

Performance Enhancing Substances and True Excellence

Last Tuesday evening, while community-minded citizens were at block parties for National Night Out, Barry Bonds broke the record. Minus Baseball's commissioner Bud Selig and 33-year record-holder Hank Aaron (who sent instead a video-taped salute), and amid the perennial controversy regarding alleged use of steroids, the tough-skinned slugger did what no human being has ever done before. He hit home run # 756.

Well, to be honest, Sadaharu Oh hit 868 home runs in Japanese baseball. However, I imagine that Bond's feat, accomplished against pitchers in the National League, was considerably more difficult than Sadaharu's.

Whatever your opinion of baseball, of performance-enhancing substances and of Barry Bonds himself, this is an achievement demanding respect.

Bonds had commented, following his record-tying #755 last Saturday, that the milestone marked the end of the most arduous battle of his career. He was referring, we were told, to the effort to catch Aaron's title, which held for as many years as Bond's Savior walked the face of this earth. But no doubt the viewers understood the real battle to be that of self-vindication: in topping America's home run charts Willie Mays' godson would, in his patiently defiant way, try to shrug the monkey off his back.

You can write a million scathing commentaries, complaining about Barry Bonds' lack of social etiquette, painting asterisks everywhere, boycotting the Giants and predicting Alex Rodriguez's anticipated 757 home runs (at 32, he's only got 257 to go), but you can't deny that the 43-year old Bonds slammed the ball over the wall 756 times. And let's face the truth: pump all the steroids you want, for as long as you want, into the vast majority of the critics, and they will still never be able to hit even a single against any major league pitcher, let alone clear the bleachers into the moonlit Bay. In the words of Mike Piazza, All-Star catcher and slugger:

"I think Barry Bonds is the greatest player I've ever seen. And probably even without the controversy around him, [one of] the top three players in the history of the game. He's got seven MVPs. He had the highest, I think, on-base percentage last year in the National League." (M. Kress)

And on the popular blog, beliefnet (Idol Chatter, Sports, July 20, 2007), Patton Dodd echoed Michael Kress, recounting his conversion experience

when he actually saw Barry Bonds in action. “I've heard sportscasters say ten thousand times that Bonds has a pure swing”, he wrote, “and I've watched that swing on television probably half that many times. But seeing it in person was a new experience. He crushed every ball he hit--a few towering foul balls, a hard-hit line drive, a sharp ground-out.

“All sports fans are Barry Bonds fans”, Dodd concluded. “Bonds is a cheater, but he's a beautiful baseball player, and even those who are turned off by him will watch him break the record with awe-and enjoy it.”

In fact, on August 7th, the Giant's Stadium was filled to 103.4% capacity.

With 42,991 in attendance, and millions more attentive to the airwaves, Bonds' moment of truth had arrived. It was as if this moment had been, despite all the controversy, divinely ordained. With the count 3-2, Bonds swung again, and gifted a fan with New York Mets jersey with a souvenir worth \$400-500,000. During the impromptu ceremony afterwards, in pointing to heaven, Bonds seemed to be honoring more than his father.

Back to Mike Piazza. He is a devout Catholic. Maybe one reason he supports Bonds is the latter's Christian faith, visible in days gone by in that silver cross he so often wore as an earring. Maybe this awareness of a deeper source of strength in Bond's excellence moderates his judgment.

Yet before I go there, let's not forget Lance Armstrong. The survivor of cancer that had, in 1993, metastasized to his brain and required not only a thorough dose of chemotherapy, but also brain surgery, he went on to do what no human had ever done, and may never be able to repeat: winning the arduous Tour de France seven consecutive times. *How did he do it?*

One of history's most celebrated athletes, a role model for participants in every sport, raising over \$60 million in the fight against cancer, Lance Armstrong has also had to fight a more demoralizing battle: the incessant accusations that he won the Tour de France thanks to illegal substances.

To this day, Armstrong has never failed a doping test and continues to maintain his innocence. Still, even if he had boosted his performance via some prohibited concoction, the question would be the same: how many of his critics, given all the available substances in the world, would be able even to finish the Tour de France, let alone be among its celebrities?

