

Cooperstown and the ‘Roids

by Bill James

For the last ten years or so people have been asking me to comment on the issue of steroids and the Hall of Fame. To this point I have resisted addressing these questions, arguing—as I do with the Hall of Fame status of active players—that there is nothing to

be gained by trying to guess where objects still in motion will eventually land. With the passage of time the dust will settle, and we will see the issue more clearly.

After ten years, however, the dust does not seem to be settling very rapidly. There seem to be as many different and contradictory opinions on the issue now as there were five or eight years ago. We are all tired of arguing about it, but we still don't agree. In any case, I am finally ready to say what I have to say about it. It is my opinion that, in time, the use of steroids or other Performance Enhancing Drugs will mean virtually nothing in the debate about who gets into the Hall of Fame and who does not.

The process of arriving at this conclusion began when I was studying aging patterns in the post-steroid era. One of the characteristics of the steroid era was that we had several dozen players who continued to improve beyond the normal aging time frame, so that many of them had their best seasons past the age of 32. This is historically not normal. In the post-steroid era we are returning to the historic norm in which players hit a wall sometime in their early thirties. But what does this mean?

It means that *steroids keep you young*. You may not like to hear it stated that way, because steroids are evil, wicked, mean and nasty and youth is a good thing, but...that's what it means. Steroids help the athlete resist the effects of aging.

Well, if steroids help keep you young, what's wrong with that?

What's wrong with that is that steroids may help keep players "young" at some risk to their health, and the use of steroids by athletes may lead non-athletes to risk their health as well. But the fact is that, with time, the use of

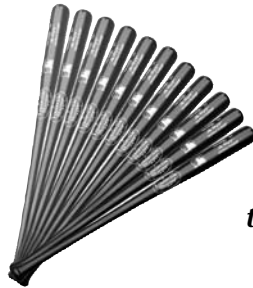
drugs like steroids will not disappear from our culture. It will, in fact, grow, eventually becoming so common that it might almost be said to be ubiquitous. *Everybody wants to stay young*. As we move forward in time, more and more people are *going* to use more and more drugs in an effort to stay young. Many of these drugs are going to be steroids or the descendants of steroids.

If we look into the future, then, we can reliably foresee a time in which *everybody is going to be using steroids* or their pharmaceutical descendants. We will learn to control the health risks of these drugs, or we will develop alternatives to them. Once that happens, people will start living to age 200 or 300 or 1,000, and doctors

will begin routinely prescribing drugs to help you live to be 200 or 300 or 1,000. If you look into the future 40 or 50 years, I think it is quite likely that every citizen will routinely take anti-aging pills every day.

How, then, are those people of the future—who are taking steroids every day—going to look back on baseball players who used steroids? They're going to look back on them as pioneers. They're going to look back at it and say "So what?"

The argument for discriminating against PED users rests upon the assumption of the moral superiority of non-drug users. But in a culture in which *everyone* routinely uses steroids, that argument cannot possibly prevail. You can like it or you can dislike it, but your grandchildren are going to be steroid users. Therefore, they are very likely to be people who do not regard the use of steroids as a moral failing. They are more likely to regard the banning of steroids as a bizarre artifice of the past.



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Let us suppose that I am entirely wrong about all of that; let us suppose that our grandchildren do *not* wind up regularly ingesting chemicals to extend their youth. I would still argue that, in the long run, the use of steroids will eventually become a non-issue in who gets into the Hall of Fame.

My second argument is this:

1) Eventually, *some* players who have been associated with steroids are going to get into the Hall of Fame. This is no longer at issue. One cannot keep Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, A-Rod, Manny Ramirez, Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa and all of the others out of the Hall of Fame forever. *Some* of them have to get in. If nothing else, somebody will eventually get in and *then* acknowledge that he used steroids.

2) Once *some* players who have been associated with steroids are in the Hall of Fame, the argument against the others will become un-sustainable.

When the time comes at which two or three or four players are in the Hall of Fame who have acknowledged some steroid use, the barrier to other steroid users rests upon some sort of balancing test. Did this player use *too many* steroids to be considered legitimate? Is his career a creation of the steroids? Would he have been a Hall of Fame player without the steroids?

I am not suggesting that it is inappropriate for any one sportswriter or any one Hall of Fame voter to balance these considerations as best he can. But one does not build a house upon a well-balanced rock. The way that each sportswriter looks at these issues is going to be different from the way that each other looks at them. There can only be a consensus on one of two positions:

a) that steroid users should not be in the Hall of Fame, or

b) that steroid use is not an issue in the debate.

Between the two extreme positions, it becomes a fluid discussion. Once we move away from the one extreme, in my view, we will begin to drift inevitably toward the other.

