

Starting From Scratch

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Friday, December 14 2007 7:00 PM -

The relative lack of activity in the chat rooms, the various stories on fan reaction on television and in the newspapers all speaks to a huge wave of fan indifference about Senator George Mitchell's report on the steroids era in baseball. Fans just don't care, and figure that a huge chunk of players were cheating for a long stretch of time. Gary Benz says that baseball pretty much just needs to start over.



It would have been a surprise if the fans really did give a damn.

The relative lack of activity in the chat rooms, the various [stories](#) on fan reaction on television and in the newspapers all speaks to a huge wave of fan indifference about Senator George Mitchell's report on the steroids era in baseball. The voice of one fan in particular, I think, well summed up what really is the issue. He didn't care because he already figured most baseball players were cheating anyway.

And isn't that, in the end, the most damning indictment of all? If fans truly think that the entire sport is tainted, what's the point?

When the dust settles on all of it, it is rather doubtful, actually, that most fans will still hold the view that nearly every player was on the juice. But what no one can escape is the fact that the caretakers of major league baseball-the owners, the club executives, the players, their union, the agents, the national and local media-did such a lousy job with the privilege they were given, that it threatened the very foundation of the sport itself.

In my view, there really is only one answer: take a bulldozer to the sport and start from scratch. Kick out everyone and anyone who in any way is associated with

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the steroids era. Ban them from baseball permanently, like Shoeless Joe Jackson and Pete Rose. And when I say everyone and anyone, I mean just that: the owners who still sit idly by while the likes of George Steinbrenner and his ilk whose insane quest to buy a championship year after year created such an economic upheaval that it encouraged players to cheat in order to grab a bigger pay day; every club executive, from the general managers to the towel attendants, who put their heads in the sand while the players they pampered, purchased, traded for or signed seemed to get bigger as if they were inflated by an air hose; every manager or coach who stayed cloistered in his office in order to avoid seeing the ugly realities taking place in his club house; any player who took the stuff and any player who looked the other way while his teammate was getting an injection; union leaders like Donald Fehr, Gene Orza and the rest of their minions who intentionally blocked a meaningful drug testing program until Congress threatened action; the reporters who were in those locker rooms every day, saw what was happening, heard the whispers and refused to do their jobs because they feared their access to the players would dry up.

You see, the Mitchell report is far more than just the names of the 70 or 80 ball players whose arrogance clashed with their stupidity when they not only associated with but actually befriended the various drug dealers and suppliers whose only job was to give them an unfair edge. The report is about all of us who actually find, or used to anyway, meaning in the sport itself now having that stripped away from them. Not only is it a virtual certainty that whatever results you may have seen on the field over the last 10-15 years are suspect, but there's little comfort that anyone associated with baseball has the guts or the wherewithal to ensure we don't have another 10-15 years of similar uncertainty, Commissioner Bud Selig's predictable hand-wringing notwithstanding. That's why you have to start from scratch.

Consider the fall out of just the last few days. In this corner you had the Roger Clemens camp, but not necessarily Clemens himself, issuing denial after denial, expressing outrage after outrage, and questioning the fairness of the process. But his attorney, Rusty Hardin, without any sense of irony, claimed his client had been denied a fair shake while hiding from the fact that Clemens was given every opportunity to participate in the investigation and refused, just like every other player, preferring instead to shout from the cheap seats after the fact. It's the

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coward's way out because it avoids actually having to tell the truth at the moment of truth. You can bet the mortgage that Clemens won't pursue legal action even while claiming he was slandered because that, too, would force him to testify under oath about the allegations, putting him squarely in the sites of a perjury charge if he lied.

In another corner sat the pathetic talking heads of ESPN seemingly spending more time attacking the credibility of the accusers than in focusing on the overall message. In other words, it was just more of the same. When it is nut-cutting time, they'll jump on the side of the players in order to ensure they can still do their jobs on a daily basis.

What they can't hide from, though, is the fact that this story didn't break on a single day. It was an era, for goodness sakes. It was literally years in the making. I don't care how lousy of a reporter Peter Gammons might be. You mean to tell me, credibly, that in all the locker rooms he's been in for all these years he never saw anything, ever? He didn't see enough to make him want to follow a reporter's instinct that maybe, just maybe, there is a story to tell? And that's not to single out Gammons at all. Paul Hoynes, Sheldon Ocker and Terry Pluto, to name just three locals, have been covering major league baseball literally for decades and have been in those same locker rooms. Where were they when it mattered most? And that's not to single out Hoynes or Pluto either. Every town with a major league team has their own versions of Hoynes, Ocker and Pluto. They were silent as well.

In still another corner sits the club owners and executives, exemplified by the likes of Houston's Drayton McLane who said on Friday that he still plans on letting Clemens fulfill his personal services contract with the club, barring "real evidence" linking Clemens to steroids. In just that one statement, McLane couldn't have sent a more powerful message as to what he thinks about Mitchell's report.

But for the conveniently forgetful McLane, he should check out pages 167-175 of

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the Mitchell report. Clemens is mentioned some 82 times. The accusations couldn't be more specific: Clemens' personal trainer, someone to whom he is still inextricably linked, says he personally injected Clemens with steroids on several different occasions. That's real evidence, enough so that the burden does shift to Clemens to prove otherwise since this is not, after all, a criminal proceeding. But Clemens refused to cooperate. End of story. Selig thanks you very much, Mr. McLane. Your fruit basket should arrive on Monday.

The rest of the corners in this story, and there are plenty more, are equally sordid. The truth is that it's far easier to attack the source than to confront the reality of what they have had to say. So in that sense, the reactions of those directly involved are understandable. But that doesn't make them right. Jose Canseco may be a terrible human being for any reason you want to think. But to this point he's still viewed as an outsider, a disgruntled ex-ball player even as virtually every one of his accusations bears fruit. He's batting a thousand and he still hasn't been sued.

But given the reaction to Canseco over these last several years, why then should we reasonably think that the reactions to the accusations made by Kirk Radomski or Brian McNamee would be any different? The default thinking, which makes so little sense it could have been written by Lewis Carroll, is that that they are making all this stuff up because they were facing more severe criminal penalties if they didn't tell the truth. Huh? The last thing a guy facing hard time wants is to face even more hard time for not telling the truth. But why let a little logic get in the way?

A corollary to all of this is that Radomski and McNamee were just telling Mitchell and federal prosecutors what they wanted to hear. Left unexplained is why anyone would actually want to hear that the greatest players in the history of the sport were cheaters? What's the incentive in that?

Whether the Mitchell report will ultimately have some long-term positive impact won't be known for years, but don't hold your breath in the interim. Too many

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people with a vested interest in this are so deep in denial that they can't even see the blood on their own hands. But for all the denial they'll continue to muster, there legacy will always be that they helped ruin the very game they professed to love. Starting over, from scratch, is the least they can do now.