
OBSERVATIONS

No Game for Old Men

Abraham Socher

KIKI CUYLER was a terrific right-fielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Chicago Cubs in the 1920's and 30's, a Johnny Damon-type player with speed and extra-base power. In 1925 he hit .357 and led the National League in triples and runs scored. From 1926 through 1930, he led the league in stolen bases in every year but one. In the mid-30's, after an injury, Cuyler started to slow down. He played his last season with the Brooklyn Dodgers as a second-string outfielder, and was out of the majors by the age of forty.

A couple of years later, Cuyler's son was offered a spot on a minor-league team. According to the baseball historian Bill James, Kiki knew that his son was not good enough, and wanted to spare him the pain of finding out. "Look, son," he said, "I had to leave the major leagues because my legs have gone back on me, and that's why I'm through as a player. But I'll race you a hundred yards. If you beat me, I'll say it's all

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right to go ahead. If I beat you, you'll give it up." Kiki won by fifteen yards, going away.

Nowadays, to judge by former U.S. Senator George Mitchell's recently delivered 409-page *Report to the Commissioner of Baseball of an Independent Investigation Into the Illegal Use of Steroids and Other Performance-Enhancing Substances by Players in Major League Baseball*, a player like Kiki, and maybe even his son, would have other options.

PERFORMANCE-ENHANCING drugs are most tempting to players at the margins of talent, health, and, perhaps most of all, age. A minor leaguer—especially one who is not a power hitter—can muscle up to get to the majors. A good pitcher can move into the superstar category by throwing a faster fastball. With the use of anabolic steroids, a great hitter can build extraordinary muscle mass, increase his endurance, and prolong his dominance. For older players, human-growth hormone (HGH) can speed the healing after an injury, help tired bodies bounce back from workouts, and prevent the muscle deterioration that comes with age.

In fact, aside from sudden changes in physique or increases in home runs and other "power" statistics, the easiest way to tell if a baseball player is, as they say, on the juice is if his career does *not* describe an arc more or less like Kiki Cuyler's: peaking in the mid- to late twenties, plateauing for a few years, and in decline by the mid- to late thirties. A truly great player like Willie Mays might peak earlier and plateau for longer, but the shape of the curve is—not coincidentally—as inexorable as death.

Or at least it was until recently. Mays's first great year was 1954, when he was twenty-three. His last excellent year was thirteen years later in 1966. When, as a child, I saw him play at Candlestick Park in 1971, his legs, like Kiki Cuyler's, had "gone back" on him, and his play was quickly deteriorating.

As it happens, the modern-day player most comparable to Willie Mays is his godson Barry Bonds. But Bonds had the best offensive year of his or arguably anyone's career at the advanced age of thirty-six, hitting a staggering 73 home runs. Indeed, Bonds is unique in having played his five best years after the age of thirty-five, which is

to say—again not coincidentally—after he is alleged to have begun taking anabolic steroids.

SENATOR MITCHELL'S report was commissioned by the corporation known as Major League Baseball, which happens to be a principal beneficiary of the rekindled public interest in the game induced by steroids-powered record-breaking. On those grounds alone, expectations for the report were not exactly high to begin with. Although Mitchell begins on a strong note—"there has been widespread illegal use of anabolic steroids and other performance-enhancing substances by players in Major League Baseball, in violation of federal law and baseball policy"—and although he and his team uncovered some striking new facts and allegations, the report was no surprise to anyone who had been paying attention over the last couple of decades.

Twenty years ago, in the *Washington Post*, the sports columnist Tom Boswell remarked of José Canseco, then a speedy young power-hitter with the Oakland A's, that he was the best example of a player "who has become great through steroids." By his own later account in *Juiced* (2005), Canseco was the Johnny Appleseed of anabolic steroids. In the late 80's, he introduced them to teammates, including Mark McGwire. "It was really no big deal," Canseco writes. "We would just slip away, get our syringes and vials, and head into the bathroom." A few years later, playing for the Texas Rangers, he was injecting Rafael Palmeiro, Juan Gonzalez, and Ivan Rodriguez, each of whom improved significantly as a home-run hitter.

