

INFIELD DIRT

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Drugs and Baseball: Whose good and whose bad?

By John Morello

So I guess the jury has spoken through their newly elected foreman Curt Schilling. Barry Bonds is a cheater. According to Schilling's statements on Boston's WEEI, Barry has cheated on his wife, his taxes, and most importantly Baseball. Schilling also said that Barry had shifty eyes, did not look "trustworthy", and he heard from someone that Barry had attended meetings with Al Qaeda types. Oh, by the way, Barry likes white women and does not believe in God.

Of course Barry has never admitted to any of the first three things nor are any of the other statements true, relevant, or important. But I figured since we live in an age where anyone can fling a statement against the wall to see if it sticks, I just wanted to see if my lies would stay out there, or better yet come back to me like the children's telephone game.

I have been concerned in recent days as I have watched the media, players, and public

pile on in destroying Barry Bonds. These attempts seem to me hypocritical at best and, yes, racist at their worst.

Baseball loves to sell itself as the pure American ideal. We think of images like the scruffy haired farm boy making it to the "big." Playing backyard games with childhood friends long gone. Having a catch with Dad. A willow tree serving as second base. Yankee stadium after the attack on the world trade center as New York and America emerges victorious.

These images are tied into our very own dreams of the beautiful ideals we hold about our country and unfortunately they are just that...Dreams. Ideals. But far from the truth. Baseball is running from its own ghosts in the same tracks as America itself. Its hard to tell the cart from the horse when comparing the specific culture of the major leagues and America's culture at large. We are no longer the country that exports its glorious products from the midwest, we import them from a cheaper place, just as our players are imported. Our neighborhoods are so dissected that a game of baseball with nine kids on each team, who can get along and play with nine other kids, is a distant dream. Dad is often not around to play catch. And if you remember, New Yorker's bravery may have shocked the world after 9-11 but, quite symbolically, the Yankees lost that series to the Diamondbacks and now our country is mired in a 5 year war which gets bloodier everyday.

You see, baseball is just like real life but baseball does not want you to know that. They need you to BELIEVE like a church needs you to believe. If you do not believe you will not come to church. Which means the offerings go down while the church goes under. So if you want to keep a ring on Monsignor Bud Selig's finger you better believe in your gods and hate your devils. So we hold sacred our DiMaggio and our Williams and we despise our Pete Rose or Shoeless Joe. We love our benevolent god Hank Aaron and we despise our devil Barry Bonds.

But as anyone can tell you who has come to explore and embrace a faith of their own, its never that easy.

The last time I checked America was at war on drugs. The illegal ones that is. Alcohol, which statistics point out is involved in more crime and deaths than all the other drugs combined, is acceptable and exempted. But in general we see drugs ruin lives and have developed responses. Addiction tears families apart.

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Overdoses shatter lives filled with potential. And illegal drug trafficking is at the heart of American crime. This epidemic spreads from the inner-city crack den to the midwest meth lab. We are a nation on drugs and simultaneously at war with them. We need our drugs but we don't like that we need our drugs. Because, in the back of our minds, we

know that for every drunk on the street there is a drunk in the CEO chair with a Martini. For every 17 year old girl on crack there is a 30 year old mom on speed and Prozac. For every young teen smoking weed there is a father smoking the same stuff and then popping his Cialis. This is a rather grim assessment I know but if we search our minds we must realize that we are constantly living in this dichotomy. So when we look at baseball why should it be any different than Real Life. I assert that, like everyday life, baseball has been a game of drugs for years and it is still and shall ever be. The policy can be summed up with the famous line about life in New Jersey: "Everything's legal as long as you don't get caught."

While it is true that Baseball made steroids illegal in recent years, for many years it wasn't. It may have been frowned upon but it was not illegal. So one is confronted with this thought. If, as Schilling and others who wear the label as baseball purist would want, we are to weed out all offenders and throw away all records and statistics of those who used steroids...Where do we start? Do we start before it was illegal and everywhere or after it was illegal...and everywhere? Furthermore, if we go after steroid users for enhancing performance where do we draw the line on drugs that enhance performance? According to the famous Sports Illustrated article a few years ago, Steroids were rampant in baseball during the eighties and nineties but it was certainly not the only or most popular drug. Amphetamines

known as “greenies” were in fact so wide spread that not only were they used by the majority of players, but their use was encouraged. Starting pitchers wanted their infielders to be “on their game” and at their best and if that meant popping a handful of speed than so be it. Some retired players now tell stories of pitchers getting mad before the game at other players who were not “giving one hundred percent” by taking their speed. These “greenies” have been around since the golden age of baseball right up until today and they are still largely ignored because they are an inconspicuous pill rather than a needle. Also, their users do not win MVP awards and home run derbies but they certainly make the web gems on ESPN every night. I wonder if Mr. Schilling has ever taken a substance to enhance his performance. I wonder if he has ever benefited from a great play by an infielder on speed. I wonder if he ever got an insurance home run in the eighth inning from a big left fielder or DH on steroids. Probably not and if he did I’m sure he’s sorry. In addition, if he is sorry and he is the good christian that he proclaims, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if we went back and removed all of the victories that we feel had cheating involved in some way. It’s what Jesus would do.