Over 2,300 climbers have reached the summit of Mount Everest. In the opinion of the earliest mountaineers, and the purists of today, only those who reached the 29,035 foot peak without oxygen could be said to have truly conquered the peak. ...And what of those who relied on...Sherpas?

In fact, it should be noted that the common aspirin pill contains caffeine.

Which brings me to my complaint about the extent to which controversies have dominated the media. As Piazza notes, if Barry Bonds had violated baseball's elevated standards and perjured himself in the process, then why did the Commissioner allow him the opportunity to reach #756?

In a culture of martinis, cigarettes and double espressos, where golden-era athletic heroes graying into retirement simply substitute alternative performance-enhancing prescriptions for the sports-related ones (let the reader understand), I sense some hypocrisy. We all have our addictions.

The truth is, performance enhancing measures have been rampant from the beginning, and they are as common today as ever. Take, for example, chewing tobacco. Recently, baseball seems to have greened, as one sees less and less of the swollen cheeks of players who, in years gone by, used to eject, as predictably as Old Faithful, an opaque glob of contaminated slobber directly onto the field. There, designer Nike's would stomp the foul, nicotine-laden oil slick into the soil, creating a hazardous waste site.

So now maybe the players wear sanitized nicotine patches. But there are other motivators in sports. Besides the women waiting, available, in the stands of certain professional sports circuits, there are the numerous other perks offered to those who make the MVP list or six-figure salaries. Lucrative advertising contracts, access to benefits that only the elite enjoy, together with fame, the spotlight, and a chance to make history, all lead to a higher rate of likely financial success in any number of fields.

In the case of Barry Bonds, far more objectionable to me than the steroid accusations is one performance-enhancing element which absolutely no one can deny: his 2007 contract. Already aging in baseball terms, the 43-year-old negotiated his 15th Giants season for \$15.8 million. True, he has generated huge revenues for his franchise by his notoriety, and may be doing permanent damage to more than just his knees. But is this fair?

Why don't we hear more editorials about his salary? Was his home run record worth this price tag? Isn't this an injustice to athletes in general?

I thank God that the most essential recourse for enhancing performance is still widely popular and generally accepted, even in the network media. Though itself subject to abuse, this “substance” still bucks the cynics and maintains athletes at a peak level of excellence, no matter what their activity, their health status, their salary and their score. It simply works.

I’ve referred to this motivator already. Never to be censored completely, it will prevail over every attack, because its ingredients are made in heaven. I’m talking about faith: faith in a God who calls us to excellence.

And the substance which makes the greatest difference is Almighty God. True, he is not bound to make any particular athlete or team win. But he does enable many to become victorious. Did Bonds negate God’s grace by using illegal substances, then lying publicly about the issue? Only the Lord knows all the details. But, for some reason, God did not deny Barry Bonds the ability, almost supernatural, to set a whole series of records.

One day, the purists will have to confess that millions of athletes, whether openly or in the silence of their hearts, rely on God, not just for that extra spurt of last-minute energy at the goal or in the batter’s box, but in fact for their very capacity to desire, to prepare for, and to achieve the victory.

And if the Heavenly Father could raise up our Savior from a genealogy of ancestors, both men and women, who were at times very far from holy, then he can also sustain in being athletes who achieve new heights in spite of (and perhaps, on occasion, with the help of) what is forbidden.

I’d like to conclude with a quote from August 8th’s MLB.com, “Baseball Perspectives”. It cited the words of words of Hank Aaron, who achieved his momentous goal of 755, in spite of a climate of racial discrimination:

“I would like to offer my congratulations to Barry Bonds on becoming baseball's career home run leader...I move over now and offer my best wishes to Barry and his family on this historical achievement.”

“Aaron smiled. Bonds raised his helmet toward the big screen, as if Aaron could see him through the pixels. ‘That meant absolutely everything to me,’ Bonds later acknowledged. ‘It hit me so fast, I didn't know what to think. It was absolutely the best.’

