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Offseason's steroids stories don't dampen fans' love of baseball

By **Larry Stone**
Seattle Times baseball reporter

The steroids-related bombshells keep coming, so many now that it's hard to muster shock, let alone outrage, over the latest Jose Canseco revelation kinda sorta implicating Alex Rodriguez.

But the fans keep coming, too. It's the anomaly of our times. Even as baseball remains embroiled in arguably its most damaging scandal, it prepares for another season of record-breaking attendance and revenue.

The man who broke Roger Maris' home-run records sits forlornly in front of Congress and refuses to talk about the past, shrouding his legacy in a cloud of doubt. And fans keep flooding to the ballpark.

The all-time home-run king is indicted on a charge of perjury, and a best-selling book, "Game of Shadows," depicts in intricate detail his alleged use of performance-enhancing drugs. And the dollars keep pouring into major-league coffers.

The greatest pitcher of our generation, a seven-time Cy Young winner, is dragged into the fray, along with 88 other players, in the Mitchell Report, which documents, with Major League Baseball's blessing, how an entire generation became tainted by the scourge of steroids.

And now, on the eve of opening day, here comes Canseco, back for his final five minutes of fame. And this time, he's dragging A-Rod with him with vaguely sourced suspicions of his possible steroids use.

It was flimsy enough that Don Yaeger, the original co-author of Canseco's upcoming book, "Vindicated," backed out, saying of the A-Rod allegations, "There's no meat on the bones."

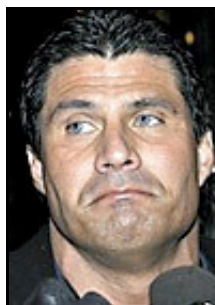
But commissioner Bud Selig still has to shudder when he sees coast-to-coast headlines this week linking A-Rod to steroids, while Canseco makes the rounds pumping his book and keeping the story alive. And just when the sport is ready to celebrate the dawning of a new season.

But guess what? The fans will keep coming. The money will keep rolling in. Book it: Selig and Bob DuPuy, MLB's president and chief operating officer, have already crunched the numbers, based on advanced ticket sales, and concluded that last year's record total of 79.5 million fans through the turnstiles will be surpassed in 2008.



STEVEN SENNE / AP

Fans at Boston's Fenway Park show asterisk signs to Barry Bonds, then playing for San Francisco, during a June 2007 game.



Jose Canseco has implicated Alex Rodriguez.

So, no doubt, will be the 2007 revenue of \$6.1 billion — up 9 percent from the year before. Consider this: In 1995, before steroids erupted into the consciousness, the league's revenue figure was \$1.3 billion. In 1998, it was \$2.5 billion. In 2003, it was \$3.9 billion.

The trend is up, up, up, even while the integrity of the sport, and the legitimacy of its vital statistical legacy, is in tatters.

What's going on here?

Cynics would say that over-muscled sluggers hitting tape-measure shots was, and is, good for business.

Part of the answer might be found in a recent Sports Illustrated examination of steroids that concluded, "We are a juiced nation ... we are a nation looking for enhancement, a way to age gracefully, perform better and longer, and, at the outer edge, vanquish what was once considered that all-time undefeated opponent known as aging."

But it's more than a "Chicks and dudes dig the long ball" answer. It's more than the fact that artificial enhancement is tacitly tolerated because deep down we know we'd all try it, too.

Will Leitch of the sports Web site Deadspin.com was on to something when he said in a recent NPR interview, "I think there's a little bit of a disconnect between the way people in the media and the sports enterprise see the steroid thing, and the way fans see it."

Leitch posits that hard-core fans have become inured to the steroids onslaught.

"They don't like steroids either, but at a certain level, this is so exhausting in a lot of ways a fan has to make his peace with it or her peace with it in a way that the media is not going to be able to," Leitch told NPR.

A recent article on baseball's steroids crisis, "Baseball, Steroids and Business Ethics: How Breaches of Trust Can Change The Game," published by the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, addresses the same question from a different point of view.

In the article, Wharton marketing professor Deborah Small, who researches biases in consumer behavior, cites studies showing that consumers are invariably egocentric, which in sports transactions leads to what she terms "cognitive dissonance."

Put another way, fans desperately want to think the best of their teams, and their sports heroes, and find every excuse to do so.

Using Bonds as an example, Small said in the article that ardent Giants fans, confronted with evidence of his steroids use, "can believe that Bonds is a cheater and liar, but this is a difficult switch to make.

"Easier options include believing the evidence isn't accurate, or believing that taking steroids is like speeding on the highway — everyone does it, no big deal — or we can chose to ignore the story. We try to see the world in a simple way."

Jim Kane, a senior fellow with The Brookside Group, a loyalty consulting firm, said in a phone interview that sports teams "have a special impenetrable insulation against any kind of scandal."

While most businesses have to earn trust through their behavior, love of team is inherited, passed down through the generations, and zealously protected.

"You defend it almost like you defend your family, because of who you are, not because they've earned anything," he said.

That's not to say that baseball hasn't paid a huge price for the steroids scandal in terms of public trust.

The New York-based consumer research firm Brand Keys released a study in the aftermath of the Mitchell Report that showed baseball's "loyalty index" had dropped from 109 earlier in 2007 to 101 (with 119 as the ideal rating).

According to a Washington Times article, Brand Keys said baseball took hits in the categories of authenticity, fan bonding, and, especially, history and tradition.

Gene Grabowski, a senior vice president at Levick Strategic Communications, a crisis-communications firm based in Washington, D.C., said in a telephone interview:

"Here's the problem baseball has: Too many people suspect, or think they know, that owners tacitly approved the use of steroids. Whether or not that's true, it feels and sounds true. I think that's something they have to address."

Selig would no doubt argue that the Mitchell Report comprehensively addresses baseball's complicity. That might work for a normal business, but Grabowski thinks that baseball is more an institution than a business, and thus has higher standards.

Baseball, he argues, needs to come clean with both an acknowledgment of its role in fostering a steroid culture, and more important, an apology perceived by the public as sincere. Otherwise, he said, the sport will eventually pay a huge price.

"Maybe it can get away with it today and tomorrow, but years from now ... we may be sowing the seeds not of the demise of baseball, but the irrelevance of baseball.

"Yes, it's fun and interesting, but so are truck pulls and the World Wrestling Federation. Does baseball want to be another WWF?"

That's a question to ponder next week as you prepare to resume your romance with baseball.

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