Scoring Hits, Runs and Asterisks

By ALAN SCHWARZ

AND so the uproar over the illegal use of steroids by baseball players has passed, trampled under the persistent parade of home runs. The games go on. Balls keep sailing over fences in beguiling arcs. Fans dance as box scores grow as bloated as the sluggers' physiques.

Much of the commotion over baseball and steroids — catalyzed by a Sports Illustrated exposé 10 days ago in which the former San Diego Padres star Ken Caminiti admitted he took them the season he won the 1996 National League Most Valuable Player award — has concerned how the drugs can be unhealthy to players, what with their testicles shrinking and extra body weight tearing their joints to shreds. But this is the rough equivalent of criticizing looting because those glass shards can be sharp. As the drugs pollute the players' bodies, they threaten to rip the Steroid Era from the game's sacred statistical timeline.

Home runs have become laughingly common in modern baseball. Since 1995 they have come at a rate of 2.18 per game, a 36 percent increase from 20 years ago, cutting standards to snippets. Where 50 home runs in a season once meant something (just 18 players did it before 1995), 16 have since, with Roger Maris's old record of 61 passed no fewer than seven times in the last four years. Simple math suggests that several players active today will pass the career totals of Willie Mays (660), Babe Ruth (714) and Hank Aaron (755), obliterating the sport's most revered historical benchmark.

No specific players beyond Caminiti and the recently retired Jose Canseco have admitted to using steroids; reliable estimates place their use among 20 percent to 40 percent of major leaguers, most of them hitters. And several other factors, including smaller ballparks, harder bats and honest weight-training, have contributed to baseball's increased offense.

Yet while these sorts of changes have naturally taken place throughout the game's history, rampant cheating — breaking the law to bulk up 30 pounds and cream more balls 400 feet — has not. Just as the players' bodies break down from the extra weight, baseball's statistical framework could collapse from the beefed-up numbers.

Much of baseball's appeal derives from statistics. This is not a modern, database-driven phenomenon: box scores have captivated fans since the first one appeared in The New York Morning News in 1845, and books crammed with season and career breakdowns have been popular since the late 19th century. Young fans memorized the backs of Topps baseball cards and played stats-based games like Strat-O-Matic. Today, millions devote much of their free time to competing in fantasy leagues based on real players and their statistics, which for many are inseparable.

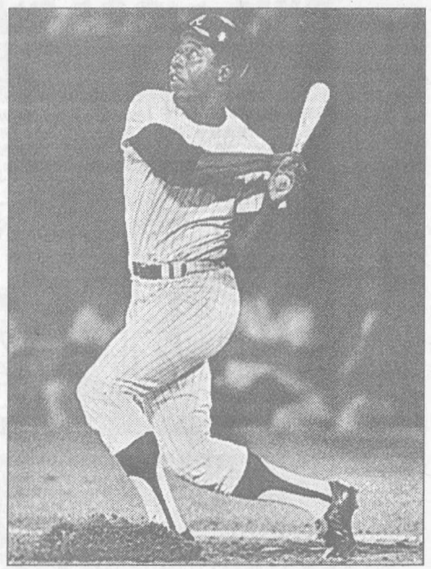
The numbers have always ebbed and flowed — from the dead-ball era of the early 20th century to the high-offense 1920's and 1930's to a 1968 season in which, before the strike zone was shrunk and the mound was lowered to its present height of 10 inches, the entire majors batted a measly .237. "All records are set under conditions which are favorable to the setting of such a record," said the baseball historian Bill James. Sure enough, legendary numbers like Hack Wilson's 191 R.B.I. came in 1930, and Bob Gibson's 1.12 E.R.A. came in 1968.

NEAL TRAVEN, chairman of the statistics committee of the Society for American Baseball Research, says his colleagues haven't exactly rioted over any steroid epidemic. "When the pendulum swings back, which it will, this will be a phenomenon to adjust for, like the lively ball," he said calmly.

What seems to get forgotten, however, is that steroids aid only the dozens or hundreds who choose to cheat — as opposed to all players equally, like a lower mound or smaller ballparks. And we will probably never know who the cheaters are; the day after his admission broke, Caminiti backtracked, sounding as if he'd just found a horse's head in his bed.

Breaking the rules is usually linked only to individual players. Gaylord Perry won the 1972 Cy Young Award by throwing pitches smeared with Vaseline, and two years later, when the Yankees' Graig Nettles broke his bat, rubber balls spilled out. As for breaking the law, in 1970 Pittsburgh Pirates pitcher Dock Ellis threw a no-hitter while on acid, the competitive benefits of which are debatable, while Babe Ruth wasn't exactly sober for all of his 656 home runs between the 18th and 21st Amendments. But the rampant use of steroids, which will only continue because the Players Association opposes mandatory testing, could corrode the meaning of an entire era's worth of statistics, and therefore its place in history.

In baseball, statistics tell the story. The image of Joe DiMaggio will always be married to the number 56 (his consecutive-game hitting streak), Ted Williams to his .406 batting average. A generation from now, 50 homers might mean something quite different, a story not necessarily fit for bedtime.



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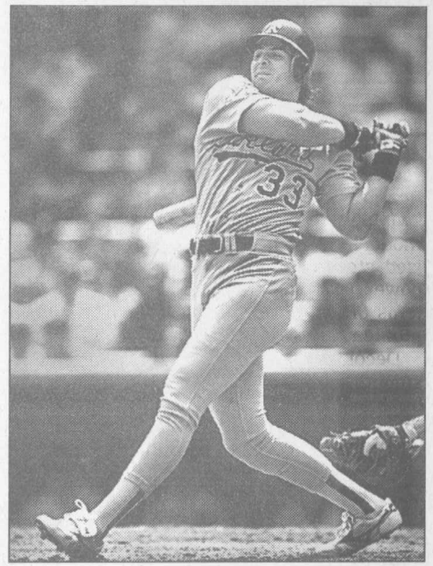

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Then and now: Hank Aaron, left, blasting No. 600 in 1971, and Jose Canseco in 1992.

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