“There it was. Just as the beauty of the game continues to renew people’s faith in the purity of baseball, Aaron reaching out to Bonds across the sea of previous acrimony once again renewed faith in the game's ability to heal wounds.” I wonder if God was doing the same. *-Fr. Dean McFalls*

Accomplishments of Barry Bonds: *(from the Wikipedia)*

- * Holds record for most home runs in a career (757)
- * Holds record for most home runs in a season (73 in 2001)
- * Holds record for most walks in a career (2,540)
- * Holds record for most intentional walks in a career (679)
- * Holds record for most walks in a season (232 in 2004)
- * Holds record for most intentional walks in a season (120 in 2004)
- * Holds record for highest slugging percentage in a season (.863 in 2001)
- * Holds record for highest on base percentage in a season (.609 in 2004)
- * Holds record for most MVP awards (7) and consecutive MVP awards (4); (1990, 1992-93, 2001-04). Note: the current version of the MVP award has been given since 1931. Prior to that year, the League Awards were only given to a player once (from 1922-1929) and sometimes not at all (from 1915-1921).
- * Holds record for most pitchers homered off (446)
- * Holds record for most consecutive games with a walk (18)
- * Shares record for consecutive plate appearances with a walk (7)
- * Holds record for consecutive seasons with 30 or more home runs (13), 1992-2004
- * Only player in 400 home run and 400 stolen base club
- * Only player in 500 home run and 500 stolen base club
- * One of four players in 40-40 club (40 home runs and 40 stolen bases)
- * Holds record for most consecutive seasons with .600 slugging percentage or higher (8), 1998-2005
- * 5-time SF Giants Player of the Year (1998, 2001-04)
- * 14-Time All-Star (1990, 1992-98, 2000-04, 2007)
- * 7-Time [Baseball America](#) NL All-Star OF (1993, 1998, 2000-04)
- * 3-Time Major League Player of the Year (1990, 2001, 2004)
- * 3-Time Baseball America MLB Player of the Year (2001, 2003-04)
- * 8-Time Gold Glove winner for NL Outfielder (1990-94, 1996-98)
- * 12-Time Silver Slugger winner for NL Outfielder (1990-94, 1996-97, 2000-04)
- * Led the Major Leagues in home runs (1993, 2001)
- * Led the NL in batting average (2002, 2004)
- * Led the NL in on base percentage (1991-93, 1995, 2001-04, 2006)
- * Led the Major Leagues in slugging percentage (1990, 1992-93, 2001-04)

- * Led the Major Leagues in extra base hits (1992-93, 2001)
- * Led the Major Leagues in on base percentage (1992, 2001-04)
- * Led the NL in runs (1992)
- * Led the NL in RBIs (1993)
- * Led the NL in walks (1992, 1994-97, 2000-04, 2006)
- * Led the NL in intentional walks (1992-98, 2002-04, 2006)
- * Led the NL in runs created (1992-93, 2001-02, 2004)
- * Led the Major Leagues in total bases (1993, with 365)
- * Led the Major Leagues in runs created (1993, 2001-02, 2004)
- * Led the NL in games (1995)
- * Led the NL in extra base hits (1992-93, 2001)
- * Led the NL in at bats per home run (1992-93, 1996, 2000-04)
- * 3-Time NL Hank Aaron Award winner (2001-02, 2004)
- * Led the Major Leagues in batting average (2002, with .370)
- * Listed at # 6 on *The Sporting News*' list of the 100 Greatest Baseball Players, the highest-ranked active player, in 2005.
- * Named a finalist to the [Major League Baseball All-Century Team](#) in 1999, but not elected to the team in the fan balloting.
- * Rating of 352 on [Baseball-Reference.com](#)'s Hall of Fame monitor (100 is a good HOF candidate); 9th among all hitters, highest among hitters not in HOF yet.
- * With his father [Bobby](#), leads all father-son combinations in combined home runs (1,088) and stolen bases (975) through August 7, 2007.
- * Barry Bonds hit his 757th home run on August 8th. Sadaharu Oh is rooting for Bonds to break his Japanese record of 868. We'll see.

(Wikipedia article on Barry Bonds, available Online)

August 9th, 2007, by Fr. Dean McFalls, Pastor, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, 16200 Cambridge Drive, Lathrop, CA 95330)