

Article

When Rituals Fail: Confessions of Doping in Elite Sports

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Abstract: In the nineteenth century, Protestant reformers declared: Sport builds character. They described sport as ethically valuable and as an experiential tool to teach values and cooperation. However, sports have long raised ethical challenges when it comes to fairness in competition. This article examines controversies over performance enhancing drugs and pays attention to the rituals of confession at play for those caught doping. Nineteenth-century revivalist Charles Finney formalized a ritual practice that became known as the “anxious bench”. Finney would demand that a sinner sit on the bench, separated from others because of their sinfulness, and confess their sinful ways in order to re-devote themselves to God and goodness. Turning to steroid use in Major League Baseball and Lance Armstrong’s doping scandal, I consider how rituals of confession based on the anxious bench failed to redeem these athletes because the athletes themselves resisted the premise. Rituals of confession preserve an underlying ideology that sport is morally valuable. When these rituals fail, they reveal less noble structural motivations that lead to doping in the first place like monetary reward, intense pressure to perform, and the entertainment demands of elite sport.

Keywords: doping; anti-doping; confession; ritual; sports; Major League Baseball; Lance Armstrong; muscular Christianity

1. Introduction

On 18 and 19 January 2013, Oprah Winfrey’s OWN network aired a two-part interview with Lance Armstrong, wherein he admitted to using banned performance enhancing techniques in all seven of his Tour de France victories. The setting was the lobby of the Four Seasons Hotel in Austin, Texas, with Winfrey and Armstrong in leather chairs angled half toward each other, half toward the camera. Between the two was an end table holding two glasses of water with matching metal straws. Clearly, Winfrey had considered how to make the atmosphere of the interview feel intimate and personal, rather than cold and legalistic.

Over the course of two 90-min segments, Winfrey asked hard questions, some of which Armstrong answered and some of which he avoided. When Winfrey asked, “Do you owe David Walsh an apology?” Armstrong responded, “That’s a good question”.

Winfrey pushed, “Do you owe David Walsh an apology who for thirteen years has pursued this story, who wrote for the *Times*, who has now written books about you and this entire process?” To which, Armstrong managed to reply, “I would, I would, I’d apologize to David”.¹ Armstrong’s tendency to admit that an apology was justified but to not actually deliver it characterized the interview as a whole. Widely regarded as a partial apology at most, the public expressed disappointment in Armstrong’s comportment and his dodging of responsibility.

¹ David Walsh was a reporter who followed Armstrong’s career for years and was one of the first to raise suspicions about his performance enhancement strategies (Ballester and Walsh 2004; Walsh 2013).

Armstrong's choice to turn to Winfrey as his confessor is an interesting one. In this article, I investigate two examples of professional athletes accused of doping and consider their moments of confession. Confession is a religious ritual that often provides a way for a wrongdoer to achieve redemption. The performance enhancement scandals in Major League Baseball and Lance Armstrong's career provide a window on failed confessions, on athletes unable to achieve redemption after disappointing the public. I will show that these failed confessions reveal an underlying contradiction. American culture tends to preserve the idea that sport is morally valuable ("character-building") and therefore hold athletes to a high moral standard.² However, athletes tend to see doping as a systemic problem, rather than an individual problem, and therefore they are disinclined to individual confession.

2. Nineteenth-Century Influences

In order to investigate these confessions, it will be useful to note two important influences from the nineteenth century: The "anxious bench" and muscular Christianity. The anxious bench was a confessional practice developed by evangelist Charles Finney. Finney was a revival preacher and would provide a row of seats between himself and the audience. Finney intended for individuals to approach this bench of seats, confess to their inner shames and torments, and leave the bench on the right path to salvation. When a sinner was on the bench, the preacher prodded them with questions, attempting to reveal the root of their shame and, in so doing, provide a path for confession and redemption. Historian of American religions Kathryn Lofton describes the ritual as such:

"The bench was the climactic site in the revival process, setting sinners physically apart from the audience as symbols of sin, and of their own failure to make a break with their sinful past: they were separated by their failures, and by their failure to cease their failures". (Lofton 2008, p. 56)

Charles Finney was one of the most influential evangelical preachers of his time, and he developed a set of what he called "new measures" for revivals. One of these was the anxious bench; others included holding revivals over a series of days, encouraging women to speak openly at these meetings, and eliciting fervor through preaching. For Finney, all sins were voluntary, meaning they stemmed from the will of the sinner, and because of this, all sinners had the ability to reshape their wills and cease sinful ways. He saw the anxious bench as a tool to accomplish this. His most famous invocation of the anxious bench was in Rochester, New York in 1830–1831. Over the course of six months in Rochester, Finney preached 98 sermons and boasted over 1200 conversions. In part because of his claims to numerical success, other revivalists adopted his "new measures", and features like emotional public confession became common across New England (Perciaccante 2003).

American cultural understandings of confession and redemption are still shaped by the idea of the shamed sinner set apart and forced to name their sin in the quest of their salvation (Stephan 2008; Meyer 2011). As Lofton has pointed out, one cultural site that preserves this understanding is the Oprah Winfrey Show, wherein Winfrey's interview structure mirrors the practice of the anxious bench (Lofton 2011). I return to this idea later in this article.

