



Reflections of a River Rat:

Baseball reins in its cheating martyrs

By Jim Holleran

Who knew baseball had so many Joan of Arc wannabes?

From listening to the clamor about baseball enforcing its existing rules on doctoring baseballs, you'd think a few pitchers had been set ablaze three times and had their ashes cast into the Seine, the same fate as the 15th-century French saint.



Tampa Bay Rays righthander Tyler Glasnow was the first pseudo martyr to step forward and blame Major League Baseball for cracking down on pitchers who apply sticky substances to baseballs. Starting this week, umpires will begin stop-and-frisk trips to the mound. If caught, pitchers will be ejected immediately and handed a 10-day suspension.

Glasnow bemoaned baseball's pending crackdown with forcing him to abandon his illegal substance and leading to his injury. He said he was forced to grip the baseball more tightly and that led to a partially torn ulnar collateral ligament and a flexor tendon strain in his pitching elbow.

"I just threw 80 innings, then you tell me I can't use anything in the middle of the year. I have to change everything I've been doing the entire season. I'm telling you I truly believe that's why I got hurt."

Whoa! Let's unpack that bluster. It's MLB's fault for not letting him cheat? He rationalizes that hitters aren't bothered by pitchers applying mixtures of sunscreen and rosin to the ball or Spider Tack, the bubblegum-like goo used by strongman contestants.

New York Yankees righthander Gerrit Cole also rationalized about injuries:

"I would just hate to see players get hurt. I would hate to see balls start flying at people's head. I had a really tough time gripping the baseball tonight, especially early when it was windy. I don't really care to be inflammatory here, so I am just going to leave it at that."

This whining follows a performance in which Cole allowed only two runs in eight innings of a 3-2 Yankees win. A baseball in his hands resembles a wiffle ball in my hands. Except he throws it 98 miles an hour will earn \$324 million from his current contract.

But here's the reality. Fans complain about the stars with eight-figure salaries ... usually the ones playing against their favorite team. Yes, it's pitchers' livelihoods that are affected by the crackdown, but the game belongs to the fans, the people who buy the tickets, order the team swag, pay the bills for cable TV and streaming services. Enough of the exaggeration about gripping a ball when you have powerful, oversized hands.



We fans want to see well-pitched games. We appreciate that Yankees lefthanded reliever Aroldis Chapman easily touches 100 mph with his fastball. Relatively unknown Cleveland closer Emmanuel Clase cuts his fastball and the radar gun still blinks 100 mph. So enough of the bellyaching about not being able to

cheat by adding extra spin. Clase did his time last year, receiving a 60-game suspension for using performance-enhancing drugs. He and the Indians lived by the rules.

The cheating works like this. If you can maintain a better grip on the ball via an illegal substance, you can impart extra spin. The curve dives a little more sharply. The cut fastball moves a little more. As spin rates climb, hitters make less contact and strike out more. Batting averages wane. Scoring goes down. Fans sit on their hands.

The pitcher's rubber remains 60 feet, 6 inches away. The mound is still 10 inches high. A rosin bag sits on the back side of every mound. Rosin is legal and it boosts a pitcher's grip. But every pitcher still looks for an advantage to maintain his livelihood, to stay in the majors, to extend the big bucks and perks of a major-league career.

Baseball has lost its grip as America's pastime. Once the darling of sports fans up until the 1970s, baseball's pre-eminence was eroded by NFL Sundays, NBA telecasts, and widespread televising of college football and basketball. In the marketplace of sports, MLB has fallen to No. 2 behind the NFL and needs to counter the oversimplified criticism that it is boring.

