Race, even though steroids were illegal, the issue of testing was so low-key that no one really paid attention to or protested them. I maintain that public perception is the dog that wags the tail of MLB policies, and not the other way around.

Pharmacological Calvinism is the belief that taking a pill or drug is morally wrong, because hard work, suffering and pain are essential parts of human existence. The

concept figures prominently in Kramer's discussion of Prozac as a way of explaining the public's response to the drug, and the same can be said of fans and baseball players. This phenomenon can be seen in baseball lingo: someone who is "clean" is someone who is off steroids.<sup>4</sup> This terminology might come from the MLB policies, but it probably comes from larger drug culture, and reflects the idea that even though it is tough to argue against steroids ideologically, there is still a taint to taking steroids, the sense that a player who takes them has lost some purity they might have off steroids. This also might be why players like Jose Canseco are ridiculed and reviled when they talk about steroids being the standard throughout the league: they are deliberately taking a stance against pharmacological Calvinism, and so automatically people hearing them want to reject the idea without listening to their analysis, which often is more logical than people care to admit.

Another effect of pharmacological Calvinism is that news reporters looking to cover steroids automatically assume a negative stance towards them, although that is also influenced by the dangerous side effects. Verducci shows this in an online article recently. A reader asked whether or not cheating by faking a tag out was the same as steroids cheating. Verducci's response: "Equating a missed tag play at the plate with sticking a needle full of illegal performance-enhancing drugs into your body? . . . Because baseball tradition winks at Lo Duca making a phantom tag we're supposed to just say, 'Oh, what the heck, juice up, boys!' 'Cheating' is a lot like crime: it comes in all shapes and sizes."<sup>20</sup> This response clearly betrays a sense of pharmacological Calvinism: although both acts are cheating, the drug use is inherently worse. And Verducci's response is representative of writers around national sports.

The articles written by reporters who take this view form the next reason why steroids are considered cheating. Sports journalism is very pervasive. Every fan has to get their scores and results from somewhere, often on a daily basis. Sports fans also tend to spend a lot of time discussing sports, so ideas and opinions they read get discussed and argued about in their social circle. Thus sports journalism pieces that vilify steroids and are meant to shock readers into caring about the issue go a long way towards defining fan attitudes towards it. In the congressional testimony, Waxman cites these articles as a reason that people eventually realized how pervasive steroids were, and how much of a problem they were.<sup>3</sup> Since the Verducci piece, SI has run other exposes on steroids, as has ESPN the magazine. All these sources automatically take the stance of vilifying steroids, and its proponents, like Jose Canseco, are ridiculed. Is it any wonder, then, that steroids are dismissed out of hand as cheating?

The final reason steroids are considered cheating is because they work so well. And because they work so well, and so many ballplayers used them, the build of a user, his problems and habits, became commonly known and looked for. What is more, because of the negative press steroids got, fans were able to label them an “other” to dismiss steroids users as people holding alien values without really looking or considering how they might be motivated by the same things as regular fans. This can be shown by the massive amount of jokes about “big heads, small balls,” a common side effect of steroid use, and the vehemence of the national polls quoted earlier. For fans to say that anyone testing positive should be thrown out of the sport is quite harsh, considering that there are arrests of ballplayers all the time for a variety of other drug use charges and crime, and none of them are thrown out on the first offense. Something that

might help explain this position is the legitimate use of steroids. Steroids are not like nutritional supplements or protein shakes that people might regularly take to get in shape, and they are not petty crimes or drug charges that baseball fans are familiar with or have committed themselves. They are treatments for sick people to help survive treatment, including treatment of diseases like AIDS, which already is somewhat marginalized in mainstream culture. And even in those diseases, steroids are something to avoid if you can. So that makes purposeful steroid users in sports all the more alien.

Ultimately, the reason why taking steroids is considered cheating goes back to the chemical properties of steroids themselves: they work too well at helping athletes build muscle, and combined with the country's pharmacological Calvinism, make for bad press and public perception. This leads fans to consider steroids "cheating" and justify it by saying steroids give an unfair competitive advantage, when the entire sport of baseball is built on just such advantages. If steroids were less useful, like nutritional supplements today, they would probably be legal, widely used, and just another part of the game, like spitting sunflower seeds. Unfortunately, because of the pressure on athletes who will do anything to succeed, steroids are only going to get more powerful and hard to detect, rather than more benign and legal. But that doesn't mean the steroid "scandal" won't go away. Already, journalists are trumpeting this baseball season as the post-steroid era. If history is any indication, people will think steroids solved, stop caring, only to be shocked again when the next great and popular surge of offense turns out to be the result of their beloved players using the next generation of performance enhancers.

## Endnotes

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