Muscular Christianity was a movement of Protestant men who defined manliness as a combination of Christian morality and athleticism. It emerged in Britain in the 1850s and quickly spread to America. According to historian William Baker, as industry replaced agricultural labor as the defining force in men's lives, "another kind of male dominance, athletic prowess, became a central feature in the definition of manliness" (Baker 1996, p. xii). As muscular Christianity took hold in America, it became commonplace to describe health and vigor as key manly virtues. One Methodist minister summed up

² There are a variety of theoretical approaches that may lead to different interpretations of these events. For example, applying anthropology of the body may reveal the ways that sensory information informs our assessments of confession (Breton 2020). Applying critical race theory may reveal cultural expectations that vary based on the race of athletes, fans, and media reporters (Douglas 2014; Brennen and Brown 2016). Attending to sex and gender would show that female athletes often experience higher levels of scrutiny regarding steroid use than their male counterparts (Henne 2015). While these are beyond the scope of the current article, these facets also deserve scholarly attention.

the ideology, noting that it was as much a man's moral duty "to have a good digestion, and sweet breath, and strong arms, and stalwart legs, and an erect bearing as it is to read his Bible, or say his prayers, or love his neighbor as himself" (Baker 1996, p. xi). According to historian Axel Bundgaard, American Civil War veterans hoped that "young men could learn the hard lessons of war and develop tough moral character through battle on the playing field without the actual bloodshed and death of armed conflict" (Bundgaard 2005, p. 171). This philosophy led to the growth of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in the U.S. As a generation of boys grew up without military opportunities to prove their bravery, sports became an important component of character demonstration. The YMCA was central to this enterprise and impacted the American sports landscape by inventing the sport of basketball, expanding access to swimming pools, and forming summer camps for boys (and later, girls).

President Theodore Roosevelt promoted the muscular Christian values of manliness and physical strength as both patriotic and religious obligations. Roosevelt popularized the term "strenuous life", emphasizing a series of experiences that challenged young men through competitive sports and encounters with nature. Americans had accepted the muscular Christian premise that boys needed character development, and also that strong character could be achieved through physical education and mastery of the natural world. Following the example of the YMCA, boys' schools at the turn of the century embraced athletics as character building practices. In 1900, Roosevelt praised school sports as a method of developing the manly traits he thought vital to America's male youth. He wrote:

"Nowadays, whatever other faults the son of rich parents may tend to develop, he is at least forced by the opinion of all his associates of his own age to bear himself well in manly exercises and to develop his body—and therefore, to a certain extent, his character—in the rough sports which call for pluck, endurance, and physical address". (quoted in Putney 2001, p. 106)

Roosevelt's words indicate a socio-economic aspect to muscular Christianity. As non-Protestant immigration from Europe and the migration of black Americans from the rural South to the urban North changed the demographics of American cities, Protestant reformers worked hard to establish belief in manly, moral virtue that could be achieved and experienced through sport.

Protestant Americans enjoyed the idea that team sports could contribute to spiritual growth. Sports sociologist Jay Coakley summarized the trend this way, "In large part, organized sports became important because they could be used to train loyal and hardworking people dedicated to achievement and production for the glory of God and country" (Coakley 2001, p. 72). This sense that sport contributed to one's morality continues to inform popular perceptions of sport and athletes. However, as Coakley has pointed out:

"The mere fact that people do or do not play sports tells us little about their overall lives and how they go about developing their sense of who they are, how they are connected to others, and what is important in their lives. This is why hundreds of studies have not given us the evidence we need to determine whether sports do or do not build character". (Coakley 2001, p. 93)

The question of whether sport builds character remains unanswered, but American culture still tends to adopt the muscular Christian perspective that sport participation is inherently good and moral. One of the major challenges to this perspective on sport is the prevalence of doping.³

³ Christian ethicists like Tracy Trothen have argued that debates over performance enhancement would shift if the values of sport were reprioritized to reflect spiritual growth and hope rather than winning (Trothen 2019). This is part of a longer trajectory of Christian rethinking of the values of sport in light of ethical challenges (Blazer 2015).

3. History of Doping

The term “doping” likely originates with cheating in horse racing by drugging a horse to be slower. Organized criminals were often responsible for horse doping to manipulate race results, and this may have led to the ongoing association of drug use in competition with criminality, corruption, and disrepute. However, for the first half of the twentieth century, sport and innovations in drug performance enhancements were intertwined without the perception that using drugs to improve sporting performance was evil. For example, the USSR entered the Olympic games in 1952, and the games quickly became a proxy for the Cold War. Amphetamine use was widespread on both the USSR and USA teams. One reason amphetamine use was so widespread was that the armed forces on both sides during World War II relied on these drugs for troop invigoration. When the war ended, troops came home and spread the word about “pep pills” (Dimeo 2007).

Over the course of the 1960s, American media and policy makers increasingly connected amphetamines to social degeneracy and counter-culture movements. Additionally, the deaths of high-profile Tour de France cyclists who used amphetamines drew increased concern about the safety of drug use during sport. This contributed to the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) anti-doping response, which they claimed would preserve amateurism and fair play (Dimeo 2007, p. 53). The IOC developed their first banned substance list in the 1960s. Because most athletes that used performance enhancing drugs used some form of amphetamine for a short-term boost in performance, testing was carried out directly pre-competition.

In their exploration of why the governing institutions of sport were interested in banning substances, Paul Dimeo and Verner Møller propose that those in charge relied on an idealized understanding of sport as a competition between amateurs (not paid professionals) who seek to measure natural talents against each other. The authors point out that this noble understanding of international competition was unrealistic in the 1960s and remains unrealistic today (Dimeo and Møller 2018). Sports scientist David Mottram concurs, writing that in the 1960s, “The fear of bringing sport into disrepute meant that many sporting authorities denied the possibility that doping took place, therefore, anti-doping testing was, at best, haphazard” (Mottram 2011, p. 24).

