CENTER VALLEY  – Barry Bonds has done it. Finally. The home run record is his, whether or not it comes with an asterisk.

Though the deed is done, the debates rage on. Given the magnitude of that milestone, fans of the game remain ambivalent: should we cheer his accomplishment as the result of unmatched athletic skill, or jeer at the prospect that steroids contributed unfairly to his success?

Aficionados will point to the numbers and reel off statistics that lay claim to an unparalleled record of achievement. They’ll hasten to add that the San Francisco slugger has never failed a drug test (as did the pitcher who gave up the record-tying home run). Detractors will counter that the proof is in the pictures. Since athletes don’t usually, or so drastically, improve with age, the physiological change from a fit and trim phenom to the now bulked-up Bonds must have come by way of chemical enhancement. Even absent legally admissible proof, it’s clear to them that “the clear” played a part in his hitting prowess.

But the real debate goes beyond evidentiary arguments. The discord among baseball fans and the general public signals a broader cultural malaise that encompasses three facets of life which we hold dear and which this singular athletic feat brings into focus.

Barry Bonds stands tall as baseball’s greatest home run hitter. His pose after the epic blast says it all. Arms outstretched to the heavens, he pauses there as the mighty conqueror, having demonstrated his supremacy over this pitcher, over all other homerun hitters in a single season, and now over all who have ever hit the ball out of the park. A sea of flashbulbs captured the moment.

Photo: Brad Mangin/SI
But the home run is, itself, a flash. Dramatic in its expression of power and its immediacy of results, it contrasts mightily with the ordinary work of ballplayers. The long ball remains fleeting compared to the more abiding efforts of compiling a superior average in hitting (ala Tony Gwynn) or playing persistently in thousands of consecutive games (ala Cal Ripken). In terms of cultural appreciation, we resonate more with the “blue collar” sportsmanship represented in these newest Hall of Famers.

Barry Bonds is arguably the most recognized name in the game today and, in some ways, its most valuable player. As proclaimed on his wife’s t-shirt, he with her is “The King and I.” Apparently, he prefers it that way, relishing in the standoffish role of anti-hero. Reminding reporters that “This record is not tainted at all,” Bonds avowed that the 3,000-hit plateau would be his next conquest: “I haven’t gotten there yet, but I want it.”

While fans shell out big bucks to be entertained by such exploits, they also value promotion of the common good over narcissism. Witness the adulatory response to Hank Aaron’s classy video message, in which he congratulates the new record-holder and says “I move over now.” Consider, too, the words of Ripken, who wore a different t-shirt on his own record breaking day (“2130+ Hugs and Kisses for Daddy”). During his Hall of Fame induction, he expressed thanks to all those who, on a daily basis and without public fanfare, live their lives by “showing up, working hard, and making the world a better place.” Our culture appreciates the character of humble role models more than that of self-centered superstars.

Barry Bonds will be immortalized for his playing ability. His statistical records demonstrate that his performance on the diamond surpasses that of others who have played the game. Suspicions of illegal performance enhancement notwithstanding, we cannot fail to acknowledge his superior level of talent and skill. Steroids don’t hit home runs; good hitters do.

Nevertheless, the asterisk remains, if not on a Cooperstown plaque at least in the back of everyone’s mind. Beyond this typographical symbol, the bigger question that lingers is whether or not he’s telling the truth. That question goes beyond statistical analysis to touch the very core of who we are as persons and how we interact as a society. What our culture appreciates most, in the end, is integrity. We seek an encounter with the “truth of the person” that John Paul II reminds us is grounded in trust, is disclosed in faithful self-giving, and is experienced as certainty and security in our lives.

As the home run tally continues, so too will our ambivalence about Barry Bonds’s fame. But for our cultural well-being, sportsmanship and character and integrity need to be key players in every game.