

Fans let down as players juiced-up

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It's almost spring and hopefully the worst of winter is now behind us. The nation's past time is set to kick off in about a month, but this year a dark cloud hangs over baseball. Jose Canseco, our juiced-up former bash brother, has come forward naming names of players who use steroids, some of the names being very high profile home run hitters like Barry Bonds and Mark McGwire.

Bonds' situation is particularly interesting because he is within striking distance of the sport's most fabled award. He sits just twelve homers away from passing Babe Ruth and 52 away from eclipsing the all-time mark of Hank Aaron. Bonds, in the past, has always shrugged off accusations, but this scandal has certainly tainted his quest at baseball history.

McGwire's situation is a little different. He has been out of baseball for a few years and isn't in the spotlight anymore. Fans cannot just turn on televisions and see "Big Mac" trying to explain himself. What makes this even harder is that this now darkens his glorious 1998 season that is credited with bringing fans back

to baseball.

That joy we felt as fans watching McGwire and Sammy Sosa now isn't so pure. We all know Sosa was caught with a corked bat and for a moment, we all felt a sense of sadness thinking that his numbers were not real. However, tests on his bats proved that they weren't corked and baseball all breathed a sigh of relief. However, this news about McGwire is like a corked bat that won't go away; a bat that we can't test. Even if "Big Mac" came forward and claimed the allegations are false, there is no way that can be proven. We can't go back six years and test McGwire. It's his word against Canseco's, and it comes down to which bash brother you trust more.

That summer of 1998 brought the kid back in all of us, and to those fans that are still kids, it was a thrill to watch history being made in front of our eyes. Roger Maris, a name we hardly knew, who owned a record we all knew, was suddenly in the spotlight. The record had barely been sniffed since Maris hit his 61 home runs in 1961. We all watched with curious eyes as McGwire started the season fast and was ahead of Maris' pace.

Suddenly in June, a relatively unknown slugger from Chicago,

Sammy Sosa, joined the race. Through the dog days of summer, Sosa and McGwire fired back and forth until that one glorious day in early September when "Big Mac" hit number 62. If I close my eyes, I can still hear Joe Buck make the call and I see "Big Mac" jumping around the bases like a 12-year-old with joy in his eyes, as the fireworks went off at Busch Stadium and the Maris family looked on. With tears in their eyes watching the record their father gave at least a decade of the end of his life to attain, the Maris family embraced and accepted McGwire as a worthy successor.

All that drama, but was it fiction? Was the Hollywood ending too good to be true? McGwire captured our hearts. He was king of the mountain and sitting on top of the world. He was Paul Bunyan with super-human strength, hitting balls to the moon. He captured the imagination of every baseball fan. Should we ask for our money back? Should we send letters to "Big Mac" saying that we want compensation for him lying to us? Each individual fan must make that decision.

As we all know, McGwire's record was broken a few years later by Bonds, a far less likeable character. Cocky to the media,

ignorant to fans, Bonds had no support and half the media coverage that "Big Mac" did. We almost want Bonds' record to be false. We want him to be proven a liar so we can laugh in his face. But the record book will still belong to him. And does he care

what the fans think? Absolutely not.

So, as more of this story surfaces, we are left with Canseco. He is also not a likeable guy and is now the reason that joy in 1998 is gone. But he is not a liar simply because he is disliked. He has

exposed some truths about this game. And we as the fans need to take a harder look at whom we put our support behind. We will all be taking a closer look at who's hitting the ball over the fences this summer.

