

# The Designer Player

*Rodrigo Villagomez*

Baseball is a multi-billion dollar entertainment industry. The modern age of American sports has seen to it that we no longer look at baseball as just "America's pastime." We must now see it as another corporation striving to produce a product that will be consumed by the populous. It is a corporation that produces the reluctant hero, a man who begrudgingly accepts the title "role model." These players are under intense pressure to continually be on top of their game. They are driven by relentless fans to achieve greater levels of strength and prowess. Consequentially, because of this pressure more professional baseball players are turning to performance-enhancing drugs, more specifically steroids, to aid them in their quest for greatness. Many believe that these drugs decrease the integrity of the players and ultimately the game itself. My opinion is that if it were not for the small percentage of players who have recently been found to use steroids, baseball would not be enjoying the success it does today. So really baseball should be thanking these players for actually keeping the game popular.

Before this argument begins, let's first look at the clinical definition of a steroid. A steroid is "any group of organic compounds belonging to the general class of biochemicals called lipids, which are easily soluble in organic solvents and slightly soluble in water" (Dempsey). Now let's put it in terms that you and I can understand with the help of author Dayn Perry. "Testosterone has an androgenic, or masculizing, function and an anabolic, or tissue-building, function. It is the second set of effects that attracts athletes who take testosterone to increase their muscle mass and strength and decrease their body fat" (Perry). Perry goes on to explain that the physical conditioning the players already maintain combined with the introduction of the hormone accelerates this process. Basically what this all boils down to is the fact that steroids do in fact accelerate muscle mass. There are a million other supplements out there designed to do the same thing; so why the big fuss over steroids? Most people have a problem with them because of the speed with which users obtain their results. If you're a professional athlete making millions of dollars a year, don't you want to be the best as soon as you can? Actually, by using steroids, a batter is hurting his swing. Being big and bulky and able to hit the ball out of the park is great, but not being able to move those humongous arms around quickly in order to hit a 90 mph fastball is counterproductive. It is not the drug alone that is causing the enhanced play. The drugs, combined with an already over-the-top work out schedule, make the player better. If it were possible to become the world's greatest baseball player by simply using steroids and doing nothing else, don't you think that everyone would be doing so?

The main opponents against the use of steroids are those who say that using is an attack on baseball's integrity. Every player who takes the drug damages the credibility of the sport, and this is unfair to those who choose not to partake. My answer is simply to wake up. Long before the media brought the issue of steroids to the forefront, they were being injected, rubbed or swallowed in locker rooms dating back many years. In 1996, Ken Caminiti, a retired third baseman and National League MVP, said in a Sports

Illustrated interview, "It's no secret what's going on in baseball. At least half the guys are using. They talk about it. They joke about it with each other" (Perry). If this is true then maybe we should take a second look at how much stock we have put into the sanctity of the game. Jose Canseco recently released a tell-all book, entitled *Juiced*, on his usage of the drug. Canseco claimed many of his fellow teammates joined him in using steroids and that he personally injected most of them. In reality, the so-called "integrity" of the game has been lost for years. Pitchers have always found ways to doctor the ball so their pitches have extra movement. Batters have used lighter or corked bats to achieve a faster swing. Pete Rose was caught betting on his team while he was a manager. Baseball has not been a fair game for years.

Another of the major arguments of those opposed to using steroids is the health risk factor. Steroid use has been linked to liver, prostate and even testicular cancers as well as heart disease. According to epidemiologist Charles Yesalis, "We know steroids can be used with a reasonable measure of safety. We know this because they're used in medicine all the time, just not to enhance body image or improve athletic performance" (Perry). Steroids are also used in the treatment of breast cancer. In response to the fear of long term effects from the continued use of steroids, Yesalis has this to say: "We've had thousands upon thousands [of long term studies] done on tobacco, cocaine, you name it, but for as much as you see and hear about anabolic steroids, they haven't taken that step" (Perry). The truth of the matter is we hear all the time from modern medicine that we can get cancer in ways we never thought about. Remember when standing in front of the microwave could give us cancer? Or now we hear that talking on the cell phone might be damaging to our health. Living is unhealthy. We all do things that are not good for our bodies, be it smoking or drinking or whatever. These players are no more ruining their bodies than those people who have to have a smoke break every two minutes. In fact, I say that using a natural hormone to increase muscle mass is in fact healthier. Plus, the smoker does not get paid to smoke; at least the athlete has better incentives.

Baseball fans love home runs. Ever since the days of Babe Ruth the loyal fan loved to see the sheer beauty of a baseball leaving the stadium. The home run is a display of strength; it is poetry in motion. So is it any wonder why players continually strive to increase the power of their swing? Nobody wants to be known as the one who could consistently get on base, or the one with the stellar batting average. They want to be the ones who get noticed by both the press and the fans. Barry Bonds, Mark McGwire, Jose Canseco, Rafael Palmeiro. These names should sound familiar, but can you tell me who has the highest batting average in Major League Baseball history? Without the ever-present chance that when these men step up to the plate they can take it deep, the game might get a little boring. In fact baseball itself has been making changes in the game to help encourage home run production. Many ballparks have changed the dimensions of their outfields, moving the fences in to make it easier to hit it out. Just look at steroids as a baseball player's attempt at trying to move the wall in just a little closer.

This recent batch of steroid allegations is not the first case of performance-enhancing drugs being used in baseball. During the 1998 season Mark McGwire broke Roger Maris's long-standing record of 61 home runs in a single season. This new record could not have come at a better time for baseball as most fans still held on to their disappointing memories of the 1994 players strike when the season was cut short. McGwire's assault on the record revitalized the game and gave people a reason to watch again. That joy was carried into the very next season when both McGwire and Sammy Sosa embarked on a head to head battle to break McGwire's record. After all of the excitement died down, the controversy ignited when accusations were made that McGwire was taking androstendione, another supplement equal to an over the counter supplement hydroxycut. This just proves that we as fans love to see exciting plays and players who are larger than life. We watch first and ask questions later. I believe that at the time we as fans did not care whether Mark McGwire was hitting his home runs with help or not. But with the vilification of the supplement he used, we were forced to feel guilty for enjoying a game. The same can be said today with the recent steroid allegations made on some of the game's biggest names.

Above all we must remember baseball is a sport. It is intended for the entertainment of the crowd that attends and those who watch it on television. There of course are fanatics (like myself) who hang on every swing or every throw, but most are casual fans, the ones who watch their favorite team when possible. Arguing over the integrity of a product that is meant for entertainment is futile. The average fan didn't even question whether or not Barry Bonds used steroids to break Mark McGwire's home run record. They just enjoyed the excitement of it all. There are many other and probably better places to find role models in one's life. We as a society should not look to baseball to produce our perfect example of humanity. These people put themselves on stage every night in order to show us things we are not capable of, things that we want to do but can't. For three hours or so we get to escape into a world that is filled with strength and agility. Does it matter the method in which our modern day gladiators achieve their greatness? I certainly think not. Fans should not be let down because their favorite player used steroids to make them watch. They should thank them. Without those players, they might not even have a game to watch.