I would liken this to attitudes about sexuality and television. At one point there was a firm consensus that there was no place for sex on TV. Married couples, on TV, slept in twin beds. The first departures from this firm position were small and insignificant...PBS specials on prostitution, chewing gum and soft drink commercials that pushed the boundaries of "taste", and edited-for-TV

movies that were not quite as edited as they would have been a few years ago. Once there was no longer a firm consensus at an extreme position, there was a fluid standard that moved inevitably toward more and more openness about sexuality.

I will note that this happened without the consent and without the approval of most of the American public. It was never true that *most* people wanted to see more sex on TV. Probably it was generally true that most Americans disliked what they regarded as the erosion of standards of decency. But it was always true that *some* people wanted to see more sex on TV, and that was all that mattered, because that created a market for shows that pushed the envelope, and thus eroded the barriers. It was like a battle line that disintegrated once the firing started. The importance of holding the battle line, in old-style military conflict, was that once the line was breached, there was no longer an organized point of resistance. Once the consensus against any sexual references on TV was gone, there was no longer any consensus about what the standards should be—thus, a constant moving of the standards.

I think the same thing will happen here: Once there is no longer a firm consensus against steroid users in the Hall of Fame, there will be a fluid situation which moves inevitably in the direction of more and more inclusiveness. It is not necessary that people approve of this movement in principle. It is only necessary that there be advocates for those who are still on the outside looking in...for Sammy Sosa, let's say, and Manny Ramirez. And there is no question that there will be those advocates.

Third argument. History is forgiving. Statistics endure.

At the time that Dick Allen left the major leagues, virtually no one thought of him as a Hall of Fame player. In his first year of eligibility for the Hall of Fame, he received the support of a little less than 4% of the voters. In his fifteen years of eligibility for BBWAA selection, he never reached 20% in the voting.

Dick Allen did not have imaginary sins or imaginary failings as a player. He had very real offenses. But as time passes, the details of these incidents (and eventually the incidents themselves) are forgotten, and it becomes easier for Allen's advocates to re-interpret them as situations in which Allen was the victim, rather than the aggressor or offender. The people who were there die off. A certain number of people want to play the role of Dick Allen's advocate. No one—including me—wants to play the role

of persistently denigrating Dick Allen; in fact, I'm pretty sure you can go to hell for that. People who were friends of Dick Allen speak up; the dozens or hundreds of ex-teammates who despised Dick Allen keep silent, or speak of him as well as they can manage.

For very good reasons, we do not nurture hatred. We let things pass. This leads history to be forgiving. Perhaps it is right, perhaps it is wrong, but that is the way it is. Sometime between 2020 and 2030, Dick Allen will be elected to the Hall of Fame.

The same thing has happened, more slowly, with the Black Sox. In 1950 no one thought Joe Jackson should be in the Hall of Fame. Now it is a common opinion—perhaps a majority opinion—that he should. People question whether he “really” did the things that he clearly admitted doing. His virtues are celebrated; his sins are minimized. Perhaps this is right; perhaps it is wrong. It is the way of history.

History will rally on the side of the steroid users in the same way that it has rallied on the side of Dick Allen, Joe Jackson, Orlando Cepeda, Hack Wilson and many others. But with the steroid users, we are not talking about a single isolated “offender”, but about a large group of them, representing the bulk of the dominant players of their generation. The forces that push for their acceptance will get organized much more quickly and will move with much greater force. This, in my view, will make the use of steroids a non-factor in Hall of Fame discussions within 30 to 40 years.

Fourth argument. Old players play a key role in the Hall of Fame debate. It seems unlikely to me that aging ballplayers will divide their ex-teammates neatly into classes of “steroid users” and “non-steroid users.”

One of the key reasons that Dick Allen will eventually be in the Hall of Fame is that one of his ex-teammates—Goose Gossage—feels strongly that he should be, and is outspoken on this issue. Goose Gossage is now a Hall of Famer. His voice carries weight.

Eventually, younger players who were teammates of Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa, A-Rod and Roger Clemens are going to be in the Hall of Fame. Andy Pettitte is probably going to be in the Hall of Fame. When he is in the Hall of Fame—if he gets there before Roger—he is *going*

to speak up for Roger Clemens. Hell, somebody might even speak up for Barry Bonds.

Once this happens, it will erode the prejudice against steroid users in the Hall of Fame, to the extent that that prejudice might otherwise exist. *You* might choose to divide the world of baseball players into steroid users and non-steroid users, but this is not a division that makes intuitive sense when you know the people involved. Therefore, this is not the division that will ultimately endure, once the long historical sorting-out process that makes Goose Gossage relevant and Lindy McDaniel irrelevant has run its course.