In the United States, this time period saw the development of sports ministry; explicitly Christian organizations formed that recruited celebrity athletes to promote an evangelical understanding of Christian life and salvation. During the first decades of anti-doping, organizations like Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Athletes in Action (the sports ministry branch of Campus Crusade for Christ—now called Cru in the U.S.) relied on portraying their athletes as clean and reputable role models. As the founder of FCA, Dave Hannah, saw it, “Athletes are used to sell everything from candy bars to cars. Why not have them tell about something far greater—the message of Jesus Christ?” (quoted in Smalley 1981, p. 26). These organizations were tuned into the celebrity power of athletes to influence the American public, and also relied on muscular Christian understandings of the moral value of sport. In the U.S. context, these groups were highly successful in maintaining the ideal of the athlete as a moral role model.

In the 1970s, the IOC lifted the requirement that an athlete be an unpaid amateur, allowing paid professionals to compete and eroding one leg of the IOC’s moral argument for purity of sport. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, another drug replaced amphetamines as the drug of choice for performance enhancement: Steroids. Since steroids could be used in the off season to produce muscle gains that would impact in-season competition, anti-doping policing added out-competition testing in an effort to detect steroid use year-round. The IOC began testing for steroids in 1976, but this did not stop doping. As Paul Dimeo put it, “It ended a hundred years of relatively open drug use, and ushered in a new period of deceit, underground innovation, high profile ‘catches,’ and difficult decisions on borderline drugs” (Dimeo 2007, p. 106). By the mid-1970s, several constituencies emerged with a vested interest in painting doping as a practice condoned by communist countries and opposed by the moral West. For Dimeo, “In the politics of the Cold War the propaganda machine told the public that the communists were all evil, whereas in the West the small minority of wrongdoers did not represent

the morality of the people” (Dimeo 2007, p. 121). Dimeo sees this portrayal as disingenuous and therefore he critiques anti-doping as moral theater, rather than enforcing sporting equality.

With the fall of East Germany in the 1990s, the sophisticated doping strategies of the East Germans (some used on girls as young as 12) shocked the international sport community. According to Dimeo and Møller, this was the moment when anti-doping agencies should have realized that doping strategies had become far more complex. However, they note, “The more open debate of the late 1970s and early 1980s had given way to the twin ideas of the need to stop doping, and the need to reassert the fundamentalist dogma of the pure essence of sport” (Dimeo and Møller 2018, p. 33). For Dimeo and Møller, the commitment to the “purity” of sport worked against the success of anti-doping policies.

Through the development of anti-doping policies, we can see the preservation of the muscular Christian idea that sport is inherently good and that “pure” sport benefits society. The primary organization that enforces anti-doping policies in the U.S. is the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA 2020), which formed in 2000. According to USADA’s website, “Athletes who dope seek to gain an unfair advantage over their competitors, thereby undermining their competitors’ hard work and threatening the credibility of their sport. This win-at-all-costs attitude violates the underlying values that make sport meaningful to society” (USADA 2020). While USADA does not spell out the “underlying values” that it mentions, it is possible to infer a muscular Christian understanding of sport as morally valuable.

In USADA’s words, winning at all costs is a detriment to sport, but this quality informs sport at a very basic level. As sport sociologist Shirl Hoffman has noted, to fully engage in sporting competition, an athlete must be willing to embrace the “killer instinct”, a quality Hoffman defines as “ridding yourself of sympathies for your opponent that might inhibit you in applying your full resources to furthering your own cause” (Hoffman 2010, p. 149). This ethical quandary is a major challenge to the idea of sport as morally valuable—is it morally admirable to achieve one’s success at the expense of another’s? Rather than addressing this deep ethical dilemma built into the structures of sport, anti-doping agencies tend to uncritically promote muscular Christian understandings of sport. Examining two performance enhancing drug scandals and their outcomes will show that the muscular Christian association of sport and morality pervades anti-doping actions.

4. Accusations

4.1. The Tour de France

The 1998 Festina affair revealed widespread doping in the Tour de France. Tour de France teams have a *soigneur*, a non-riding member of the team who provides support and transports supplies. During the 1998 Tour, customs agents stopped Willy Voet, the *soigneur* for the Swiss Festina team, for a routine border search of his car and found a variety of drugs including amphetamines, Erythropoietin, steroids, and masking agents. Erythropoietin, commonly known as EPO, is a drug that boosts a person’s blood hematocrit levels, which allows for increased oxygen circulation and therefore increased stamina. The discovery led officials to investigate other teams, and they uncovered more doping. Some teams protested the excessive searches, and some withdrew from the race. When the racers entered Paris three weeks after the race’s start, less than half the riders who started the race crossed the finish line. Sportswriter Alasdair Fotheringham noted that the 1998 Tour threw the credibility of professional cycling into question and caused a crisis for Tour administrators (Fotheringham 2016).

The Festina Affair was a blemish on the reputation of the Tour de France, and Tour director Jean-Marie Leblanc announced that if any rider or team threatened the reputation of the race during the next year’s Tour, actions to expel participants would occur. The head of corporate operations for the Tour decreed, “We will be absolutely hardnosed. The Tour will never be the symbol of doping but of the fight against doping” (Quoted in Rosen 2008, p. 102). After the 1998 Festina scandal, Swiss rider Alex Zülle confessed to the pressure he felt to use EPO. “As a rider, you feel tied into the system. It’s like being on the highway. The law says there’s a speed limit of 65, but everyone is driving 70

or faster. Why should I be the one who obeys the speed limit?" (Quoted in [Rosen 2008](#), p. 101). For many racers, performance enhancement strategies seemed to level the playing field, not provide an unfair advantage.

