

OPEN FORUM

How We Judge a Fallen Hero

By *Ethan Nadelmann*

DARRYL STRAWBERRY seems to have a hard time just saying no to cocaine.

For the third time in 10 years, Strawberry has entered a treatment center to deal with his addiction to the drug, and he has been suspended from baseball for a year for failing his drug test.

My first thought on hearing this news was: What's the matter with him? Can't he just say no, if only for the few more years that his knees hold out? He sure must like cocaine a lot.

My second thought was: Gee, Strawberry sure is lucky he's rich and famous, and that all sorts of people like George Steinbrenner care about him, because if he were poor and not famous, odds are that he'd be sitting behind bars right now, probably for violating probation or parole with a dirty urine sample. This country is full of people whose only offense is an inability to say no to cocaine. Some go to fancy rehabs, some sort it out at home, and the unlucky ones get to think it over in jail or prison.

My third thought was: Strawberry's addicted. He's got a disease, or a disability. This is not a case of moral weakness but of metabolic dysfunction. We don't punish folks for their diseases, or disabilities. If anything, we try to make accommodations for their disabilities so long as they don't pose direct threats to others. If we really believe that drug addiction is a disease, then there is no ethical or medical justification for depriving him of his livelihood for manifesting a symptom of the disease. Moreover, why in this case do we always blame the patient? Maybe the fault lies with the treatment provider.

My fourth thought was: Damn hypocrites! Strawberry can't seem to say no to cocaine, but who isn't addicted to one thing or another? Think about cigarettes. How many people have quit, and quit again, and again, and again? Some really do quit, but they still cheat every once in a while. Can't relate to cigarettes? Think about coffee. Imagine abstaining from that wonderful drug day after day after day, even on those mornings when nothing in the world would seem more pleasurable than a delicious hot cup of coffee. Can't relate to that one? Then think about



dieting, and about saying no to bread day after day after day. Who doesn't cheat? Who isn't addicted to something? Sure, cocaine is different. But what's most different about cocaine is not the nature of the experience, or the behavior associated with it, but the fact that it is illegal and the others aren't.

My fifth thought was: What exactly is the point of the punishment? Almost everything we've learned about drug use and addiction is that a good job and a supportive environment are crucial in enabling people to say no to drugs, or at least to keep their drug use under control. Strawberry's job as a major league ballplayer, responsible to his fans, teammates and employer, provided powerful incentives for him to keep his cocaine use under control. He may have slipped up in the off season, but no one doubts this man's courage and fortitude. So what is the point of suspending him from baseball? Is the punishment supposed to be a form of treatment? Or the treatment a form of punishment? Or can we no longer tell the difference?

My sixth thought was: Why don't they leave the guy alone? No one's suggested that Darryl's cocaine use gave him an unfair advantage over his competitors. And no one's claimed his drug use posed a threat to others on the ballfield. Indeed, no one's even charged he was impaired at the workplace. Seems to me Darryl's cocaine use was none of anyone else's business -- apart from the laws and policies and contracts that make this private behavior

supposedly everyone's business.

My seventh thought was: Perhaps professional baseball, and all professional sports, would be better off without any drug testing — except perhaps for performance enhancing substances. What's the point? Few employees work in more public workplaces. If they are impaired, people will notice, and managers will deal with it, quickly. If they're not impaired, and don't pose a threat to others, who cares if they're using one drug or another.

"But they're role models for young people," some say. If that's true, then why does the system insist on broadcasting their vices and frailties? It's hard enough living the life of a hero, constantly in the public eye, without having your urine tested and your results announced to the world. If we're running short on heroes these days, maybe it's because we no longer respect their privacy, and their humanity, enough to let them be heroes.

I'll tell you when Darryl Strawberry became my hero. I'm a Yankee fan, not a Mets fan, so it wasn't until quite recently: Oct. 17, 1999, to be exact, Game 4 of the American League Championship Series, at Boston's Fenway Park. According to *The New York Times'* Buster Olney: "When Strawberry came to bat for the first time, the Fenway Park fans offered a new and different chorus for the slugger with the history of drugs and alcohol — 'Just Say No.' Boston's Bret Saberhagen threw a high fastball and Strawberry rattled a high drive two-thirds of the way up the right field foul pole for a home run. It was the last time the hearty singers serenaded Strawberry on this evening."

It reminded me of another hero of mine who wasn't good at just saying no, Babe Ruth. He, too, broke the prohibition laws of the day with alacrity --but no one ever thought to test his urine. Good thing for him. Good thing for us.

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