

Could Steroids Save Baseball?

“And that’s the ballgame,” said San Francisco broadcaster Duane Kuiper to conclude a mundane telecast of Giants baseball. The Giants had lost 2-0, a game in which they had only five hits, two of which didn’t even leave the infield. The only runs scored in the game were early in the 2nd inning, and the rest of the game felt comparable to watching paint dry.

I sat up on the couch, rubbed my eyes, and wondered where three hours of my life had just gone. Don’t get me wrong, baseball is undoubtedly my favorite sport, and I never grow tired of it, but every now and then I can’t deny that it’s just not as riveting as other sports are to watch. As I flipped through the channels to find something else on, I began daydreaming of baseball in years past; when the league was dominated by powerful behemoths like Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, and Mark McGwire, all of whom were connected to the use of PEDs and metabolic steroids. Maybe it was the nostalgic side of my youth talking, but baseball seemed more *fun* back then, like at every waking moment someone was going to blast a ball further than you’d ever seen, or blow away an opponent with a fastball at over 100 mph.

The baseball purest in me initially diminished the thought with disgust. After all, PEDs and steroids were *cheating*. The likes of Babe Ruth, Hank Aaron, and all the godfathers of the game that built its legacy without enhancements would roll over in their graves. But the other side of me considered the casual spectator, who wouldn’t bother wasting their time and/or money to watch a 2-0 pitching duel like the one I just saw, and would much rather watch football or basketball and leave baseball to the geezers. In that aspect, I thought, “Could steroids actually *help* baseball?”

Now, before you throw me to the wolves for condoning the use of outlawed drugs to boost popularity, let’s review some facts and play a little devil’s advocate.

The “steroid era” of baseball doesn’t necessarily have specific dates that mark its exact beginning and end, but a popular point of emphasis derives from between 1998 to 2001 with the offensive statistics put up by Barry Bonds, Mark McGwire, and Sammy Sosa during that period. The previous single season homerun record set 37 years prior to 1998 by Roger Maris in 1961 was, ironically, 61. Not many came close to challenging Maris’s record until McGwire and Sosa practically raced to the number in ‘98, McGwire ultimately winning it by not only beating Sosa to the record but also racking up 70 for the year in total; Sosa ended with a somehow disappointing 66. Needless to say, two men had overtaken a record that some thought to be unreachable in spectacular fashion, in a year that also saw 13 major leaguers hit at least 40 long balls to their own credit. Then just three years later, Bonds would crank 73 in a season to once again break the unbreakable. Bonds would later plateau Hank Aaron’s 755 career home runs a few years later, a mountain that mankind may never see scaled again.

These men were modern day superheroes, making the impossible look like a walk in the park. More importantly, baseball was skyrocketing in nearly every category from ratings, revenues, and TV exposure. It garnered numbers similar to the NFL and out-scored the NBA, its main contemporary over the years. Baseball has not seen numbers such as these since, despite the recent resurgence back to the more offensive-minded style of play teams are beginning to adopt. Baseball fell as quickly as it rose, and perhaps some rule changes are the reason.

Major League Baseball began implementing scheduled PED testing in 2003 in suspicion of their presence due to the successes of Bonds, McGwire, and Sosa. Failing such tests would result in suspensions and fines, depending on the offense. Since 2005, 39 players have served suspensions from their major league ball clubs for testing positive for PEDs, and more than 60 minor league players have been suspended for similar offenses. The aforementioned three athletes among others have been given little recognition from the Baseball Hall of Fame and significant baseball outlets such as writers and the media in regards their legacies [Bonds in particular] as, despite their on-field heroics, are tainted with the steroid controversy and may never see their names acknowledged with the greatest who've ever lived because of it.

I traveled to Cooperstown, New York with my family in 2012 to visit the Baseball Hall of Fame. Excited as ever, and as a true Giants fan, I ran all around finding every shred of Giants history in that museum to get a picture of. I felt prouder with every speck of Giant lore I can across. Finally, I made it to the booth that dawned the helmet, bat, and jersey of Barry Bonds that he used to hit his 756th career home run and be crowned the home run king; the one I truly looked forward to seeing. As I examined with pride, while also wearing my since long-outgrown Bonds t-shirt, I read the placard that reviewed the items in the seal-proof glass case. It read that Bonds's feat was not recognized by Major League Baseball because of the steroid controversy; that until proven guilty or innocent, the record would forever be clouded in mystery and conflict. Then I looked at the ball that was graffitied with a beige colored asterisk, supposedly sometime after it was bought after an auction, before the museum could get ahold of it. I was overcome with sadness, and shame. It was like they wanted to pretend it didn't count, almost like it didn't happen. Whoever put that asterisk on the ball to make sure it would forever be known that the record was broken, but impurely.

That representation of one of baseball's most historic moments still stands today, reflecting the never-ending debate over achievements linked to the involvement of PEDs and steroids and whether or not they can be considered to be valid.

At the end of the day, the use of any kind of substance that can give you any kind of seemingly inhuman abilities is cheating and cannot stand. But as football continues to dominate the American sports scene, and the once back and forth ratings battle between baseball and basketball is now in favor of the latter by a very wide margin, baseball is searching for answers to help draw in a larger viewing audience. Changes have already been made to help shorten the game's length to keep younger audiences occupied, as well as an increase in social media usage and numerous ownerships considering moving in their outfield fences to possibly increase offensive production and make the game more lively. However, pushback from baseball purists don't want to see the game that has withstood the test of time since the late 1800s severely tainted in any way. This has presented front office executives with the daunting task of finding a median between drawing in new audiences while keep their regulars happy, with a sport that is slowly trending towards obscurity. Only time will tell what the future holds for America's pastime, but we can only wonder what could of, or would happen if the "superheroes" never had their powers taken away.