Journalistic accounts of athletes caught doping tend to portray doping in moralistic and religious terms. For example, David Walsh published a book detailing his long coverage of Lance Armstrong and Walsh's own journey from skepticism that doping was widespread to his desire to reveal the full extent of doping practices. The book is titled *Seven Deadly Sins: My Pursuit of Lance Armstrong* ([Walsh 2013](#)). The number seven refers to the number of times that Armstrong won the Tour de France and the number of times his wins were assisted by banned performance enhancement strategies. Calling these "sins" invokes religious morality, but rather than comparing Armstrong's career to the Christian list of damnable sins (pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth), Walsh uses this terminology as a shorthand to condemn Armstrong's rule violations and lies.

Armstrong finished fourth in the 1998 Tour, his first Tour after the completion of his cancer treatments. When Armstrong raced in 1999, Walsh describes how journalists wanted to tell the story of the man who beat cancer and came back to win the Tour de France. They didn't want to notice that the race was faster than 1998, even though it should have slowed down if doping had really decreased, and they didn't want to listen to cyclists who voiced suspicions about Armstrong and others doping. For example, cyclist Christophe Bassons told one media outlet that he didn't think anyone placing in the top ten of the 1999 Tour was riding clean. Walsh writes, "In the press room, there was widespread indifference to Bassons. Armstrong was such a better story and any reporting of Bassons's complaints would lessen the feel-good effect of the back-from-cancer hero" ([Walsh 2013](#), p. 52). In this way, journalists were complicit in allowing ongoing doping, not wanting to cast a shadow on a good story.

When Lance Armstrong accepted his last yellow jersey (the symbol of the Tour de France leader) after winning in 2005, he said, "I want to send a message to people who do not believe in cycling, the cynics, skeptics. I am sorry that they do not believe in miracles, in dreams. Too bad for them" (Quoted in [Rosen 2008](#), p. 155). It was only one month later that the French sport daily *L'Equipe* claimed to have proof that Armstrong had used EPO during his victorious Tour in 1999. *L'Equipe's* reporter had gotten hold of documents from France's anti-doping laboratory that was testing samples from the 1999 Tour with improved technologies. While the samples were anonymized, *L'Equipe* claimed to have evidence that Armstrong's samples tested positive for EPO. In response to this story, Jean-Marie Leblanc told *L'Equipe* that he felt shocked and "morally betrayed" by Armstrong (Quoted in [Rosen 2008](#), p. 155). Since the lab did not follow appropriate regulations when testing the samples, the Tour could not levy any sanctions against Armstrong, who had, in any case, already retired from professional cycling. Armstrong continued to claim that any allegations that he used performance enhancing drugs were false and part of a "witch-hunt" against him by Tour de France organizers, the World Anti-Doping Agency, and the French press ([Rosen 2008](#), p. 158).

4.2. Major League Baseball

From 1971 to 1990, seven labor disputes between the players' union and the team owners disrupted Major League Baseball's season play. The 1994 season brought the worst dispute to date; beginning in August 1994, the players went on strike for 234 days, resulting in the only cancellation of the World Series since World War I. Fans, players, journalists, and team administrators all worried that the strike spelled the end of an era for baseball. A number of players retired early, Michael Jordan's transition to professional baseball was cut short, and disappointed fans grew cynical over what they saw as rich people arguing about money.

Fast forward to the summer of 1998 when Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa were locked in a race to beat Hank Aaron's home run record, and fans returned to the sport with gusto. The media loved Mark McGwire. As journalists Mark Fainaru-Wada and Lance Williams saw it, "Something about McGwire's appearance—the red hair and the freckled, craggy face that sometimes burst into a winning smile—seemed to invite affectionate hyperbole" ([Fainaru-Wada and Williams 2006](#), p. xi).

Teams set records for attendance at games; McGwire's team, the St. Louis Cardinals, boasted record setting attendance of 3.1 million home tickets for the season.

In August of McGwire's home run summer, a journalist caught sight of androstenedione, a steroid commonly known as Andro, in McGwire's locker and tried to raise the alarm about potential steroid use in Major League Baseball. However, the backlash was not against McGwire, but against the reporter, Steve Wilstein. At the time, Andro was a legal substance that anyone could buy at a supplement store, but it was banned by the Olympics and the National Football League. In response to the story, the Cardinal's manager threatened to ban Associated Press from the clubhouse, and though Commissioner Bud Selig promised an investigation into the health effects of Andro, he was also clear that there would be no action taken against McGwire. According to Fainaru-Wada and Williams, McGwire and Sosa were "bringing baseball back from oblivion's edge" (Fainaru-Wada and Williams 2006, p. xiv). There was little motivation on the part of Major League Baseball to pursue a doping case.

The success of the game was a relief after the struggles to appease fans disappointed by the 1994 World Series cancellation. According to player Jose Canseco, everyone was benefitting from the new normal of steroids in the game—the players, the owners, the fans, the media. He wrote:

"Looking back, I think the country had been in the grip of a collective delusion. People were wondering, foolishly, how the game had become so damn *big*, and they looked everywhere for explanations ... The ballparks were smaller, they said. The strike zone was smaller. The bats were better and more powerful ... The entire analysis was laughable. The answer was clear and any fool could sum it up in one word. The word was *steroids*". (Canseco 2008, pp. 86–87, emphasis in original)

Inspired by the attention McGwire and Sosa garnered, as well as the common locker room knowledge that steroids played a part in their success, other players jumped on the steroid train, including Barry Bonds, who showed up to spring training in 1999 with an extra 15 pounds of muscle, unheard of for an athlete in his mid-30s. Though some journalists harbored suspicions that Bonds's larger physique was the result of steroids, the example of the nearly banned and reviled Steve Wilstein dissuaded them from investigating Bonds's drug use (Fainaru-Wada and Williams 2006, p. 72). That season, Bonds blew out his elbow because he had gained muscle too quickly and overtaxed his tendons. It could have been a career-ending injury, but he was back playing seven weeks later. The media bought the story that the injury was the result of a long baseball career, and steroids went unmentioned.