Other players learned of the good news from elsewhere. Around the same time, outfielder Lenny Dykstra of the Philadelphia Phillies was cheerily attributing his off-season addition of 30-odd pounds of muscle to working with free weights and "really good vitamins." In 1996,

Brady Anderson, a lead-off hitter for the Baltimore Orioles who had never managed more than 21 home runs in a season, suddenly hit 50—a feat that Hank Aaron, Ted Williams, and Reggie Jackson never achieved.

TWO YEARS later, in the midst of Mark McGwire's spectacular 1998 duel with Sammy Sosa to break the season record of 61 home runs, a reporter noticed a bottle of androstenedione in McGwire's locker. "Andro" is a prohormone, which, while legal in baseball at the time, was designed, like anabolic steroids, artificially to raise the athlete's level of testosterone. An earlier version had been used by the big-shouldered East German Olympic women's teams of yore and was already banned in football and the Olympics.

The *New York Times* ran the story under the headline, "The News Is Out: Popeye Spikes His Spinach," though by then McGwire looked more like Bluto. He ended the season with 70 home runs, ten more than Babe Ruth had hit in 1927 and nine more than Roger Maris in 1961. Contemplating his achievement, McGwire famously remarked that he was "like, in awe of myself."

So was major-league baseball, which had been languishing after the disastrous strike-shortened season of 1994, and was now regaining its status as America's pastime. And so were others. According to the reporters Mark Fainaru-Wada and Lance Williams in *Game of Shadows* (2006), the certainty that McGwire was using much more than over-the-counter "andro" was what helped convince Barry Bonds to find a trainer who would supervise a serious steroids and weight-training regimen. Within three years, Bonds had broken McGwire's single-season record.

In the fall of 2000, interviewed on a nationally syndicated radio show, Jason Giambi of the Oakland A's spoke with a jocularity bordering on candor about his own massive physique and repeatedly referred to

Barry Bonds, then in the first year of his great steroids-fueled run, as a "cartoon character." Major League Baseball was evidently not listening. In response to the increase in home runs that year, Commissioner Bud Selig requested an investigation into the manufacture and composition of baseballs. The investigative team took a trip to the Rawlings plant in Costa Rica and found that the cork centers of the balls were not being "juiced." Nobody asked whether the players were.

Others, however, were paying attention. In 2003, both Giambi and Bonds came under investigation for their patronage of the Bay Area Laboratory Cooperative (BALCO), which specialized in undetectable boutique steroids. The ongoing BALCO scandal, together with the debacle of congressional hearings in 2005 in which McGwire brokenly repeated that he would not "talk about the past" and Rafael Palmeiro defiantly insisted that he had never used steroids, only to test positive shortly thereafter, led in turn to the commissioning of Mitchell's report.

THE REPORT goes over this and a great deal more public information. None of it is news: the pharmacological genie has long been out of the bottle, and the use of steroids in other sports, most prominently track-and-field and cycling, is well known. Why should baseball be any different? As a minor leaguer told the writer Will Carroll, "if shooting bull piss was going to get me ten more home runs, fine." No amount of congressional harrumphing, "Say-it-ain't-so, Joe" pleas from broken-hearted youngsters, or reports of awful side effects (shrunken testicles, a literally inflated head, uncontrollable rage, severe depression, immunosuppression, cancer) will change this.

Still, the report is valuable for the wealth and specificity of its detail. This is largely due to the cooperation of Kirk Radomski, a former New York Mets batboy and

clubhouse employee, and his customer Brian McNamee, formerly a strength coach for the Toronto Blue Jays and the New York Yankees. Radomski signed a plea agreement with the U.S. Attorney's office in which he admitted to selling anabolic steroids, HGH, and amphetamines to dozens of major-league players from 1995 through 2005. McNamee signed a similar agreement. Both face further charges if they can be shown to have lied to investigators.

