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Sports Need to Take Lead Against Steroid Usage

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As Giants star Barry Bonds closes in on one of the most revered records in American sport, should we care about whether he used performance-enhancing drugs to hit many of his home runs?

Should we honestly give a hoot when high-profile athletes such as Olympic gold medal sprinter Justin Gatlin, NFL All-Pro Shawne Merriman and Tour de France champion Floyd Landis test positive for banned steroids?

In a word, yes. In two words, Shirley Babashoff.

Babashoff, an American swimming star, ignited a firestorm at the 1976 Olympic Games when she suggested that East German swimmers were competing with something other than natural ability and hard work. Babashoff, who was poised to become the performer of the Games, quickly became a lightning rod for criticism. The media branded her a poor sport, sore loser and, in the most telling of nicknames, “Surly Shirley.”

Babashoff’s observations later proved to be correct when the fall of the Berlin Wall revealed that the East German team had engaged in widespread, systematic doping. Sadly, though, she never received an apology for the harsh treatment she was subjected to, nor reparation for the medals and honors that are rightfully hers.

A lot has changed since that debacle in Montreal. Today, the burning question is not whether individuals are engaging in doping, but rather, why aren’t the organizational bodies and principal sponsors of the country’s most popular sports doing more to address the problem?

It’s easy to grow apathetic about the subject. The universe that the majority of elite-level athletes populate seems so far removed from our everyday reality that we may as well be referring to life on Mercury. Case in point: the New York Yankees’ signing of Roger Clemens to a four-month, \$18.5 million contract.

But before Clemens and athletes of his caliber became ludicrously compensated sports stars, they were like young, idealistic Babashoffs—working hard to hone their talents and operating under the basic assumption that the playing field was level and true.

Soccer fields, baseball diamonds and basketball courts are where lessons such as honesty, fair play and good character have traditionally been passed from one generation to another. They are training grounds for future pharmaceutical researchers, airport security personnel and politicians, to name just a few. The integrity of our playing fields is worth preserving. But such preservation comes at a price.

Don Caitlin, one of the world's foremost anti-doping crusaders, estimated years ago that while researchers have been allocated \$2 million a year to win the war against performance-enhancing drugs, it would take upward of \$50 million just to stay ahead of the rapid advancements being made in the production of illicit drugs.

Exorbitant? Not when viewed against the backdrop of today's professional sports.

If Major League Baseball can support median player salaries of \$2.94 million, it should certainly be able to award groups such as Caitlin's U.S. Anti-Doping Research Institute more than the recent three-year, \$500,000 grant to develop a test for the detection of human growth hormones. If the average NBA franchise is worth in excess of \$300 million and the average NFL franchise is worth nearly three times that, those organizations can surely find it in their budgets to institute more comprehensive athlete testing and to develop wide-reaching programs designed to help educate youngsters on the dangers and pitfalls of steroid use.

And isn't it about time that Nike, whose worldwide sales are about \$14 billion, and AdidasSolomon, which has worldwide sales in excess of \$11 billion, weighed in on the matter? They should be introducing ad campaigns insisting that all athletes not just do it, but that they do it cleanly.

The sporting world's deep pockets need to take more of a proactive stance on this issue. It's time for them to demonstrate the same type of leadership and commitment that a teenage swimmer exhibited three decades ago.

[Editor's Note: After this story was published, Roger Clemens was implicated in a doping scandal. Money and cheating, sadly enough, often go hand-in-hand.]