

Summer of Suspension

Players using performance-enhancing drugs don't just violate the rules — they also violate our trust



BOB LATHAM

The summer sports season is just about behind us, and yet again the sports landscape was tarnished by performance-enhancing drugs. The Biogenesis revelations in Major League Baseball were certainly the most notorious, but there was also the suspension of American 100-meter record holder Tyson Gay and several Jamaican sprinters that kept them out of the IAAF World Championships. The 14

players suspended by MLB included former National League MVP Ryan Braun and three-time American League MVP Alex Rodriguez, which would appear to be the last self-inflicted nail in the legacy coffin of A-Rod.

It is difficult to be a sports fan under such circumstances. Baseball can keep Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, Mark McGwire and now probably A-Rod out of the Hall of Fame. It can put an asterisk by single-season and career records for home runs. The Tour de France can strip Lance Armstrong of seven victories (without, of course, declaring anyone else the victor since others on the podium were doing the same thing). That is all warranted, but what about all of us who saw those performances? What do we do with the memories of those moments and the excitement we felt?

I had season tickets to Texas Rangers games during the three seasons A-Rod played in Texas. He was the best player in baseball, and one of the best players I have ever seen, performing consistently even for a team that was not particularly good. I remember taking young kids to the games and saying, "Watch that guy if you want to see how baseball should be played." I saw Lance Armstrong win two of his seven Tour de France victories. And I, like everyone else in America, was crowded around a television set in September 1998 to watch Mark McGwire hit his 62nd home run to break Roger Maris' long-standing single-season record. It was a little bit different when Barry Bonds hit his 756th career home run because he had already been strongly suspected of using PEDs. But for most of these other athletes, we believed in them. We trusted them and therefore trusted our emotions, while the memories of their achievements became indelible.

So where do we put those performances in our cultural psyche? Why can't we, as we do with music and the arts, just enjoy the performances and not worry about what substances went into their creation? After all, we don't

have to give back copies of "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" because The Beatles were experimenting with psychedelic drugs at the time, do we? Do the literary awards given to Ken Kesey's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" all have to be returned because the inspiration for Chief Broom came to Kesey during an LSD trip? Should "Kubla Khan" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge be banned since it came to him during an opium dream? Should we not be celebrating the Rolling Stones going strong in their 50th year because Keith Richards has been linked to every substance known to man? Why is Woodstock celebrated and Ryan Braun's MVP award tarnished? Can I not put A-Rod's career in the same memory vault that I would a Nirvana concert—troubled yet inspired?

CAN I NOT PUT A-ROD'S CAREER IN THE SAME MEMORY VAULT THAT I WOULD A NIRVANA CONCERT—TROUBLED YET INSPIRED?

The answer, of course, is that there is a zero-sum game with sports. Somebody wins and somebody loses. Recording artists can take "all kind of pills" to give them "all kind of thrills" (as Dr. Hook sang), but it doesn't keep other artists from selling their own music. Taylor

Swift is doing just fine, for instance, but there can be only one Olympic 100-meter champion or Tour de France champion. Swift will sell however many albums she's going to sell, regardless of what other artists are taking to inspire themselves—and, by the way, if it turns out her music was inspired by substances rather than ex-boyfriends, it would be the musical equivalent of learning that Wee Willie Keeler took human growth hormone. I suppose you could make the argument that a substance-inspired artist winning a Grammy keeps someone else from winning a Grammy, but it's not quite the same as sports. Selling records isn't a structured "competition."

This is what keeps the stewards of sports fighting to ensure that sports are clean and that athletes do not have to share a medicine cabinet with Keith Richards to perform. And it's what should keep us, the sports fans, supportive of their efforts. But that doesn't mean you can't enjoy Keith. ■

Bob Latham is a partner at the law firm Jackson Walker, L.L.P., and an International Rugby Board member. A compilation of his best columns titled "Winners & Losers: Rants, Riffs and Reflections on the World of Sports," is available in the Media Zone at SportsTravelMagazine.com.