In 2003, more than five percent of Major League Baseball players tested positive for steroids, leading to a permanent drug testing policy. At the end of the 2004 season, the organization announced that this number had fallen to less than two percent, but investigative journalism undermined these numbers. For example, since the late 1990s, Victor Conte had been providing athletes with undetectable steroids. In December 2004, he told *ESPN The Magazine* that the state of drug testing was so weak that cheating was like "taking candy from a baby" (Quoted in Assael 2007, p. 252n3).

Conte began supplying professional baseball players just as Major League Baseball ramped up their testing initiatives. He produced elaborate calendars for his clients to micromanage their doses of various drugs as well as to anticipate testing schedules and make sure athletes tested clean. Conte's organization, the Bay Area Laboratory Cooperative (BALCO), produced a wide array of drugs that were difficult to detect or easy to mask. Among these were human growth hormone (HGH), EPO, insulin (usually prescribed for diabetes, and powerful when combined with other drugs), modafinil (usually prescribed for narcolepsy, and a strong stimulant), and two designer drugs that became known as "the Cream" and "the Clear". The Clear (norbolethone) was a difficult to detect steroid, ensuring athletes would "clear" their drug tests. The Cream was a topical drug applied to the skin to increase testosterone levels in the body. This boost in testosterone levels covered for one tell-tale sign of steroid use, low testosterone. Human growth hormone and insulin were completely undetectable, since the human body produces these substances.

In September of 2003, the IRS and the San Mateo County Narcotic Task Force raided BALCO and discovered that they were prescribing illegal and designer drugs to athletes in an array of sports,

including professional baseball players Jason Giambi and Barry Bonds (Bryant 2005, pp. 303–17). On 20 January 2004, in George W. Bush's State of the Union Address, the president focused on steroids, saying:

“Athletics play such an important role in our society, but unfortunately, some in professional sports are not setting much of an example. The use of performance-enhancing drugs like steroids in baseball, football and other sports is dangerous and it sends the wrong message: that there are shortcuts to accomplishment and that performance is more important than character. So tonight, I call on team owners, union representatives, coaches and players to take the lead, to send the right signal, to get tough and to get rid of steroids now”. (Bush 2004)

When the president invoked the term “character”, this was a direct reference to muscular Christianity's premise that sport holds moral value and that athletes benefit morally from playing sports. Clear also is the assumption that athletes have a moral obligation to serve as role models.

A few weeks later, United States Attorney John Ashcroft announced a forty-two-count indictment against BALCO and its administrators. Sports reporters focused on Giambi. Giambi's testimony in the indictment was sealed, so at first, he dodged questions about BALCO and steroids. However, eventually, he denied steroid use altogether. This was contradicted by a *San Francisco Chronicle* article that appeared in December 2004 and included Giambi's leaked grand jury testimony that showed “he had consumed a wide and chilling array of performance-enhancing drugs, from illegal anabolic steroids to human growth hormone to undetectable designer steroids created specifically to thwart even the most sophisticated drug tests, even to female fertility pills that boosted the already potent levels of testosterone he had injected into his body” (Bryant 2005, p. 313). The story caused Nike and others to pull their endorsement contracts.

Jose Canseco's 2005 tell-all on steroids, *Juiced: Wild Times, Rampant 'Roids, Smash Hits, and How Baseball Got Big*, brought national attention to the high prevalence of doping in Major League Baseball. From the first paragraph of his book, Canseco takes issue with those who criticize steroid use. He wrote, “I'm tired of hearing such short-sighted crap from people who have no idea what they're talking about. Steroids are here to stay. That's a fact. Steroids are the future” (Canseco 2005, p. 1). Canseco changed his tune in his second book, *Vindicated: Big Names, Big Liars, and the Battle to Save Baseball*. In this book, he claims that his earlier autobiography was an attempt to shed light on steroid use run amok and force the powers of Major League Baseball to clean up the sport (Canseco 2008). Whether or not that was his intention with *Juiced*, it is what happened in the aftermath of its publication.

5. Confessions

As the media and the American public became painfully aware of the prevalence of steroids and other performance enhancing strategies in elite sports, athletes tended to describe their drug use not as sinful, but as a necessary part of elite competition. Powerful entities like the U.S. Senate and Oprah Winfrey attempted to provide an anxious bench for athletes to atone, but athletes generally side-stepped the ritual, revealing two failures: The American public failed to see that sport as character-building was a myth that hid the darker side of competition, and athletes failed to see that the American preoccupation with the character-building myth required that they participate in confession to achieve redemption. Combined with the lingering muscular Christian association of sport and morality, the anxious bench cements the connection between performance enhancement and the “sin” of cheating. As I will show, when some athletes resisted this paradigm, they were denied cultural redemption after getting caught.