And what about alcohol? One would argue that it surely does not enhance performance but it is certainly detrimental to ones health and lifestyle. From Babe Ruth to Mickey Mantle to the recent terrible loss of Josh Hancock

in St. Louis, alcohol has claimed many victims. If baseball is the american pastime it claims than obviously, like steroids, Commissioner Selig and the players would not want to send the message to kids that it is acceptable and something successful athletes would do. So we start by removing it from some clubhouses like we have seen this week but do we then go after the players and their appearances off the field but in the public eye. What about the beer commercials? What about the billboards? What about the beer logo on my scorecard and the whiskey ads in GQ with that hot young shortstop? You start to see the problem and the potential hypocrisy we have and you start to see just how myopic and petty the attack on Barry Bonds becomes.

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So why the attack on Barry Bonds specifically? Perhaps it’s because Barry, admittedly, never played the media circus game and never gave the reporters the quotes and unfet-

tered access to his personal life that some craved. Perhaps its because he is a millionaire many times over. Perhaps its because he approaches a record that many hold sacred. A record that is held by a quiet peaceful man who endured hardships and death threats at a time when blacks were still lucky to be included in America’s game. A time when most of America did not want to see Hank Aaron break the Babe’s record. Sadly, it was not because everyone loved the iconic Babe so much either. Lets face the fact that at the time the big deal was framed thus: Black Hank was breaking the White Babe’s record and most of our country did not want that. Optimists would say the country was not ready for it but Hank, because of his outstanding character and quiet demeanor, charmed his way into hardened racist hearts. I say nothing has changed since 1975 and 715.

The black athlete of today is still hated by most of white America. Not overtly and not with N-words but the hatred is still there. Most of middle class white america wants to hold onto what is *theirs*. Their piece of the pie. Their income. Their neighborhood. Their ideal of America. They do not want someone with a different skin color being able to take what is *theirs* simply by hitting a home run, catching a pass, or dunking a ball. That would not be fair in their minds because, after all, they had to go to school for four years and suck up to the boss and sit in a cubicle to make their living. Many around me question, barely inaudibly, the justice of America they have been weaned on.

In their minds, if a black kid can NOT go to college and NOT even speak proper english and still make a million dollars...Then it shatters white America's precious dream. The give away from Mr. Schilling which smacked of these sentiments was when he said the following:

"I don't care that he's black, or green, or purple, or yellow, or whatever. It's unfortunate - there's good people and bad people. It's unfortunate that it's happening the way it's happening."

Whenever I've heard someone say "I don't care if they are green" that person was often times a racist. Whenever I've heard someone say "There's good ones and bad ones"...They were usually a racist. Because not far behind that is the statement. "There are black people and there are N-word." You know it. You have heard it. And I'm not talking about Chris Rock's routine. I am talking about that guy next to you on the subway, at the bar, at the cookout, or in your house. Hold on John, are you saying that Curt Schilling is racist because he attacked Barry Bonds? Maybe. Well he admitted it didn't he? He admitted he did not like black people. He tolerates latinos because because they smile more. And he thinks that old people and children should be exterminated. No he never admitted that stuff...I'm just playing that telephone game again. But the point is that, regardless of the steroid issue, I think that most of America would be rooting against Barry Bonds because he is simply to them a symbol of all that is

wrong with America. Unlike humble Hank who "knew his place", Barry is wealthy and bold. He is confident and some would say cocky.

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He also makes more in a month than Hank made in two years. You see, to most of America and Mr. Schilling there are good ones and there are bad ones. Hank was a good one. Barry is a bad one. Good black man. Bad black man. Apparently it is now Schilling and white America's role to be the judge and tell us which ones are which. Just like they tell us which drugs are bad and which ones are (wink) good. Steroids bad. Speed good. Human growth hormone bad. Alcohol good.

It will be interesting to see how the countries opinions ebb and flow over the next

few weeks as Barry will draw closer and inevitably break the record. I personally am very happy for him and his achievement. I have never been a big Pirates, Giants, or Barry Bonds fan but thats mainly because on the east coast we stick to our red sox and yankee heroes. But I do know baseball and I do know "good" when I see it. And I do know "great" when I see it. Make no mistake, Barry Bonds is great and if he had the access to steroids and perhaps was using steroids then it is likely that other players had the same access and potential to use them. So then let us also question the pitchers throwing the ball to him and the fielders chasing his liners to right-field. Further, if all the hitters have access to the same drugs then how come they didn't hit 74 home runs in a season or how come they did not hit 755 home runs. I believe its simple. Because they couldn't. They are not as good. They could not swing as well, hit the ball as hard, or drive it as far because Barry Bonds is better than them. You see as Mr. Schilling would say: There are good ones and there are great ones. Like it or not, Barry Bonds is not green, he does not care what you think and he is great.

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