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Guest Column: Steroid users' merit for Hall not so clear-cut

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Times Guest Columnist

Say what you want about the recent elections of the Baseball Hall of Fame. Just remember, there are two sides to every story.

The 2013 election, as everyone must surely know by now, given all the publicity it's created, wound up with not a single modern candidate getting enough votes to gain induction into the baseball shrine. That, of course, included the band of steroid users who were listed for the first time on the ballot.

Neither Barry Bonds nor Roger Clemens nor Sammy Sosa came anywhere close to attracting the necessary 75 percent of the votes cast by members of the Baseball Writers' Association of America. Neither did any of the others on the ballot, including some who were perhaps unjustly tainted simply because they played in what has been labeled as the steroid era.

As a result, three dead guys who were on the old-timers ballot and selected by a small and sometimes uninformed group of so-called baseball historians are the only baseball people who will be inducted when the event takes place this summer (Delaware County resident and former Daily News baseball columnist Paul Hagen will most deservedly be inducted into the writers' wing of the Hall.)

The do-gooders and the bleeding hearts who have written in various other newspapers that the members of the BWAA should not be charged with casting the votes that determine whether or not a player, manager, executive, or umpire should have a plaque at Cooperstown are, of course, entirely wrong in their self-serving arguments. Nobody is more qualified, more knowledgeable — and more objective — than the journalists who cast these votes.

And to say that steroid-users should not be inducted into the Hall is a questionable position.

I say that for a number of reasons. First, back in the 1970s and 1980s when steroids were supposedly as common as chewing gum, it wasn't just the good players who downed the performance-enhancing drugs. Legions of players did it.

Some improved; some didn't.

Taking steroids was not considered an evil practice, but merely something that, like pushups and situps, helped one become a better ballplayer. And neither the baseball officials nor anybody else stepped forward to say it was wrong and to create a policy — since implemented — that would make taking steroids an illegal act that would be heavily punished.

I'm reminded of the well-known old-time ballplayer who was noted for his honesty and hard work. "I'd have taken steroids if they'd been around when I played," he said. "If I thought they'd make me a better player, me and a lot of my teammates would've surely used them."

And that, I believe may have been the attitude of the Bonds and the Clemenses and the Sosas. They thought the drugs were okay to use, even though, as it turned out, they have come to be considered cheating, unhealthy, and totally wrong.

This is not an argument defending the use of steroids. But please keep in mind that the Baseball Hall of Fame includes inductees who were drunks, who were thieves, who were wife-beaters. There's even one Hall of Famer who was an alleged murderer.

Now, if you want to keep somebody out of the Hall of Fame, look no farther than Pete Rose. There's a guy who really doesn't belong. Using inside information and betting on his own team's games is a real definition of a wrongdoing. In cheating, Rose did what a lot of us learned way back in Sunday school not to do. And his lifetime suspension is entirely justified.

Why is Major League baseball taking such a beating? Right before our very eyes we have a sport called ice hockey that has totally disregarded and torpedoed its fans with a strike pitting one millionaire against another. Pro basketball disgracefully runs a game-lasting circus filled with screaming announcers, flickering lights, loud music, and all manner of other distractions that interfere with the act of simply watching a game. And football with its endless band of showoff players and until recently its apparent disregard for serious injuries is hardly any better.

But baseball has taken a double kick in the stomach. One side says, it is wrong to award players with its highest honor, despite their glittering statistics, because they took drugs. The other side argues that players who took drugs should nevertheless be inducted because they were among their era's finest performers and in some cases compiled records that rank among the best of all-time.

What it could all get down to is this: drugs may help you hit the ball a little farther, but you still have to put the bat on the ball first. Drugs don't help a batter do that. And maybe drugs help your fastball get a bit swifter. But you still have to get the ball over the plate first. Drugs don't help a pitcher do that.

Rich Westcott is a baseball writer and historian and the author of 23 books. Long ago, he was a sports writer at the Daily Times.

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Ravishing Rick 5 days ago

The biggest voices against steroids are those who have NEVER competed at high levels. Are steroids cheating? Yes. But at such a high level of any sport, where small injuries, the need to be more explosive, recover faster and gain that extra little bit of speed or strength is what separates being picked up by the NFL, or being known as a bar room hero.

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Poppop 4 days ago

If one person even suspected of steroid use is inducted than PETE ROSE SHOULD BE IN THE SAME INDUCTION.

owls_1 4 days ago

Pete Rose probably would be in the Hall of Fame if he just admitted from Day 1 what he did.

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