

"Did Babe Ruth Take Asteroids?"

by Joe Mulder

Last time I was at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, I overheard a young boy in the special room dedicated to Babe Ruth. The young boy asked his dad, "Did Babe Ruth take asteroids?"

The question was very cute and extremely precious, but thinking about it recently I was finally able to conclude what ought to be done about baseball's "steroid era," at least as far as the Hall of Fame is concerned.

Recent Hall of Fame voting on Mark McGwire, whose numbers alone would make him a shoo-in, make it clear that the baseball writers tasked with selecting those worthy of enshrinement won't be letting those who achieved their statistics with performance enhancing drugs. Suspected by anyone with at least two eyeballs and brain cells of having used steroids late in his career to help him achieve gaudy home run totals, McGwire has received Hall of Fame votes on well under 25% of ballots in each of his three years of eligibility.

The problem with this is that these same baseball writers essentially gave up any claim to the title of protectors of the integrity of the game when they slathered McGwire and fellow juicer Sammy Sosa with praise during the Great, Tainted Home Run Race of 1998 (remember those two posing on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* in togas, in front of Roman columns, as co-Sportsmen of the Year? Not hard to believe there was a fall, is there, considering the amount of pride that goeth-ed back then). I was 20 and in college in 1998; I was an idiot. I had an excuse. But anyone who has a Hall of Fame vote now would have been old enough then to know better.

A bigger problem will be Barry Bonds, who holds the career and single-season home run records but has become the poster boy for baseball's steroid problems and is, by all account, a major creep. Should Hall of Fame voters deny him entry when his time comes in a few years, we'll know for sure that a decision has been made: the Hall of Fame is closed to steroid guys.

Bonds is an interesting case, though, because the argument could be made (persuasively, I imagine) that he would have been a Hall of Famer if he'd been hit by bus two months before he ever saw his first syringe. Plus, he never failed a drug test, or was suspended by baseball for cheating during his career. So, here you have one of the greatest players of his generation – if not *the* greatest – even without the 'roids, you've got the all-time leader in home runs (not to mention #4 in RBI and #3 in runs scored, as well as the only player in history to hit at least 500 home runs and steal at least 500 bases), and you're going to keep him out of the Hall of Fame for availing himself of performance enhancing drugs during a time when baseball had no rules prohibiting them? I mean,

doesn't Major League Baseball share at least as much of the blame? And how great is the hubris of the Baseball Writers Association of America that it leads me to write in defense of Barry Bonds, of all horrible people? Don't try to use your Hall of Fame vote to make up for what you failed to do years ago.

Anyway: back to Babe Ruth and his asteroids. What struck me a few days ago was that yes, of course, it is the job of the young boy's dad – not the job of the BBWAA, through their Hall of Fame voting – to explain to him about steroids in baseball.

Now, if you Hall of Fame voters want to come up with ways to argue that McGwire and Sosa's numbers don't necessarily mean they should automatically get in, fine; Sosa hit 609 home runs, but he hit 243 of them during one four-year stretch. Go ahead and argue that a career .273 hitter who, if you lift out his four-year run, averaged just over 25 homers a season in the age of steroids, tiny new ballparks and expansion-caliber pitching didn't demonstrate the sort of sustained greatness that befits a Hall of Famer. That's fine. But the Hall of Fame has a very narrow purpose: to recognize the greatest players for enshrinement, based on their on-field achievements. The Hall of Fame's purpose it not to educate fans about the history of the game, believe it or not. There's a museum right next to the Hall of Fame for that, in fact.

Actually, the full name of the institution is the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. The Hall of Fame itself is just that: a hall, on the walls of which are the plaques of famous baseball players. If that was it, you wouldn't drive across town to see it. The museum, on the other hand, is where the history of the game, if I may be permitted to use a particularly flowery phrase, comes alive. The Hall of Fame is fine, but other than the opportunity to take your picture next to your favorite players' plaques the entire experience can be replicated adequately online. The museum, on the other hand, is nothing short of the greatest place on the entire planet. That's where your kids have the most fun, and that's where they really learn about baseball.

I'm a dad. I have one child, and if all goes according to plan I'll have another by late Friday morning. Odds are that my wife and I will always have relatives to visit on the East Coast, so odds are that I'll take my children to the Hall of Fame on at least one occasion at some point in their lives (I've got a trip penciled in for Joe Mauer's induction ceremony in 2024). So, to the baseball writers who vote for the Hall of Fame, I make this humble request: you do your job, and I'll do mine. Your job is to evaluate the playing careers of baseball's best, and to decide if they're worthy. My job is to put it into context for my kids.

It's my job, naturally, to make sure that they grow up with the same opinions and biases that I do (the White Sox are evil; if your life depended on the outcome of one baseball

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game, the pitcher you'd want starting that game would be Walter Johnson; the entire Hall of Fame is a sham and a farce anyway as long as Bert Blyleven isn't in; etc.).

It's my job to point to Ken Griffey, Jr.'s Hall of Fame plaque, and then to Sammy Sosa's, and to tell my kids why one was so much greater than the other (assuming Griffey's reputation remains clean. I mean, as he got older he got a little bit fatter and a little bit worse at baseball, which is what happens to human beings who don't take steroids, so I think we can assume he's in the clear, but nothing would surprise me these days).

It's my job to explain to my kids what an asshole Ty Cobb was, but why he's in the Hall of Fame while Pete Rose and Shoeless Joe Jackson aren't. Don't make it harder on me, please; don't make me have to throw up my hands when asked why Gaylord Perry is a Hall of Famer and Mark McGwire isn't (and don't think my daughters won't know enough about baseball to ask that question. They will. By God, they will).

Babe Ruth didn't take asteroids, kiddo. Now come here and sit a spell while I tell you how I know that's true...
