

Ryan Braun's rational choice

By [Daniel Schultz](#)

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Let me get this straight: Ryan Braun gets paid north of \$20 million a year to be the aw-shucks kid turned Joe DiMaggio, the face of the Milwaukee Brewers, and the great white hope of a metro area that has never come to terms with its racial diversity. And we're supposed to be [shocked and angry](#) that he acts like a spoiled celebrity?

I guess. It's long been noted that [economics are a major driver](#) of performance-enhancing drug use in baseball. When you get paid \$105 million over five years, as Braun is, you have quite an incentive to prove to your bosses that you're worth the money.

But the problem goes deeper than that, I think. Small-market MLB teams like the Brewers have a huge incentive to find a celebrity face. And Braun isn't just a star on the field; he's visible in the community, a restaurant investor and ad man and charity supporter. His record in the game is what makes all this possible, of course, but make no mistake: a local hero is what the system is designed to create, and that's what it got.

Once you understand this, the incentives for players to use performance-enhancing drugs seem a lot more rational. It's good for their bottom line, theirs and their teams' and baseball's.

But consider how they make their money: star athletes offer reassurance that the communities they represent are notable and worth celebrating. Celebrity jocks relieve our anxiety about living in a place like Milwaukee or Cleveland, reassure us that we can hang with the big cities and their teams rich with cash and history.

Brewers owner Mark Attanasio, a billionaire investor from Los Angeles, is popular in Milwaukee precisely because he saw something in Brew City worthy of investment. He could have taken his money anywhere, yet he chose to come to Wisconsin and give us Ryan Braun! It makes the locals proud, and that soothes their anxiety about the state of their hometown.

So of course baseball players use PEDs, and of course it's because the fans worship them for being celebrities. The only real surprise in this situation is that the drugs aren't widely and openly accepted like plastic surgery is in Hollywood.

You could make a strong, if perverse, argument from Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* that as their celebrity increases, players like Braun find it progressively more difficult to avoid doping. The more people you answer to, the harder it is to let them down—and this sometimes leads to cutting corners, producing a paradoxical disappointment.

How can baseball get out of this mess? Improve revenue sharing measures and institute a salary cap, for one thing. Push for a league built around franchises rather than stars. Admit that juicing has been a problem for a long time, and that the league's measures haven't always been effective.

This wouldn't completely rid the sport of cheating any more than it would rid it of hero worship. Nor is any of this likely to happen, not as long as Bud Selig is in charge, not as long as there are fans who feel the hot sting of shame and anxiety without a Ryan Braun pounding out homers on their behalf.

But given how this season has shaped up, Brewers fans might just as well try to change human nature. They've got a better shot of doing that than getting into the playoffs.

This post has been edited to remove the false implication that Major League Baseball has no revenue sharing measures in place.