5.1. Major League Baseball

In Spring 2004, the senate held hearings on steroid use in professional baseball. One point of contention was the legality of Andro. As noted previously, the drug was legal for use, but the

National Football League and the Olympics had banned it. The players' union chief, Don Fehr, testified that he did not see anything wrong with professional baseball players legally using Andro. This angered senator John McCain who replied, "Your failure to commit to addressing this issue straight on immediately will motivate this committee to search for legislative remedies. I don't know what they are. But I can tell you, and the players you represent, the status quo is unacceptable" (Quoted in [Assael 2007](#), p. 238). In October, Congress passed the Anabolic Steroid Control Act of 2004; the Act put 18 performance enhancers, including Andro, on the banned substances list.

An influential voice that emerged through the Congressional steroid hearings was Donald Hooton. Hooton's son, Taylor, had committed suicide at age 17, and Hooton blamed his son's use of steroids for his death. For Donald Hooton, his son took steroids because he admired professional baseball players and wanted to be like them. Hooton told Congress, "Players that are guilty of taking steroids are not only cheaters. You are cowards" (Quoted in [Assael 2007](#), p. 258). Verner Møller notes a tendency to treat elite athletes as having a special responsibility to be role models because young people look up to them. However, he points out that athletes have no legal obligation to behave this way, and there are many examples of athletes failing to live up to ethical ideals when it comes to drugs, alcohol, smoking, or sex.

Legitimate or not, the sentiment that athletes have a moral obligation to be role models stuck with DEA official Jack MacGregor who would go on to bust Alberto Saltiel-Cohen, the head of the Mexico-based Quality Vet that had made the steroid that Taylor Hooton used. MacGregor later talked openly about his Christian faith as a motivator for what he called "a cause", that cause being the pursuit and dismantling of illegal and cross-border steroid operations. According to journalist Shaun Assael, MacGregor believed that Donald Hooton "was an important symbol for that cause: a man whose unimaginable loss showed parents the perils of ignoring their children" ([Assael 2007](#), p. 259). In Assael's reading, MacGregor may not have believed steroids to be the root cause of Taylor Hooton's suicide, but he still believed that preventing their distribution was a moral cause.

The March 2005 hearings on steroid use in baseball by the House Government Reform Committee brought Jose Canseco, Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa, Rafael Palmiero, and Curt Schilling to testify. Canseco was preparing to publish *Juiced*, his autobiographical account of steroids in baseball, wherein he attested that he had personally injected Mark McGwire with steroids ([Canseco 2005](#)). The hearing was elaborately choreographed and each player was sworn in separately, adding to the sense of these players ascending to the anxious bench. Assael described the hearing:

"Fairly or not, the afternoon centered on McGwire. Had he chosen to admit to steroid use, he might have been remembered as the heroic figure he hoped to be. He might have been seen as Representative [Tom] Davis saw him: "As a decent guy who got caught up in something everyone else was doing".

But ... All [America] saw was a former baseball hero who refused to talk about a past that was quickly unraveling ... And when North Carolina Republican Patrick T. McHenry asked him whether he thought using steroids was cheating, McGwire tried to sum up all the ambiguity he felt, and all the ambiguity he hoped America felt.

"That's not up to me to determine", he said simply". ([Assael 2007](#), pp. 253–54)

When Mark McGwire delivered his famous line of the hearings, "I'm not here to discuss the past", it was clear that he did not intend to follow the ritual of confession. This was even more apparent when McGwire invoked Fifth Amendment protections. According to Canseco:

"I thought that was a huge mistake. In my opinion, anyone who takes the Fifth is already guilty. And I guess, for once, the sports media agreed with me. For the next few days, everyone's favorite line was "I'm not here to talk about the past". And it was always delivered with a smirk". ([Canseco 2008](#), p. 62)

By avoiding the ritual of the anxious bench, McGwire and the others who testified that day could not achieve the benefit of forgiveness. Though the hearing was choreographed in a Finney-esque style,

the testifying athletes resisted the paradigm, side-stepping accusations and failing to reveal any inner torment over their actions.

By late 2005, Major League Baseball could no longer drag its feet on the issue of performance enhancing drugs. The previous policy of suspending a player for 10 days on a first offense and for a year if testing positive four times was replaced with a stricter policy of a 50-game suspension for a first positive test, 100 for a second, and a lifetime ban for a third. Additionally, the new policy added amphetamines to the list of banned substances. While this was a far stricter policy in terms of punishment, the testing itself still could not account for players using human growth hormone, insulin, or other undetectable or maskable drugs. It is unlikely that Major League Baseball would have changed their policies at all without the BALCO investigation, Jose Canseco's autobiography, and the congressional hearings.

Perhaps they considered their efforts a success because the American public seemed to regard steroid use as more of a cultural phenomenon than as the result of tacit encouragement from sports' higher ups. Jay Leno joked during a 2005 opening monologue, "It turns out Pete Rose has been betting on whether or not Barry Bonds used steroids". Additionally, during that year's Academy Awards, host Chris Rock joked, "We've given out ten awards so far, and not one of the winners has tested positive for steroids" (Quoted in [Fainaru-Wada and Williams 2006](#), p. 266). The moment was rife with cynicism, and Barry Bonds expressed his contempt for the moral crusade against steroid use. During 2005 spring training, he told reporters:

"Man, it's not like this is the Olympics. We don't train for four years for, like, a ten second [event]. We go 162 games. You've got to come back day after day. We're entertainers. If I can't go out there [to play], and somebody pays \$60 for a ticket, and I'm not in the lineup, who's getting cheated? Not me". (Quoted in [Fainaru-Wada and Williams 2006](#), p. 268)

Barry Bonds's critique of the game itself and its the unrealistic expectations on athletes' bodies shows that he believed steroids were necessary to do his job.

