

## *‘The Steroids Era’*

George Mitchell on Drugs in Baseball

**O**n January 15, 2008, former U.S. Senator George Mitchell testified at a hearing held by the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform to discuss his report on the illegal use of steroids in Major League Baseball. The following excerpts from the transcript have been lightly edited for clarity.

**Chairman Waxman:** When our committee held its first hearing three years ago on Major League Baseball’s steroid scandal, I talked about how the

culture of major league clubhouses trickled down to become the culture of the high school gym.

Later that same day, Don Hooton and Denise and Raymond Garibaldi [parents of adolescent athletes who committed suicide in the aftermath of heavy steroid use] proved that connection with their powerful testimony about the deadly impacts steroids had on their sons.

The Hooton and Garibaldi families

were frustrated that baseball wasn't doing more to confront its role in a growing epidemic. For our part, this committee made it clear to the players and owners that they needed to take two major steps. The first was to dramatically strengthen the league's testing program for performance enhancing drugs; the second was to investigate the extent of steroid use...

**Senator Mitchell:** In March 2006, I was asked by the Commissioner of Baseball to conduct an independent investigation into the illegal use of steroids and other performance-enhancing substances in Major League Baseball...

Last month I completed and made public my report. Since then, the public discussion has largely focused on the names of players who are identified in the report. I will focus today on the report's broader findings and recommendations...

The illegal use of steroids, human growth hormone, and other performance-enhancing substances by well-known athletes may cause serious harm to the user. In addition, their use encourages young people to use them. Because adolescents are already subject to significant hormonal changes, the abuse of steroids and other such substances can have more serious adverse effects on them than on adults. Many young Americans are placing themselves at serious risk. Some estimates appear to show a recent decline in steroid use by high school students. That is heartening. But the most recent range of estimates is from about 2 percent to

6 percent. Even the lower figure means that hundreds of thousands of high-school-aged young people are illegally using steroids. It is important to deal with well-known athletes who are illegal users, but it is at least as important, perhaps even more so, to be concerned about the reality that hundreds of thousands of our children are using these substances. Every American, not just baseball fans, ought to be shocked by that disturbing truth...

The minority of players who use these substances were wrong. They violated federal law and baseball policy. And they distorted the fairness of competition by trying to gain an unfair advantage over the majority of players who followed the law and the rules. They, the players who follow the law and play by the rules, are faced with the painful choice of either being placed at a competitive disadvantage or becoming illegal users themselves. No one should have to make that choice.

Obviously, the players who illegally used performance-enhancing substances are responsible for their actions. But they did not act in a vacuum. Everyone involved in baseball over the past two decades—commissioners, club officials, the Players Association and players—share to some extent in the responsibility for the steroids era. There was a collective failure to recognize the problem as it emerged and to deal with it early on. As a result, an environment developed in which illegal use became widespread.

Knowledge and understanding of the past are essential if the problem is to

be dealt with effectively in the future. But being chained to the past is not helpful. Baseball does not need and cannot afford to engage in a never-ending search for the name of every player who used performance-enhancing substances....

I urge everyone involved in Major League Baseball to join in a well-planned, well-executed, and sustained effort to bring the era of steroids and human growth hormone to an end, and to prevent its recurrence in some other form in the future. That's the only way this cloud will be removed from the game. The adoption of the recommendations set forth in my report will be a first step in that direction, and I will now summarize them....

First, there must be an enhanced capacity to conduct investigations based on non-testing evidence. Some illegal substances are difficult or virtually impossible to detect. Indeed, one leading expert has argued that testing only scratches the surface. The ability to investigate vigorously allegations of violations is an essential part of any meaningful drug prevention program....Second, improved educational programs about the dangers of substance use are critical to any effort to deter use....Third, although it is clear that even the best drug-testing program is by itself not sufficient, drug testing remains an important element of a comprehensive approach to combat illegal use....

I spent five years working in Northern Ireland. [In 1995, Mitchell was appointed the U.S. Special Envoy

to Northern Ireland, and was heavily involved in negotiating the 1998 Belfast Peace Accord.] And after many long and painful negotiations and difficult decisions, a conflict that had raged for a long time was brought to an end. The most difficult, emotional, and controversial part of the process that we adopted dealt with an analogous circumstance, the release from prison of persons who had been engaged in the struggle, who had committed what they believed were acts of patriotism but which the authorities and the victims and their families believed were brutal criminal acts. And I learned then that sometimes you have to turn the page and look to the future. And I sincerely believe, even as I recognize there are valid arguments both ways, that baseball has got to look to the future. And the way to do that is to turn the page on the past, to lay the foundation for a well-conceived and well-executed program and also a very strong discipline for future violations when everybody knows this is what we're going to do....

Reference was earlier made to Don Hooton, who is here; I met with him, I've listened to his message. He's gone through it painfully, as have other families who are here. I think it is a very serious problem, and it can't be solved solely by the professional leagues themselves.

That's the point I tried to make earlier. This goes far beyond baseball or any one organized sport. It's a broad, societal issue and will require a broad response at every level of society.