

Statement of Alderson - Committee on Govt Reform

Written by Steroid Hearing
Wednesday, 16 March 2005 12:00

Statement of Richard L. Alderson,

Executive Vice President,

Major League Baseball,

before the House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform

March 17, 2005

I would like to begin today by emphasizing the most important point of these hearings for Congress and young people: Baseball is dealing aggressively with the usage of steroids in the game. I believe that the current Minor League drug policy and the newly implemented Major League drug policy are enormous steps forward as we strive to eliminate performance-enhancing drugs from professional baseball.

I have been employed in baseball for almost 24 years, 17 of them with the Oakland Athletics. For 14 of those years, from 1984 through 1997, I was the General Manager of the Athletics. I was also President of the A's from 1993 through 1995 and in 1997 and 1998. I have been Executive Vice President, Baseball Operations, at Major League Baseball from 1998 to the present.

My awareness of steroids has evolved through that time, from little or no awareness in the early years to a great awareness today. Simply put, we now know far more about performance-enhancing drugs and their use in professional baseball than we once did. In retrospect, I wish that I and the rest of Major League Baseball had known more about this problem sooner so that effective controls could have been implemented earlier than they have been. No one involved in the management of Major League Baseball over the past 20-plus years would answer otherwise, but in the past we did not have the benefit of the knowledge we have now. Our awareness has been dynamic, not static, as have been our steps to address the problem. And we are addressing this

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problem, not only to protect the health of our players and the integrity of our sport, but also to demonstrate to young athletes and others that steroids and other performance enhancing substances should not be used or condoned.

With the considerable attention now being paid to the steroid issue, it is difficult to imagine that there was a time when those in baseball had barely heard of steroids, much less suspected that they were a problem in the game. When I first became the General Manager of the Athletics in 1983, the conventional wisdom within professional baseball was that strength training would not result in improved performance. Many players and Clubs placed no emphasis at all on strength development.

In the early and mid-1980s, the Oakland Athletics embarked on many innovative programs. We were the first to embrace quantitative analysis for the evaluation of players. We hired the first "mental coach," someone actually in uniform, to assist with the development of our players and staff. We may have been the first team to promote strength training and to configure a team weight room at the ballpark. At the Major League level, a former Major League player already on the coaching staff was assigned additional responsibility as the strength coach. We also instituted a comprehensive Club drug program for Minor League players in 1984. This program focused on recreational drugs and it had a testing component. Therapy was the goal of this program, not punishment. The program did not include steroids, because possible steroid use was not even contemplated at that time.

One of the players developed by the Oakland organization during this time was Jose Canseco. Canseco was a mid-round draft selection, but he quickly developed a reputation for bat speed and power. By the end of the 1984 season, which was before Canseco claims he began using steroids, Canseco was a possible future star with great power potential. Baseball America considered him the A's number one prospect. Consequently, his subsequent development, physically as well as professionally, was gratifying but not surprising to those in the organization. By the time Canseco was an established player, many organizations had adopted similar strength training programs and, as a result, many players throughout Major League Baseball were getting stronger and bigger. For those of us in management, certainly into the late 1980s, there was little reason to believe that players' strength and weight gains resulted from anything other than hard work.

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There did come a time, however, when I did wonder whether Jose Canseco might be using steroids. There was a column written in late 1988 that speculated about his steroid use and led to a brief fan reaction in Boston during the 1988 playoffs. But his reaction to the speculation was a vehement denial, a much different response than the recent admissions in his book. Also, probably in 1989, Canseco reported to spring training markedly bigger and more physically developed than he had been the year before.

However, under the Collective Bargaining Agreement then in force with the Major League Baseball Players Association, Major League players could not be tested for steroid use. Congress did not even make steroids illegal until 1991.

During my time in Oakland, I never saw any player use steroids. I never saw any steroids or steroid paraphernalia. Steroid suspicion was not a consideration of mine in trading Jose Canseco in 1992, in trading for him in 1997 or in not re-signing him for 1998. I never suspected Mark McGwire or Jason Giambi of using steroids during my tenure in Oakland.

There were many factors at work in baseball in the 1990s which may have obscured a steroid problem. Home runs and run production were increasing during this time but not always year to year. At the same time, strength programs were in vogue across Major League Baseball; hitter friendly ballparks were being built; expansion had occurred in 1993 and again in 1998; two seasons, 1994 and 1995, had been shortened by a player strike; bat design had changed and there was an emphasis with many Clubs on having offensive players even at traditionally defensive positions (i.e., shortstop, centerfield, second base, catcher).

Beginning in the late 1990s, there has been a growing awareness of steroid use in professional baseball. This greater awareness first emerged with the inquiry into the use of androstenedione in 1998. Since then, we have become more knowledgeable as a result of a strong testing program in the Minor Leagues, as well as the testing program contained in the 2002 Collective Bargaining Agreement with the Major League Baseball Players Association. Participation in international competitions such as the Olympics, where professional players have competed since 2000, has also contributed to our knowledge and, I believe, to the willingness of the Players Association to finally accept drug testing for steroids. Out of this greater awareness have come a strengthened Minor League

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drug policy, the new Major League drug policy implemented for this season, and a Medical Advisory Committee that was formed partly to keep the Commissioner and Major League Baseball informed about performance enhancing substances. Also, tighter controls on the access to Major League Baseball clubhouses were instituted.

Hindsight is 20/20 vision. All of us in baseball, including me, wish that we had been able to detect steroid use earlier in the 1990s. But I and we can only learn from this recent history. In the meantime, the new Major League steroid policy effective for this season is a great step forward. The program represents, on the part of both players and management, an affirmation that the integrity of the game, the health of Major League players, and the health of the youth of the United States are vitally important to Baseball.