When Jose Canseco's *Juiced* came out in 2005, it became a best-seller. In the book, Canseco claimed that approximately 80% of professional baseball players were using steroids. The backlash against Canseco was intense and many claimed that he was lying to sell books. But, by late 2007, the public was coming around to his point of view. Jon Friedman of *MarketWatch* analyzed why the media was so harsh in their response to Canseco: "They are angry because Canseco scooped them in baseball's biggest scandal ever" (Quoted in [Canseco 2008](#), p. 168). Similarly, John Donovan of *Sports Illustrated* noted that while many had dismissed Canseco as a greedy liar in the initial period after his book release, "He has become the opposite of what many considered him to be. He is now ... credible" (Quoted in [Canseco 2008](#), p. 170). Canseco shifted in popular imagination from greedy liar to force for cleaning up baseball. As he rose in public estimation, Canseco's fellow senate testifiers lost credibility and respect.

Historian Nathan Michael Corzine emphasizes the moral weight of baseball's performance enhancing drug scandal. He writes:

"We can always reinvent (and maybe even forgive) gamblers like Shoeless Joe Jackson or Pete Rose, but there is less room to rehabilitate Mark McGwire or Barry Bonds because their sins were greater. Their transgressions struck at the very soul of the "Last Pure Place" [a literary metaphor for baseball]; they waged war on the numbers, the holy scriptures of the church of baseball, the sacred links tying each passing generation to the next". ([Corzine 2016](#), p. 4)

The "sin" of statistics tampering by using steroids struck Corzine as unforgivable. This is partly due to the status of baseball as America's national pastime, and partly due to the tendency of baseball fans to compare players across seasons and generations. For these kinds of fans, performance enhancing drugs spoiled previous records in ways that advancing technologies did not ([Parry 2017](#)).

As we have seen, Major League Baseball players accused of steroid use did not regard it as an individual sin, but as a ubiquitous systemic practice that they connected to the pressure to perform at

their demanding sport. The American public heard the tale of Taylor Hooten's suicide and fell into the muscular Christian assumptions that athletes should be good role models because sport should develop moral character. An anxious bench style confession in the senate hearing room would have further cemented this understanding by showing an inner torment and guilt over the practice of steroid use. But for the players, this ritual did not make sense. They saw no reason to take individual blame for the commonplace practice of using steroids and side-stepped the potential ritual.

5.2. Lance Armstrong

For nearly fourteen years, Lance Armstrong denied that he used performance enhancing drugs in his Tour de France races. He viciously attacked those who made accusations and leveraged several lawsuits against journalists and anti-doping authorities. In response to the USADA charges against him that were proceeding through the courts in 2012, Armstrong said:

"These charges are baseless, motivated by spite and advanced through testimony bought and paid for by the promises of anonymity and immunity. Although USADA alleges a wide-ranging conspiracy extended over more than sixteen years, I am the only athlete it has chosen to charge. USADA's malice, its methods, its star-chamber practices, and its decision of punish first and adjudicate later are all at odds with our ideals of fairness and fair play". (Quoted in [Walsh 2013](#), p. 388)

Perhaps because of these adamant denials, it was quite surprising when Armstrong announced two months later that he would accept the USADA findings against him, charges that resulted in disqualification of his seven Tour victories and a lifetime ban. Two months later, Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI), the governing body of cycling, accepted the USADA report and implemented Armstrong's disqualification.

Over the course of his years of denial, Armstrong had made many enemies, including Greg and Kathy LeMond. Greg LeMond was one of the first professional cyclists to express doubts that Armstrong's victories were drug-free. Journalist David Walsh interviewed Kathy LeMond on the day that UCI stripped Armstrong of his titles, and she had this to say, "Where's the shame? I don't see any. No apology to all those whose lives and careers were destroyed; people duped for years into believing his story—nothing for them" (Quoted in [Walsh 2013](#), p. 401). Kathy LeMond was not alone in her concerns about Armstrong's remorse. The nation expected a full confession when Armstrong announced that Oprah Winfrey would be interviewing him in January 2013.

In the interview, Armstrong did admit to doping in the Tour de France, but he framed his actions as outcomes of the pervasive doping culture of cycling and refused to call his actions cheating. Media studies scholars Steven Thomsen and Harper Anderson argue that Armstrong failed to achieve redemption among media and fans because he avoided taking personal responsibility. They note that for atonement to come across as sincere, the accused must not only ask for forgiveness, but must also "provide ample evidence that the accused has experienced substantial personal suffering as a consequence" ([Thomsen and Anderson 2015](#), p. 82). Rather than providing this evidence, Armstrong continually framed doping in cycling as a cultural, rather than individual, problem. In response to Winfrey's query if Armstrong thought he could have won without doping, he said, "Not in that generation, and I'm not here to talk about others in that generation. It's been well documented. I didn't invent the culture, but I didn't try to stop the culture, and that's my mistake, and that's what I have to be sorry for". For Armstrong, his drug use did not constitute cheating because, "I didn't have access to anything that nobody else did" (Quoted in [Thomsen and Anderson 2015](#), p. 86).

Media coverage following the interview was critical of Armstrong's performance; in general, analysts were not satisfied with his apology. Sports scholar Andrew Meyer conjectured that Armstrong's status as a cancer survivor with a successful charitable organization made the news of his rule violations feel like a significant betrayal for those who had turned to him for hope ([Meyer 2019](#)). In Thomsen

and Anderson's analysis, Armstrong's confession failed because he evaded personal responsibility. They write:

"To repent of a "sin", the accused must actually see the behavior as sinful. Had he publicly acknowledged that his actions had in fact constituted cheating, the apology would likely be perceived as more authentic, rather than continuing the denials that he had made for more than thirteen years". (Thomsen and Anderson 2015, p. 93)

For these authors, Armstrong dodged important parts of the confession ritual; admitting to sin, shame, and personal torment.

