

Cheating You Way Into the Hall of Fame

9/26/12

By Joe Flaherty

I have always had mixed emotions regarding which players from baseball's "Steroid Era" should be voted into the Hall of Fame.

On one hand, these players knowingly defamed the game they claimed to love by choosing to take illegal performance-enhancing drugs. On the other hand, many of these players were the game's biggest stars, the top performers during a time when as many as 50 percent of the players are believed to have used some sort of performance enhancer.

Eric Gagne, former closer for the Dodgers, has written a book in which he claims that 80 percent of his teammates were using human growth hormone during his time in Los Angeles. Jose Canseco, who takes credit for introducing steroids to baseball, named names in his 2005 book, but no one he identified as a drug user has sued him.

It's unclear why so many of these players took steroids or HGH in the first place, but many attribute it to the notion that "everyone else is doing it, so I need to do it just to keep up."

Also, "Chicks dig the long ball," as we learned from a well-known baseball ad campaign. Guys, too---and they'll show up for more games if more players are hitting more home runs. By extension, owners and general managers started "digging the long ball" and rewarded bombers with multi-million-dollar contracts.

Incentives matter. And millions of dollars is a very strong incentive.

Sammy Sosa, Roger Clemens and Barry Bonds are on the Hall of Fame ballot for the first time this year. All three have been linked to steroid use, but you could easily make the argument that all of them, had they refrained from using steroids, still produced at a Hall of Fame level.

Sosa and Bonds were churning out 30-plus homer, 100-RBI seasons regularly in the early 1990s, and they had the added dimensions of speed and defense in their games. Clemens was a two-time Cy Young award winner before the age of 25 and did some of his best work between 1984 and the mid-1990s, when it's believed most players caught wind of the steroid phenomenon.

But, as I said, incentives matter.

Sosa and Bonds were obviously willing to give up other facets of their game to focus on clouting home runs and cashing in at the bank. Clemens probably figured he could be the best power pitcher of all time if he had a little performance boost. Being "the best power pitcher of all time" would merit a pretty hefty contract.

What also made the decision to use steroids easier for players was the lack of testing for PEDs. The first random testing program was put into place in 2001, so the 1980s and '90s were basically a free-for-all.

Combine the extremely low risk of getting caught with the astronomical reward of multi-million-dollar contracts and it's not hard to see why drug use became so rampant so fast. But in my opinion, the biggest factor in the advent of the "Steroid Era" was that drugs literally saved baseball from falling off the national map.

Baseball was coming off the first canceled World Series in its history in 1994. The labor dispute that caused it was finally settled before the 1995 season, but it left a bitter aftertaste. Attendance was down. TV ratings were down. Baseball, America's National Pastime, was on the brink of becoming irrelevant.

Luckily for baseball, sluggers like Sosa, Mark McGwire and Bonds came along and started smacking home runs left and right, and fans came out in droves to witness this newfound power surge. Nobody asked questions; they were just happy to have a reason to be excited about baseball again.

Chicks dig the long ball, remember?

I've always believed that Bud Selig, the current baseball commissioner who was also on the job throughout the strike debacle, was the biggest enabler for players who were using drugs.

It's not as if incentives only mattered to the players; they mattered to Selig and team owners, too. But I can't really blame Selig for turning a blind eye to drug use after seeing how well baseball rebounded because of it. It has just snowballed into a conundrum he probably never could have foreseen.

I have given a lot of thought to the "Steroid Era" and argued with my friends about whether players linked to it should be recognized for their accomplishments. I was never able to take a definitive stance.

This may be a biased opinion because of where my loyalty lies: Sammy Sosa is my favorite player of all time and the reason I love baseball so much. I spent a good chunk of my childhood trying to emulate his heroic accomplishments.

Little did I know most of it was artificial. But my point is *it still happened*. We can't just go back and erase the record books and the collective memory of baseball fans.

But then I would put on my hat of objectivity and realize that guys like Sosa were basically frauds who lied to the nation's baseball fans for personal gain. They cheated the system by using drugs. They cheated the fans by keeping their drug use secret, or denying it. They cheated the game by leading us to a point where we have to put the career of every player from that era "into context" and debate whether he was clean.

Both sides of the argument had been tugging at my conscience until I heard something from writer Bill Savage that changed my outlook on the “Steroid Era” forever:

“If you can’t write the history of the game without them, they deserve to be in the Hall of Fame.”

It’s as simple as that. Now I can acknowledge both sides of the argument in a singular answer.

Can you honestly look back at the recent history of baseball and NOT mention Sosa, Bonds, or Clemens as integral parts of the game? No, you can’t.

They did cheat, but they also saved baseball. No one can simply ignore what they accomplished in the ‘80s, ‘90s, and 2000s.

It’s also worth mentioning how talented these players had to be to produce at the rate they did, even if their performance was chemically enhanced. Steroids don’t just “work”; a user needs to put in as much time, preparation and effort as he ever did in order to benefit from using them.

It’s probably inevitable that some players will have Hall of Fame numbers but not Hall of Fame reputations because of the steroid cloud. Perhaps an explanation of their astronomical numbers would supply some needed context. They might not get in on the first ballot, but I think time will heal the public perception of these players to the point where people will realize how influential their performances were to the game. This is probably why Roger Clemens tried to make a comeback with the Houston Astros this year and extend his window of eligibility by five years.

If it were up to me, I would have a section of the Hall of Fame designated for players who competed in the “Steroid Era”. Each of their plaques would list, in detail, their involvement with performance-enhancing drugs. Then fans would be able to formulate their own opinions about that player as a person, and put his performance into context with other players’.

This would also benefit players like Ken Griffey Jr. and Frank Thomas, who succeeded in that era despite never being linked to PEDs. It will amplify their success if it can be shown that they were naturally among the greats in a time where not much else was natural.

But to deny that these players’ statistics and impact on the game are Hall of Fame-worthy is absurd. I hope voters will realize this before it’s too late.