What Radomski and McNamee's testimony revealed was not an organized conspiracy but more like a high school with rampant drug use. There were overlapping groups of incompetent dealers and giddy users exchanging drugs, information, and misinformation. Steroids and syringes were delivered by Federal Express to players at the clubhouse, kept in their lockers, and used in the bathrooms. Private "trainers" had wide access to the clubhouse.

All this was abetted by very lax discipline on the part of Major League Baseball—understandable enough, since, at least in the short term, it profited from the practice. Team officials privately discussed which players they thought were on steroids. Thus, in notes from a Los Angeles Dodgers meeting reproduced by Mitchell, the talk came around to Paul Lo Duca: "Got off the steroids . . . took away a lot [of] hard line drives." This was said more in sorrow over the lost hits than in anger over illegal doping. Meanwhile, the Players Association strenuously resisted testing for drugs and seems to have tipped off its members to impending tests. Mitchell notes elsewhere that teams failing to report information about their players' use of banned substances were liable to a \$2 million fine. None has ever been assessed.

Of course, the biggest headlines about the report have concerned Roger Clemens, who was trained by Brian McNamee. As with Bonds, Clemens's career path had described

a trajectory similar to that of previous great players—until the "decline phase" of middle age, when suddenly it shot up like a rocket. McNamee asserted that he administered a variety of steroids and, for a while, HGH to Clemens. But in a series of increasingly vociferous and not entirely plausible staged events designed to protect his reputation as the greatest pitcher of his generation, Clemens has denied taking steroids. The truth is that Roger Clemens *is* the greatest pitcher of his generation—albeit someone who, just like the greatest hitter of his generation, does appear to have called on artificial aids.

SEEING BUD SELIG piously endorse before Congress the findings and recommendations of the Mitchell report, one was inevitably reminded of the scene in *Casablanca* in which Captain Renault announces he is "shocked, shocked" to discover gambling (read: doping) going on even as he collects his winnings. One question is just how long major-league baseball can continue to cash in. But a more interesting question, at least for the serious fan as 2008 spring training begins, is what all this means for our enjoyment of the game.

W.H. Auden has some nice lines about watching someone who has found an activity at which he excels:

You need not see what someone
is doing
to know if it is his vocation,
you have only to watch his eyes:
a cook mixing a sauce, a surgeon
making a primary incision,
a clerk completing a bill of
lading,
wear the same rapt expression,
forgetting themselves in a
function.
How beautiful it is,
that eye on the object look.

Watching Barry Bonds at bat during his spectacular steroids-fueled run was like that. One saw what it really meant to "keep your eye on

the ball." He stood at the plate, massive, poised, and discerning, with that eye-on-the-object look: ready to hit anything hittable but willing to walk if the pitch was even minimally off the plate. In 2004, Bonds got on base better than 60 percent of the time, breaking Ted Williams's record when he hit .406 and walked 147 times in 1941.

There is a story about Williams at bat toward the end of his career. With each pitch, the young catcher for the opposing team complains to the umpire: "You call that a ball?" After the third such complaint, the umpire replies: "Young man, when your pitcher throws a strike, Mr. Williams will let you know." Watching Bonds was like that, too, or at least as close as those of us too young to have seen Williams are ever going to get to seeing a baseball player hit with seemingly effortless precision and power. He was both rapt and ready, forgetting himself in the function of hitting. This is the beauty to be had in sports: to see a human being perfectly adapt his body to the arbitrary, almost impossible requirements of a game in unrehearsed real time.