It's worth considering why viewers might have expected this kind of apology. Kathryn Lofton analyzed the format of Winfrey's television show and came to the conclusion that: "If Charles Finney was pastor to nineteenth-century America, it is not an overstatement to suggest that Winfrey is his twenty-first-century parallel" (Lofton 2008, p. 59). Lofton points out that Winfrey's interviews often take the form of the anxious bench by following a predictable ritual format wherein the show's guest submits to questioning and prodding from Winfrey, reveals wrong-doing and inner torment, and is set free from this pain by Winfrey's therapeutic self-help. Lofton writes:

"Whether victim or perpetrator, audience or actor, the occupant of Winfrey's anxious center is there for a reason: to instruct themselves. At the center of her ritual process is the awareness that all of us, no matter our cultural or criminal position, have some sin from which we must, and shall, be released". (Lofton 2011, p. 99)

Armstrong's choice to have Winfrey as his interviewer set the audience up to expect an anxious bench style confession: An admission of sin and torment leading to a declaration of how one will do better in the future. This is not what Armstrong delivered, and might explain why those who watched the interview thought that he came across as pompous, arrogant, and unapologetic (Thomsen and Anderson 2015, p. 93).⁴

6. Conclusions

Most ethical assessments of performance enhancement begin with the premise that athletic competition is beneficial for participants. For example, bioethicist Thomas Murray claims that what makes sports fair is not that every competitor is equal; human diversity means that competitors will always be unequal in natural ability. He argues instead that the value of sport is that sport provides an opportunity for humans to demonstrate dedication and courage, and for all of us to witness and celebrate natural talent honed through perseverance (Murray 2018). Similarly, Michael Shafer has argued that the reason the American public finds doping distasteful is not about rule-breaking or health concerns, but stems from sport functioning as an elemental human experience. For Shafer, tampering with this experience is unethical (. Shafer 2015). This perspective on sport preserves the muscular Christian understanding that sport is morally valuable, and this is likely the sentiment informing American expectations that athletes who are caught doping should feel sinful and confess.

It is worth considering that elite sport itself may be the cause of doping. As Verner Møller has pointed out, seeking to establish a competitive advantage is "the position every athlete attempts to achieve by means of intensive training, strict diets, coaching advice and just about anything else. Doping is one consequence of this striving for advantage" (Møller 2004, pp. 152–53). Some of the values of sport (to cause another to suffer, to determine one individual to be better than another,

⁴ This pattern continued in Armstrong's subsequent apologies. He met with his team's soigneur and whistle-blower, Emma O'Reilly, through an interaction organized by the *Daily Mail*. Armstrong had previously dismissed her accusations as stemming from alcoholism, a claim he later admitted was false. In O'Reilly's description of his in-person apology, she said, "I was thinking, he never actually used the word sorry. But I wasn't looking for an insincere apology" (quoted in *Guardian Staff* 2013).

to sacrifice one's body to the project of winning) are not "character-building", but push athletes into dubious moral territory. Given this foundation, it is not surprising that athletes turn to doping to pursue winning. Møller drives this point home when he writes, "Concepts such as fair play and the spirit of sport are a linguistic sugar-coating that is applied to the bitter pill of sport for the purpose of reassuring sponsors, officials who do the funding, and others who cannot reconcile themselves to the fact that sport is what it is" (Møller 2004, p. 153). Taking this a step further, health lawyer John Weston Parry has argued that self-regulating sports will inevitably lead to detrimental health outcomes for athletes because of profit motivations (Parry 2017).

These understandings of sport are useful for understanding why athletes who are caught doping tend to blame the system rather than take personal responsibility. As Jose Canseco provocatively asked in *Juiced*:

"Is it cheating to do what everyone wants you to do? Are players the only ones to blame for steroids when Donald Fehr and the other bosses of the Major League Players' Association fought for years to make sure players wouldn't be tested for steroids? Is it all that secret when the owners of the game put out the word that they want home runs and excitement, making sure that everyone from trainers to managers to clubhouse attendants understands that whatever it is the players are doing to become superhuman, they sure ought to keep it up?". (Canseco 2005, p. 9)

Of course, the implied answer to Canseco's questions is: No, it's not really cheating. For players like Canseco who take this point of view, there is no inner torment or sin to confess, so rituals based on the anxious bench are unnecessary and embarrassing.

However, for an American public still steeped in the muscular Christian understanding of sport as morally valuable, the use of performance enhancing drugs sure seemed like cheating. Muscular Christianity endures today in the common assertion that sports builds character, but it is worth remembering that this assertion is not an essential truth, but a historical particularity born of nineteenth-century Protestant anxiety. A more useful understanding of sport may be Verner Møller's assertion that "Sport is a cultivation of the will to win taken to the threshold of evil" (Møller 2010, p. 24). If we can reimagine sport as not inherently moral, but as a phenomenon that can have both ethical and unethical outcomes, we come closer to understanding why an athlete might side-step the public expectation of confession. If we also take into account all those who profit from enhanced performance (athletes, teams, owners, sponsors, fans, and sports media, to name a few), we might see that the nineteenth-century ideologies of muscular Christianity and the anxious bench have contributed to unrealistic expectations regarding athletic nobility and the necessity of confession.

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