I have a fifth argument here, but before I get to that, let me speak for a moment on the other side of the issue. Let us adopt, as the face of the non-steroid user, Will Clark. Will Clark and Rafael Palmeiro were college teammates, and apparently were not the best of friends. As players they were rivals. Texas had Palmeiro (1989-1993) and then had Clark (1994-1998), while Palmeiro went to Baltimore. After the 1998 season the Orioles—then a strong franchise—signed Clark, while Palmeiro went back to the Rangers. Later on Palmeiro went back to the Orioles, so that both the Rangers and the Orioles had Palmeiro, then Clark, then Palmeiro. There was always a debate about which was the better player.

I've always been a great admirer of Will Clark, who I think was a great player and is a historically under-rated player in part because his numbers are dimmed by comparison to the steroid-inflated numbers that came just after him. Will Clark, in the pre-steroid era, was a much better player than Palmeiro, although Palmeiro was good. Palmeiro, as we entered the steroid era, gradually pulled ahead of Clark. I have no idea whether Will Clark ever used steroids or not, but let us use Will Clark as the face of the player who chose *not* to use steroids in order to stay in the game, the player who chose the natural route and suffered the consequences of that.

Is it fair to Will Clark to compare him to players who chose to cheat in order to move beyond that level? No, it is not. Absolutely, it is not. But the critical issue is, Is this cheating? If you choose to regard it as cheating, if you choose not to support the Hall of Fame candidacy of a steroid user because you regard it as cheating, I would not argue with you. I think that Will Clark has a perfect right to feel that he was cheated out of a fair chance to compete for honors in his time, and, if you choose to look at it from the standpoint of Will Clark, I don't think that you are wrong to do so.

But at the same time, I do not believe that history will look at this issue from the standpoint of Will Clark. I don't see how it can. What it seems to me that the Will Clark defenders have not come to terms with is the breadth and depth of the PED problem, which began in the 1960s and expanded without resistance for almost 40 years, eventu-



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ally involving generations of players. It seems to me that the Will Clark defenders are still looking at the issue as one of “some” players gaining an advantage by using Performance Enhancing Drugs. But it wasn’t really an issue of *some* players gaining an advantage by the use of Performance Enhancing Drugs; it is an issue of *many* players using Performance Enhancing drugs in competition with one another. Nobody knows how many. It would be my estimate that it was somewhere between 40 and 80%.

The discrimination against PED users in Hall of Fame voting rests upon the perception that this was *cheating*. But is it cheating if one violates a rule that nobody is enforcing, and which one may legitimately see as being widely ignored by those within the competition?

It seems to me that, at some point, this becomes an impossible argument to sustain—that all of these players were “cheating”, in a climate in which most everybody was doing the same things, and in which there was either no rule against doing these things or zero enforcement of those rules. If one player is using a corked bat, like Babe Ruth, clearly, he’s cheating. But if 80% of the players are using corked bats and no one is enforcing any rules against it, are they all cheating? One better: if 80% of the players are using corked bats and it is unclear whether there are or are not any rules against it, is that cheating?

And...was there really a rule against the use of Performance Enhancing Drugs? At best, it is a debatable point. The Commissioner issued edicts banning the use of Performance Enhancing Drugs. People who were raised on the image of an all-powerful commissioner whose every word was law are thus inclined to believe that there was a rule against it.

But “rules”, in civilized society, have certain characteristics. They are agreed to by a process in which all of the interested parties participate. They are included in the

rule book. There is a process for enforcing them. Someone is assigned to enforce the rule, and that authority is given the powers necessary to enforce the rule. There are specified and reasonable punishments for violation of the rules.

The “rule” against Performance Enhancing Drugs, if there was such a rule before 2002, by-passed all of these gates. It was never agreed to by the players, who clearly and absolutely have a right to participate in the process of changing any and all rules to which they are subject. It was not included in any of the various rule books that define the conduct of the game from various perspectives. There was no process for enforcing such a rule. The punishments were draconian in theory and non-existent in fact.

It seems to me that, with the passage of time, more people will come to understand that the commissioner’s periodic spasms of self-righteousness do not constitute baseball law. It seems to me that the argument that it is cheating must ultimately collapse under the weight of carrying this great contradiction—that 80% of the players are cheating against the other 20% by violating some “rule” to which they never consented, which was never included in the rule books, and which for which there was no enforcement procedure. History is simply *not* going to see it that way.

The end of the day here is about the year 2040, perhaps 2050. It will come upon us in a flash. And, at the end of the day, Mark McGwire is going to be in the Hall of Fame, and Roger Clemens, and Sammy Sosa, and Rafael Palmeiro, and probably even Barry Bonds. I am not especially advocating this; I simply think that is the way it is. I only hope that, when all of these players are enshrined, they will extend a hand up to a few players from the Will Clark division of the game.