But if that is so, why should I, as a fan, resent Bonds for, at great cost to his own body and reputation, affording me the experience of such beauty? To return to the *New York Times's* favorite literary allusion, why should we cheer Popeye but boo Barry? Or, perhaps closer to home, why do we root for Joe Hardy in the musical comedy *Damn Yankees* when he makes a Faustian bargain to exchange his broken-down, middle-aged body for that of a brilliant young ballplayer? In fact the case for Bonds is stronger, since, no matter what "performance-enhancing" drugs were involved, no one else in major-league baseball could have become the hitter he became.

In short, what is wrong with the libertarian argument to which Bonds himself has sometimes gestured? What is wrong with just letting "the show," as players call the

major leagues, be a show—and not worrying about what goes on backstage?

One way to see the weakness of this argument is by means of a thought experiment. Last spring, in a spectacular lapse of taste and good judgment, ESPN began airing a “reality television show” on Bonds’s pursuit of Hank Aaron’s all-time home-run record. Called “Bonds on Bonds,” the show, which was eventually canceled, gave supposed behind-the-scenes glimpses into his preparations for the game. Imagine if this had included the carefully calibrated and charted ministrations of Bonds’s personal trainer Greg Anderson. If it is a Monday, Wednesday, or Friday, then an HGH belly-button shot. On Mondays and Wednesdays, BALCO’s undetectable designer drug “The Clear” is placed under the tongue. On Tuesdays, “The Cream” is massaged onto the elbow. The three-week cycle would end with a climactic Clomid pill, and then viewers could be treated to the suspense of wondering whether Bonds’s power would drop during the off-week before the next cycle began.

THE POINT IS that it is important to us that great athletes push the limits of human achievement. But it has to be *human* achievement. Seeing Bonds in batting practice or on the weight machines in his pre-steroid days might have been boring, but at least these exercises would have had an internal relationship to the ath-

letic virtues of strength, speed, and coordination that he demonstrated on the field. Performance-enhancing drugs are literally, even sickeningly, external.

It is not as if someone other than Mark McGwire hit 70 home runs in 1998; but it is not quite as if the middle-aged McGwire did, either. He may have intuited something like this in his apparently fatuous remark that he was “in awe” of himself. Awe is not really an attitude one can feel toward oneself. Perhaps he was in awe of the body he had become.

We have, in brief, a kind of reverse-Frankenstein problem: not has the monster become human, but has the human become monstrous? And are we as interested in seeing these players throw fastballs and hit home runs once we know that monsters or virtual post-humans is what they are? This is a particular problem in baseball, where numbers—60, 61, .406—stand for iconic achievements and serve as landmarks in the history and tradition of the game. Can the tradition hold together if the numbers change with the speed of pharmaceutical advances?

The steroids scandal is unique in the history of baseball. It involves no cheating on the field; no spitballs, no fixing of games. It may have been so widespread that it did not even upset the overall competitive balance of play. Finally, unlike the cocaine scandals of the 80’s, it most certainly did not result in worse play on the field. Nonetheless, if the loosely

Aristotelian argument I have been suggesting is correct, this scandal could kill or at least radically transform our understanding and appreciation of what baseball, and sport more generally, is. Indeed, it may already have happened.

WHEN WILLIE MAYS was a teenager he played on a factory team in Alabama with his father, who was called Kitty Kat because of his grace in the field. Kitty Kat was in his mid-thirties and Willie was sixteen. In his autobiography, Mays described the last time they played together. A batter hit a sinking liner to left center:

I heard my father say “all right, all right, let me take it.” But then I knew that the ball was sinking and he was too far back, and I saw that if I cut in front of him, I could handle it, so I did and caught it off the grassstops.

A. Bartlett Giamatti, the late commissioner of baseball, who, unlike Bud Selig, revered baseball and could turn a phrase, spoke of the game as an arcadia in which the play was “graceful, energetic, and free in the order and law of a green field.” As a Renaissance scholar, Giamatti would also have known that there is death, or at least a hint of it, even in arcadia. This is a lesson that, if it is not too late, baseball should learn and teach its players. Like Kiki Cuyler, Willie Mays, Sr. knew it. He never played again.