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Narrative Draft

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Going, Going, Gone: Barry Bonds, Steroids, and the Love of the Game

“The rest of us should spend all of our time in the dugout bowing to him.”

- Former SF Giant Benito Santiago, regarding Barry Bonds

It's a strange thing, as you grow up, watching your heroes become villains, but that is exactly what happened. The baseball players I pretended to be in the yard while playing catch as a little leaguer became people I was discouraged from supporting as I moved into the later years of high school. Players I admired for bringing life back to baseball and deemed sure fire hall of famers, became disgraced and shamed in their own clubhouses. Raised in a household that seemed to work around the SF Giants and 49ers schedules, now I won't even bring up the name Barry Bonds around my Dad, for a desire to not subject myself to his hateful spewing against my hero.

“He's a cheater. A liar.” They proclaim, my Father and his like minded objectors. “He ruined baseball! He should never be allowed near a baseball diamond again.” I can hear it, every time it's the same thing. “The guys an asshole. He's a fraud. Nothing he did is worth anything.

Barry Bonds doesn't deserve to be in the hall of fame. He pumped himself up with steroids and that's why he hit so many home runs. His records should be taken away. An asterisk by each of them at the very least. He lied to everyone. He's a felon. A criminal. He should be put in jail probably! Barry Bonds intentionally defiled baseball, he deceived his fans. Plain and simple, he cheated to be famous."

That's the story of Barry Bonds according to so many people. He used steroids, he cheated, lied, and nothing he did in baseball should count. Many people who tell this story were at one time Barry Bonds fans, and are lifetime baseball fans. That they are so willing to judge, so willing to hate a player who did so much for the game is sad. That people pass such strong personal judgements on someone they've never met, never seen outside of the light of a Sports Center segment, well it's part of the vicious circle of being a celebrity. Of hero worship. How quick we are to love, and how quicker still we are to hate. Their Barry Bonds wasn't a hero, he was a villain. A man who played in shadows, who used dirty tactics to deface the game they say he only pretended to love.

But that's not my Barry Bonds, that's not the guy I watched trot out to left field wearing #25 with a smile on his face, belting home runs, stealing bases, and setting records. When the so called "steroid era" hit Major League Baseball, middle of the road players suddenly exploded overnight. Good became great and the show got bigger. Bonds, however, was great before performance enhancing drugs took center stage. And when good became great, great came under fire. When you dig deep enough into anything, when you look close enough, you will find a problem. It's at that point, where we ruin the people we made into heroes.

Today the sports media and baseball fans tell their horrible story of the bad guys posing

as heroes. But there is another, possibly more accurate, story to be told. Barry Bonds was an all-star. He was an MVP. He was already a hero long before the history making records that so many question. But baseball wasn't doing as well. The strike during the 1994 season had driven a lot of fans away, and had dulled the passion of a lot of players. The loyal fans, the diehard players, the owners and press looked for ways to bring the life back into baseball. And then in 1998 Sammy Sosa and Mark McGwire set baseball on fire with their epic home run race. Suddenly the nation was swept up in the excitement of baseball, the thrill of a long home run. The eyes of the fans were immediately focused on any player that could hit the long ball. Not only was the focus on baseball renewed, but the pressure was on for the players. Bonds watched all of this from the left field of San Francisco, feeling the pressure, and realizing that whether legitimate or not the accolades of other players were diminishing his impact on the game. While already one of the best hitters in the league he knew he could be better. Like so many professional athletes his passion for the game and his drive to win left room for nothing but perfection. So he turned to his trainer, Greg Anderson, for help. Bonds wanted to reach the next level, he wanted to put on a better show for his fans, to be more productive for his team, to win. Athletes trust their trainers, they listen to them and follow their advice. When Anderson told Bonds that he was going to give him a supplement, flaxseed oil, Barry Bonds trusted Greg Anderson. To Bonds, his fans, the press and management the increase in his offense was immediately noticed. Over the next couple of seasons Barry Bonds was on top of the baseball universe. The San Francisco Giants christened a new ballpark built to cater to their superstar's offensive prowess. Barry Bonds became the greatest show on earth, launching mammoth home runs into the San Francisco bay at an astonishing rate. He believed he had reached his pinnacle,

he had worked hard for it, he had lived for and loved the game of baseball and everything it had given him.

We all wanted the show, we all wanted to be wowed by the dynamic action of powerful offense, and the players gave it to us just like we asked. And one by one, we turned on them. Barry Bonds was one of dozens whose abilities and legitimacy were questioned. But Bonds was pursued ruthlessly because of the special things he had done. By the end of his career he had set records for most home runs in a single season, most home runs in a career, various records for slugging percentage, walks, intentional walks, consecutive MVP awards (he won 7 total), batting titles, and all star selections. The ball from his record setting 756th career home run sits in the baseball hall of fame in Cooperstown, but Barry Bonds is denied entrance. He is denied entrance by the people that cast allegations at him, that accuse him of tainting the game of baseball. These are the same people who cheered for him, who watched every at bat with anticipation and celebrated when he broke Hank Aaron's home run record. Built up to heroic stature by them, Barry Bonds was broken down and beaten by the people that inspired, almost demanded, him to become who he had.