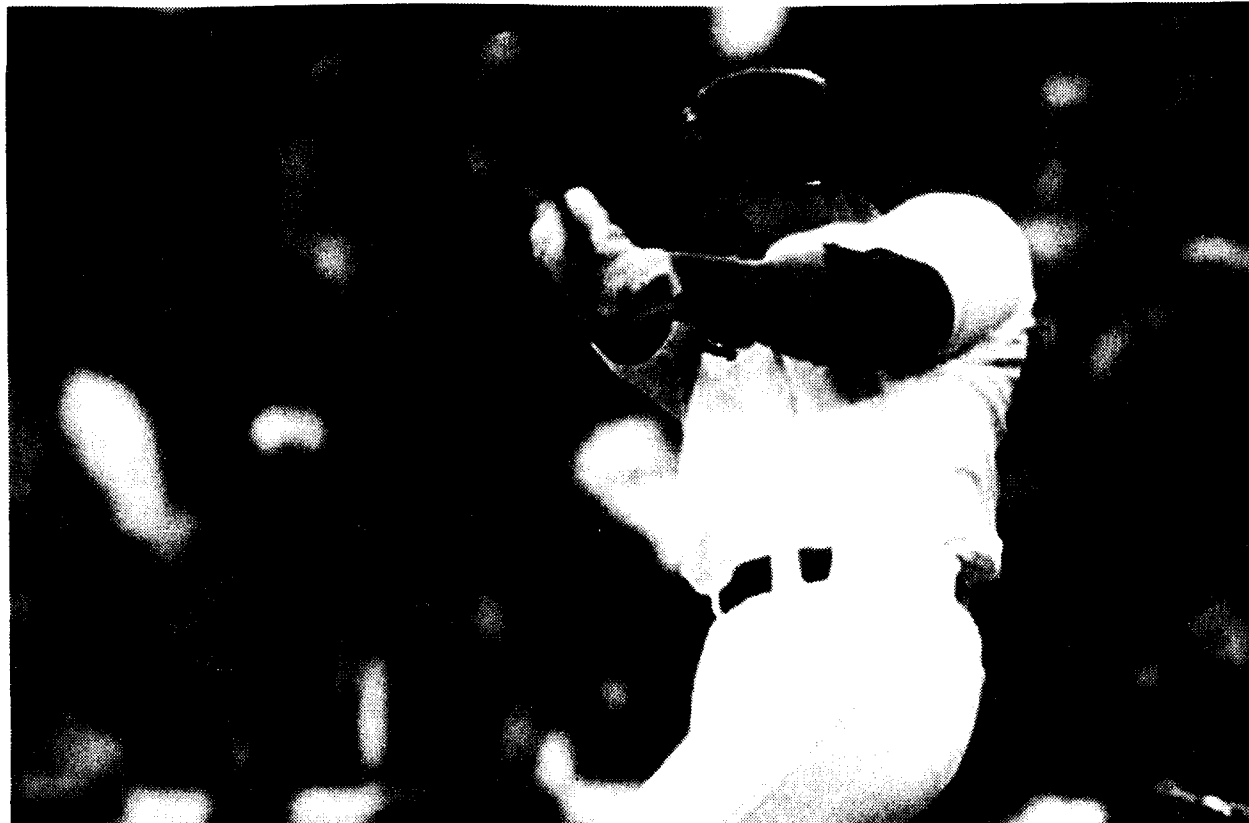


Photo courtesy of www.agreatlink.com

Mark McGwire broke Roger Maris' single season home run record of 61 with 70 in 1998. McGwire retired in November 2001 from Major League Baseball. Since then, he has endured a spotlight in a steroid-use controversy with fellow high-hitters Barry Bonds and Jose Canseco.

"...but I just graduated, I don't have two years of experience..."

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NCAA report card

By Michael Marot
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At least one team at half the nation's Division I schools could lose scholarships next year because of poor academic performance, according to a preliminary report released Monday by the NCAA.

Of the 5,720 teams at 328 Division I schools, about 410 teams risk penalties.

"We hope the behavior changes and the number of teams will actually go down over time," NCAA president Myles Brand said in a conference call.

Most of the scholarship losses, which would be for one year, are expected to come in football, baseball and men's basketball. Those were the only sports with averages below a 925-point outline at which penalties would be assessed. Baseball teams averaged 922, while football and men's basketball were at 923.

The most prominent programs below 700 were the men's basketball teams at Fresno State and Baylor. Fresno State received a 611, while Baylor scored 647 - a figure affected by the transfer of several players

after the 2003 shooting death of Patrick Dennehy.

But there immediately were concerns with the scores.

The Houston women's cross country team and the Eastern Michigan men's indoor track team both scored zero, which NCAA officials said might have been because there was only one athlete represented.

Maryland-Baltimore County athletic director Charles Brown said the NCAA miscalculated the score for its men's track team, which scored 600. Brown said he contacted the NCAA to point out the calculation only included three indoor track athletes - not the 27 that participate in both indoor and outdoor track.

"It's very embarrassing and it hurts our recruiting," Brown said. "It's extremely upsetting that the NCAA released something to the public when they know there are some flaws."

The new calculation gives athletes one point each semester for remaining eligible and another point each semester for staying in school. The points for each team then are divided by the highest possible total of points a team could score. That percentage is assessed a point total, with 1,000

being the highest. Schools scoring below 925, or 92.5 percent, could face penalties.

The NCAA will use a statistical adjustment, similar to the margin of error used in presidential polls, to prevent statistical anomalies for teams with few athletes.

Corrections to the scores are expected to be announced in April. The NCAA also will institute a yet-to-be determined waiver process to avoid penalties.

Schools are expected to be notified by December of the final results, which also include figures from the 2004-05 school year. Programs must take the penalties as early as possible and those that are far below the cutline now could take the scholarship loss next fall.

The 2003-04 data only gives schools an indication of how they are doing.

Under the new format, NCAA officials hope to improve both academic eligibility and retention of athletes. Stronger penalties, including postseason bans for consistently poor academic performance, are expected to be enforced by the fall of 2008.

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