

Good Sports: Integrity of baseball

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Perhaps only in the U.S. would the “integrity of baseball” or any sport be the focus of political speeches and front-page newspaper articles. Surveying the massive press coverage of the congressional hearings March 17 on steroid use in Major League Baseball, Representative Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) wondered why issues of health care and poverty don’t receive the same attention. Still, Sanders was quite happy to join other members of Congress in questioning some star players and in scolding officials for ignoring the use of performance-enhancing drugs. He understands that precisely because baseball and other sports have an outsized role in this country, the ethos of sports matters a great deal.

Among those testifying were parents whose sons’ suicides have been linked to the psychological effects of taking steroids. Their stories, while rare, illustrated the extreme case of what virtually all parents know from their children’s encounters with organized sports: the example of professional athletes shapes behavior at every level, down to the elementary grades. They shape how young athletes look and act, and eventually what their coaches tolerate or expect. Great athletes’ skills are emulated, and so are their training regimens, including the use of drugs.

Adolescents, who always find it difficult to look beyond this season or this moment of their lives, are the most vulnerable to a succeed-at-any-cost mentality. If the use of steroids or human growth hormone (whose medical dangers are well known) or other enhancements (some of whose effects are unknown) are winked at or encouraged by their peers and coaches, youngsters will get the message: taking drugs is part of being an athlete.

Part of the charm of sports is that they offer a compelling image of virtue—the spectacle of human talents channeled toward a goal. The apostle Paul naturally reached for that image when he called the congregation at Corinth to more virtuous living. “Athletes exercise self-control in all things,” he observed, arguing that Christians should exercise a similar kind of discipline in their life together in pursuit of a different, “imperishable” kind of victory (1 Cor. 9:25).

The undermining of that simple example of discipline and virtue is a genuine moral loss, and given the prominence of sports in our culture, the moral loss is widely felt. That sense of loss is what fuels the front-page stories and the politicians' anger. Baseball officials, who continue to offer evasive responses and ambiguous testing policies, seem to be the only ones who don't understand.