



Sports

by Jerry Keys

In America, we are indoctrinated at a young age to strive for excellence and success. Whether it be for prestige, money, or both; always shoot for the stars. Achievement is galvanized; failure is lost in a memory. Some people reach their goals the right way; others use different avenues to reach their goals. Any player who uses illegal substances are ostracized and labeled a cheat. One of the most frequently asked questions to these players is, "Why did you do it?"

No one wishes they fall short of their goal. Whatever steps which are necessary to obtain it are lauded as having the desire needed or the drive to reach their full potential. Whether they were known to take short cuts or not in the past, "we as fans" still cheered them on. After a player is revealed to have taken short cuts, the cheers stop and the accusations run ramped. Still I ask, "Why did you do it?"

For baseball players, most are drafted out of high school. Some sign with the team who drafted him, others go to college in hopes of being selected in a higher round. For example, the Atlanta Braves drafted a fresh-faced kid out in California named Randy Johnson (yes, "the" Randy Johnson) in the 4th round of the 1982 draft. He was drafted in the 2nd round by the Montreal Expos in 1985.

A usual conclusion is a player gets more signing bonus money up front the higher he is drafted. Ben McDonald passed up on the Braves in 1986 (27th round) and entered college. He was the overall #1 pick in the 1989 draft and was pitching for the Baltimore Orioles that season.

High round draft picks earn more bonus money, more guaranteed money in his contract, and have more chances to break into the

majors. These players (lets say 1st round picks) are given more opportunities to achieve stardom than guys taken in the 23rd round because the teams have much more capital invested in them. But by just making the club, are they considered stars? Some say yes, some say no.

A player has to have an extraordinary gift to make it to the big show. Even if he is a platoon player or if in the NL, a pinch hitter, he still brings in more money than 98.5% of the United States population (according to the 2005 US Census Bureau).

The minimum salary for a major league baseball player in 2008 was \$390,000. At this point, we all think... well that guy is really bringing in the dough! But the pressure has just begun. If he plays hard and has a few lucky breaks, maybe, just maybe, when he is eligible for free agency (a player has to log a certain amount of service time before he can become a free agent, until that time a player can ask for arbitration; which is also offered after a certain amount of service time has been logged), his big payday will arrive.

This player may luck up and be the exact position player a team wanting to make a run at the post-season needs. He inks a contract for four years while earning twenty-eight million dollars. Now that's bringing in the dough!

But somewhere along the player's first five years, he runs into bad luck, a nagging injury, or another new kid on the club who is looking to take his place. What does he do now? If he does carve out a name for himself, he will be set for life. But what if he gets beaten out by another player? What are his options?

This player could be content with being a career minor leaguer/often late-season call up (see Russ

Morman). He could try and look for a coaching job with a farm team. Either way, the riches he dreamed of in baseball would not come to be. A lot of players do not finish college (or even start if drafted out of high school), so could he return to college, squeak out a buck like other working Joes?

How many of us have ever had to take an exam or a skills test for a certain job and thought, "If I can just ace this test, life would be so much better?" If we had prior knowledge of what questions were to be asked, would we take advantage of it?

I am aware comparing an examination of skills of a person towards acquired knowledge versus a skill of sport is not a fair comparison but the situation each is in is very similar. If Joe Snow takes advantage of his opportunity maybe he will graduate or get the job he has always wanted. The same reward would apply to the ballplayer.

If he uses performance enhancing drugs (PED) maybe he will have a better chance at obtaining his goals of fortune and fame. If he does not, what if that new kid on the bench looking to take his place does; and succeeds in unseating him. Can he risk losing his job to another player who uses PED while he is not? A heavy burden to be placed on a guy who is all but 24 or 25 years old.

Alleged PED user Barry

Why They Did It, Part I

Bonds never needed to use anything to make the big leagues. A popular question among baseball pundits is not would he have collected a great amount of home runs, it is how many would he have swatted if he remained clean.

A different scenario with the 24-25 year old kid who has his career on the line and whether or not he will cash in on free agent riches.

In the NFL there is a minimum salary for each year played up to ten. For a rookie the minimum is \$385,000, a ten-year player \$1,100,000.

The NBA is very similar, rookie (\$442,114), ten-year (\$1,262,275). A NHL minimum is \$450,000. Have we ever asked ourselves what would we do to hold on to salaries of that magnitude? Of course an overwhelming majority of professional athletes in these four sports love the game they play. Yet it always comes down to money, as we the fans always say.

Most of us gain some type of satisfaction out of the jobs we perform (or at least I would like to think that) on a daily basis. The same goes for professional athletes. Would we continue to feel satisfied with our jobs if our pay were slashed by 90%? That is usually what

happens to players who only last a year or two in the big leagues. Or to what length would we go to, to receive that promotion which would increase our salary 175-fold? Yes...175-fold!

It was reported over the last ten years, every World Series winning team loses six players, or roughly 25% of the championship team. We would all like to think those six retired while on top, riding off into the sunset, such as Darren Daulton did with the 1997 Florida Marlins. Sadly, that is not the case. Does anyone remember two rookie call-ups for Atlanta in 1991; who played integral parts in turning the Braves into winners? Only sports nuts like myself can answer that, Brian Hunter and Keith Mitchell. Hunter spent parts of the next two years with Atlanta before being traded and ended his career appearing in 699 games with 67 dingers and 259 RBI's. Mitchell never donned a Braves uniform after '91 and wrapped-up his career in '98 with 128 games, 8 homers, and 29 RBI's.

Most sports fans would not remember who they were. It would be a fair bet each would have wanted to be household names such as teammates Terry Pendleton

or Dave Justice. Each had their moment in the sun. Returning to that 24-25 year-old player who wants to become the next household name, do they want to be a Keith Mitchell who did not get the lucky break, or the vaunted All-Star third baseman Terry Pendleton (there is no suggestion Hunter, Mitchell, Pendleton or Justice ever took any type of PEDs)? Maybe this is a question we would have to ask ourselves.

Using any type of illegal substance to gain an unfair advantage over others is a detriment to the game. Any fan or player knows that. But try telling that to the marginal player who is not only seeing his possible millions float away, much less his roughly \$500,000 low end salary, but a return to the real world where many people still do not make 5% of his "low end" earnings. A quite enormous burden for a kid to carry with a wife and child at home, depending upon his success. I have to admit I was one who wanted to throw the PED users under the bus and in a way still do. But the picture seems much different through the eyes of a player. Next month will conclude the two-part story "Why They Did It".

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