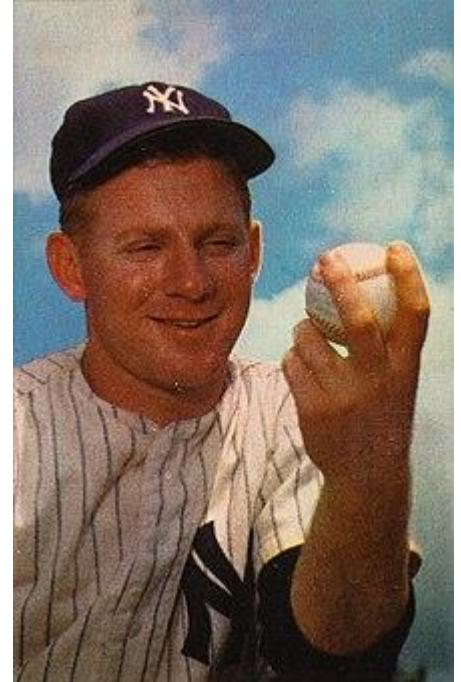
Baseball found itself twice before in eras when the lack of offense was criticized. The early 20th century was deemed the Dead Ball Era when pitchers defaced balls with mud or tobacco

juice and the ball remained in play despite how discolored or lopsided it became. Few fans today, who thrive on home runs, would have been enamored with the sacrifice bunts, stolen bases and slap hits of that era. A livelier baseball was introduced around the time Babe Ruth transitioned from the pitcher's mound to an everyday role in the batting order.

Baseball underwent a course correction after the 1968 season. Bob Gibson's ERA was a microscopic 1.12, Carl Yastrzemski won the batting title at .301 and seven teams hit lower than .230. The mighty Yankees were in freefall, hitting .214 as a team. Baseball lowered the mound five inches and shrunk the strike zone. Within two seasons, batting averages rose by 17 points and scoring rose by two runs a game.

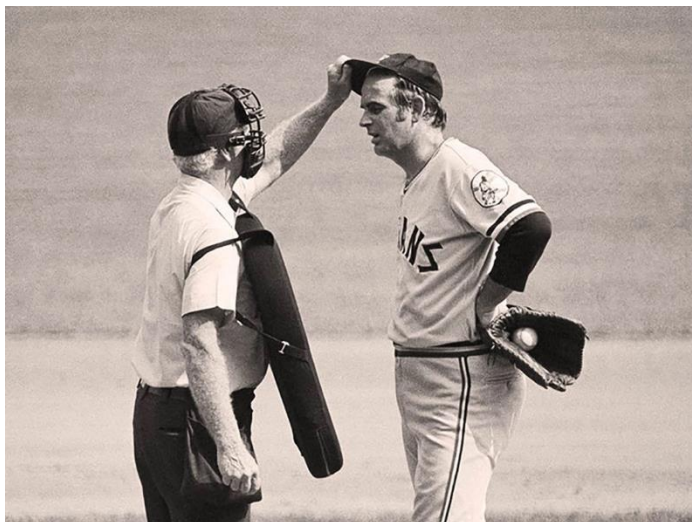
Now baseball's collective batting average is hovering around .236, in the same ballpark as the .237 average of 1968. So it's appropriate that the pendulum of rules swings back the other way.

MLB is taking heat for initiating a crackdown in June, but the criticism would come at any time. Pitchers cry foul, but managers are reluctant to say much because they realize their guys are doing the same thing. It's a quiet epidemic of cheating.



It's nothing new:

- The spitball – a fastball that performed like a knuckleball – was phased out in the 1930s, but guys were still trying to get away with it in the '50s.
- Yankees lefthander Whitey Ford sharpened his wedding ring to cut baseballs or combined baby oil, resin and turpentine for his "gunk" ball.



- Gaylord Perry hung around into his 40s by hiding K-Y Jelly behind his ear, in his glove, and best of all, on his zipper because he knew umpires wouldn't check there.

That brings us to this era of self-entitlement that espouses Yunick's Law – "If you ain't cheatin', you ain't trying."

Yunick was the legendary NASCAR "rules manipulator" who once told an interviewer: "The cheating thing is just

like the law business. It depends on who's in power, the Democrats or the Republicans, and what part of the 19th or 20th or 21st century it is, because the laws are more and

more abused the further we go. The lawyers are learning ways to circumvent the rules that we had yesterday.”

Starting this week, umpires will become the bad guys for enforcing the rules.

Listen to the parting shot from Glasnow’s press conference. "I'm sitting here, my lifelong dream. I want to go out and win a Cy Young. I want to be an All-Star and now it's s--- on.”

We survived the steroids era. We’ll endure this era of martyrdom too.

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