When people accuse Barry Bonds of using steroids and defacing baseball to a criminal level, they don't consider the deeper side of the story. We are so quick to blame those with their faces plastered all over the place, no consideration is given regarding the people who helped them to get there. We vilify Barry Bonds and his peers for using performance enhancing drugs regardless of how inconsistent the details are, even in cases where players had admitted to using PEDs, details are incomplete and inconsistent. We blame the players, when we should be looking at who else is responsible, we should be crying foul at the owners, the commissioner's office we

should be pointing the finger at ourselves, the fans. And the trainers. Greg Anderson. The man behind the man. What could he possibly stand to gain from Barry Bonds taking steroids? Well money, lots and lots of money. To become the personal trainer of all star athletes you have to know what you're doing, but more than that you have to have some impressive references. How much would a player struggling with their offense pay to have the aid of the man who trained Barry Bonds to record breaking levels? Is it enough money to make Anderson lie to Bonds and give him PEDs without his knowledge to make himself, Anderson, look like the most amazing trainer available? It seems like the answer was yes, and even then that is a fraction of the money on the table for MLB's 32 owners.

When we have spent so much time dissecting the use of PEDs in baseball, digging into stories to uncover which player used what to do which amazing thing, no one ever goes all the way to the top. Barry Bonds and his peers are not a group of idiots. These are world class athletes who are in tune with their bodies at a level most people can't comprehend. When Anderson told Bonds he was giving him flaxseed oil time and time and time again, it seems inevitable that Bonds eventually wouldn't have picked up that maybe something else was going on. No matter how innocent the initial use was (and I still choose to believe that it was innocent), what happened if and when he realized that maybe it wasn't just flaxseed oil? Bonds couldn't take the risk, he couldn't just give up the home runs. He couldn't just turn off the amazing offense. He was a man trapped. If he stopped using the potential PEDs and the home runs stopped with them, people would assume he'd been using, or worse, lost his edge and was no longer viable. The contract offers would end, the jerseys would stop selling, no more endorsements. No more hall of fame. But if he kept taking the shots and they were in fact illegal

steroids, and he got caught, the results could be even worse. He was stuck in an impossible situation. His team needed to win games. He needed to prove to his fans he was worth watching. The owners needed to see that he was worth the contracts. The sports press needed highlights, Major League Baseball needed excitement and record breakers. The pressure was immense, and it came from all sides. In a world of bad options, how can you judge what was the right choice?

When the stories came out, everyone was being convicted of breaking baseball. It's not called the steroid era because of one man. The list of potential hall of famers to have their names tarnished by PED speculation is not a short one. So why is it, so many years after the fact, that Barry Bonds is still the man, the bad guy, the villain of the MLB? Why do the press bar him from the Hall of Fame and the fans demand asterisks next to his records? Why don't we stamp an asterisk next to Mark McGwire's 70 home run season? Or trivialize Roger Clemens's 20 strikeout games and 7 Cy Young awards. Is it because second place doesn't matter regardless of how you got there? Maybe because we don't think PEDs have that big of an impact on pitchers? Maybe our societal subconscious just finds it easier to blame the black guy. The black man who stood up for himself, who got angry when his family was made to suffer as a result of vague accusations. Barry Bonds, who pointedly told his attackers, the grand jury, that when their own dirty secrets were laid bare, then they would have the right to come after him and dig into his past. Despite his love for the game, his jovial personality when on the field, the endless praise from his teammates, we still see the shadowy hostile version of Bonds as the default image from the sports media. It took 7 years for Barry Bonds to be welcomed to the Giants' spring training. Is that ESPN's fault, or ours?

I loved watching Barry Bonds hit home runs. I can remember how excited I was to watch

Sosa launch home runs over the ivy of Wrigley Field. I idolized Ken Griffey Jr and his dynamic long balls. The home run derby (which Bonds only won once, while Griffey won it three times) was a national holiday as far as my younger self was concerned. I grew up watching baseball, falling in love with it during the steroid era. I was never inspired to cheat, never motivated to user PEDs by the record setting athletes. I was motivated to go out and play. I spent hours playing ball in the front yard with my younger brother. When I was young I defended Bonds and his comrades because I never wanted to admit that my heroes could do any wrong. Now I defend them because either intentionally, or naively, they took the steps to make baseball great again. You don't need steroids to be an amazing athlete, to be an elite baseball player. But at the dawn of this tainted era, Major League Baseball needed a PED to get it's own glory back.

Barry Bonds was a man who loved baseball, who achieved his dream of playing professionally. We made him into a hero, an icon, something for us all to aspire to be. But when he got too high, we tore him right back down. We want our heroes to inspire us, but as much as we like to create them, we love to have the power to destroy them. No matter what was put into a syringe, who injected it or what it did, if any fan of baseball who has cheered at a walk off home run, a tie breaking grand slam, or watched with wonder at the fireworks of a home run derby wants to cast blame at someone, they need to look at where the it all begins. If the effect is an exciting display of super human offense, the cause is the people who want to see it.