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Bonds's record: Should it stand?

The culture of baseball is evolving, some say, while others are waiting for results from legal proceedings.

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When the moment finally came, AT&T Park in San Francisco was filled with cheers, fireworks, and streamers. Barry Bonds's 756th career home run, a prospect that had previously elicited mixed reaction from both baseball officials and fans, even drew kind words from the sport's commissioner. "[T]oday is a day for congratulations on a truly remarkable achievement," Bud Selig said in a statement.

But while Tuesday's momentous game and celebration have ended, the debate over the record-breaking feat – and the suspicions that Bonds might have long ago bulked up on steroids – continue unabated.

Some pundits feel that Bonds's record should stand no matter what because the culture of baseball is always changing. Other baseball players have used illegal drugs, they point out, and did not achieve such milestones.

But on the other side, some ask if the magnitude of this record crosses a threshold that potentially requires a different response. Already, the pressure on baseball and other sports to enforce stronger drug-use policies has increased, experts say.

For now, Major League Baseball will recognize the record with no asterisk, says spokesman Mike Teevan. But if any legal proceedings link Bonds with steroid use, momentum could build to remove the achievement from the record books.

In a broad sense, the high-profile moment raises fresh questions about the pressure on athletes to succeed at all costs. And such questions go well beyond sports: Many see an increased national compulsion to bend rules for personal gain.

"If Bonds is proven guilty in court, the commissioner of baseball should take a very strong stance on this issue and deny Bonds the record," says George Gardner, a spokesman for the Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University in Boston.

Some draw a connection with other recent scandals in professional sports: allegations of score-fixing by a referee in the NBA, dogfighting charges against one of the NFL's highest-paid stars, and doping in cycling's Tour de France.

"It is more than coincidence that so many of these episodes are happening all at once," says Gardner. "They should force a real discussion by both public and press calling such practices into question, about what is right and wrong, and what lessons can be learned by heroes in sport who get into trouble by pushing too hard for excellence."

Some see the event as an opportunity for baseball officials to take the moral high ground.

"How should baseball handle [this]? Morally and with a strong standpoint," says Jason Michelotti, director of Brand Development for Davie Brown Talent, a firm that advises major corporations about image development.

"The general public has reached a tipping point with superstars and more importantly with the leagues that employ them. It's time for these leagues to stand up for something other than profits and create a brand image they can be proud of."

But others disagree with that assessment, saying that Bonds's record, which surpassed Hank Aaron's home-run mark of 755, should stand.

"People are not focusing on the real thing, which is what a phenomenal talent Barry Bonds is," says Matthew Pace, chairman of sports business practice at Duval & Stachenfeld, a firm that advises sports and entertainment businesses. He says baseball-bat technology, stadium size, a higher quality of pitchers – as well as changes in nutritional and other supplements – have made standards different.

"Other hitters and pitchers among Bonds's peers have no doubt been using steroids, and [Bonds's] home-run numbers surpassed others anyway," he says.

Still others say that in time, the US public will forget about the controversy surrounding Bonds's record.

"Thirty, 40 years from now, no one will question whether or not Bonds was great," says Robert Tuchman, president for TSE sports and entertainment marketing in New York. "I personally think it's terrible, and we obviously don't want a situation where breaking the rules with steroids [is what enhances] the game. But it's human nature to forgive and forget."

Before that happens, others warn, sports officials need to tackle substance abuse and other corruption issues head on – or fans will turn away. "As organizations who deliver value to their stakeholders, major sports leagues need to recognize that their true engines of value lie in upholding the ideals that make sports great," says Dov Seidman, CEO of LRN, a firm that aims to inspire principled performance in business. "It's no different for baseball or a foods producer. If people don't trust it, they won't buy it."

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