

Steroids Deniers

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Gary Benz takes some time out for us to vent this afternoon about the ongoing Major League Baseball steroid soap opera. Allegedly, the players union is once again refusing to cooperate with some of the requests from former Senator George Mitchell's ongoing probe. Gary also points to some specific comments made on the matter this week by Indians reliever Roberto Hernandez that bothered him ... and says that despite talking a good game, the players and their union are not really in favor of real reform.



Baseball and its union talk a good game of trying to clean up the sport by eliminating the scourge of illegal drugs, but as long as the union is really in charge any chance for real reform is unlikely.

The “[news](#)” this morning that the Major League Baseball Players Association has refused a request to cooperate with former Sen. George Mitchell’s ongoing probe into steroids by supplying anonymous medical information is a surprise on the magnitude of Paris Hilton appearing drunk in public. The Players Association has long resisted any attempts to rid the sport of performance enhancing drugs for fear, apparently, that a decline in performance would portend a decline in salaries. As if that could ever be the case. As long as baseball is also populated with idiot owners like George Steinbrenner and impotent commissioners like Bud Selig, salaries will continue to rise to the point where there are only two or three franchises that can afford to field a team.

A point to clarify in all of this is that the Mitchell investigation was not seeking the medical records of any particular player, although most observers could easily compile a list of usual suspects if they had to. Instead, Mitchell and his investigators are trying to determine from the medical information the scope of the problem, which makes the request necessary. The union, led by Donald Fehr, has never much cared about the health of its members and the dangerous side effects that accompany the unauthorized use of performance enhancing drugs, thus they played the conspiracy card in rebuking Mitchell. They claim that “players” fear that Mitchell and his staff will spend time trying to use things like age, height, weight and blood type as a means of specifically identifying the users.

While theoretically possible, no one should believe for a moment that the union really harbors any such concerns. They simply don't like letting anyone else control the agenda in baseball. But whether the Union wants to admit it or not, it is important to the integrity of the game that there is an understanding of the scope of the problem, something an anonymous review of medical records will help accomplish. Recall that folks like admitted users Jose Canseco and Ken Caminiti estimated that more than half of all players used some form of steroids. That raises any number of questions not the least of which are whether those numbers are true and, if so, for how long they have been true.

But baseball fans shouldn't hold out any hope that the Mitchell probe will contain anything substantive as long as Bud Selig is Commission and the union can rely on veterans like the Indians Roberto Hernandez to carry their water on such issues.

While the “news” that the Union wouldn’t cooperate hardly moved the surprise needle, what Hernandez [told](#) Paul Hoynes of the Cleveland Plain Dealer earlier this week on this issue was disappointing or at least should be to Indians fans. Hernandez made it clear that he is no fan of the Mitchell probe and particularly the request for medical records. For a 42-year-old pitcher who has supposedly been there and done that, he came across as incredibly short-sighted and uninformed, at best, misguided at worst.

For example, he told Hoynes “One way or the other you're going to look guilty. What are they going to look for? We do have rights. I'm not saying I have anything to hide. But it seems like a witch hunt. It's starting to give baseball a black mark. Once you think it's dying down, two weeks later here it comes again.”

No one is questioning whether the players have “rights,” for whatever that might mean. But Hernandez needs to take a basic civics lesson. This isn’t a government-sponsored or initiated probe and thus any claims that the inquiry somehow violates some sort of Constitutional right to privacy, as his statement implies, is simply wrong. There are statutes that protect the privacy of an individual’s medical records and no one is suggesting that the statutes don’t apply or shouldn’t be

respected. But the request is for anonymous information in order to understand the problem and does not constitute some sort of witch hunt.

Hernandez also said that while he doesn't condone the use of steroids, they were not "illegal then." Presumably he's referring to anytime prior to the new drug testing policy that was put into place only when Congress held a gun to the union's head, but even in that case he would, of course, be wrong. The unauthorized use of controlled substances like steroids or human growth hormone has always been illegal. Whether major league baseball tested for it may be a whole other matter, but use of the drugs was still illegal unless properly described.

Sadly, more laughable than either of these statements was the suggestion by Hernandez that the Mitchell probe is "starting to give baseball a black mark." If Hernandez, and any other player for that matter, seriously thinks that it's the investigation that is giving baseball the black mark and not the underlying use of steroids and other performance enhancing drugs by the players, then the disconnect that currently exists between the players and fans will never truly be corrected.

But what is truly amazing about the Hernandez remarks was his refusal to even acknowledge that steroids have ever been a problem. He told Hoynes “Were there players [who used steroids]? Mostly likely. . . . You assume, but no one has any proof.” Really? No proof you say? The admissions of Canseco, Caminiti and even former Indian Jason Grimley aren’t proof? What about the several positive tests of both major and minor league players in just the past two years, none of which have been overturned? Or what about former Mets clubhouse assistant Kirk Radomski who pleaded guilty to illegal steroid distribution who said he handed out steroids to players like they were tic tacs? Even for those whose legal training is limited to watching Boston Legal, this constitutes proof.

In some respects, Hernandez and his views can be counted as those of just another knucklehead ballplayer. But Hernandez is or should be different. He’s been around the game longer than some of his teammates have been alive. General Manager Mark Shapiro brought him in specifically to be that veteran presence, someone to help mentor the younger players. If Hernandez is just towing the party line so as not to run afoul of the union, then he is a coward. On the other hand, if he honestly believes that there’s no proof players used steroids, then it’s fair to ask how can he possibly guide the younger players on this Indians team on the pitfalls to avoid. That’s just what that locker room needs, a steroids denier.

But try as the union and its robotized drones like Hernandez might to divert attention away from the problem, it isn't going away. Barry Bonds' chase for Hank Aaron's home run record only highlights the reasons why. Whenever one of the sacrosanct records in any major sport is being threatened, that is usually time for celebration and debates over the merits of the record holder and the person who threatens it. Certainly becoming the all-time home run king should be one of those times. But Bonds' conduct has completely removed any joy from those proceedings and replaced them with a series of questions that the players and the Union and Bonds are never likely to answer.

Hernandez may think that asking these questions gives baseball a black eye, but the real problem is the fact that the questions keep coming up. Baseball may have made Hernandez a relatively rich man but the game he loves will never fully eliminate its credibility problem until it eliminates the reasons the questions get asked in the first place. For Hernandez and his brethren, the willing or unwitting participation in perpetuating the problems is ultimately a sin they will have to live with.