Field of Sin:

Through steroid use, baseball players have set their Eden ablaze

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The sage of summer past, A.Bartlett Giamatti, once wrote that sports disclose our aspiration to paradise, "a dream of ourselves as better than we are, back to what we were." The verdant greens of a baseball diamond remind us of the garden of Eden, with its idyllic existence in "a physical and mental world of choice where every choice is free of error."

As another season begins, baseball reminds us that Eden is also the place of original sin. Steroid use has become today’s answer to the divine question posed to Adam and Eve: "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

Recall the story. The human progenitors inhabited a divinely created garden, presumably happy there. The creator decreed that they were not to eat from one particular tree, lest they die. They were tempted. They looked upon that forbidden fruit as something "good for food, and a delight to the eyes, and desired to make one wise." So they took and they ate. They became ashamed. They hid. They were found by the omnipresent divinity, and their deed unmasked for the choice it was, a choice against their own life. They were expelled from the garden, punished by a frustrating existence and mortality.

The garden has changed to a diamond, but the story remains the same. Not content with where they were, players looked at steroids as a way to nourish the competitive appetite, produce impressive musculature and fulfill the desire to be superior performers. So they juiced. They ingested or injected or spread "the cream." Accusations surfaced, tell-all tales were published.
Subpoenas were issued and they tried to hide.

Appearing before the almighty Congress, they were ashamed. (To quote Mark McGwire, "I cannot answer these questions without jeopardizing my friends, my family or myself.") Fans are frustrated. And baseball's once favored reputation is now being expelled from the garden of public opinion, as a Gallup poll of March 28 shows that 23 percent of fans believe steroid use is ruining the game, while another 63 percent consider it a serious problem.

Legendary umpire Bill Klem was right: "Baseball is more than a game; it's a religion." Unlike other sports, baseball approximates the transcendence of God in what might be called its eternal contours (Giamatti wrote of "squares containing circles containing rectangles"), which it weaves together with time-honored traditions, a nonstop quest for perfection, an adherence to "sacrifice" as a way of life and the inclusion of "error" as a significant part of the truth of the game. Regarding baseball as this quasi-sacred realm may explain why certain transgressions appear downright scandalous.

Thus, the present saga raises questions more moral than medical, more ethical than ergonomic. Is enhancing athletic abilities through biomedical advancements wrong? Are players not free to try to perfect their skills? Should steroids be considered a "forbidden fruit" and their users treated as "sinners"?

Using steroids without a prescription is illicit. Ballplayers who take from this pharmacological tree are guilty of breaking the rules set by higher powers. But disobedience is not the primary problem. Even without a legal classification or a leaguewide ban, using these substances constitutes a greater wrong.

Using steroids represents an "original sin," one whose depravity runs deeper than the bloodstream to be tested. We decry this practice not because the substances are illegal, but because using them unmask our basest temptation - the tendency to act solely on desire and, thus, not to be fully human.

Adam and Eve hardly hesitated when contravening the divine command that created their free choice in the first place. They listened, instead, to a serpent, the lowest of animals. That voice promised greatness with the ease of eating. But it failed to acknowledge the harm of acting without regard for truth. Making a choice freely does not, of itself, make that choice a good one. Remember, the price they paid was death.

Today, that same sinful tendency arises in ballplayers who believe they are free to choose whatever means will work to achieve a desired outcome. What they aspire to (being the best) remains noble. But how they get there nowadays contradicts the fundamental integrity of who they are as persons, of what they do as athletes, and of what the game is really about.

Certain chemical agents change the cellular operations in a body. Changing the body somehow changes who the person is. The skilled player becomes a hitting machine; the only option for opponents is an intentional walk each time at bat. The game's dramatic encounter is diminished.
Long-standing records are broken with newfound ease. Such prodigious deeds could come from the doer or the drug. Either way, athletes receive enormous monetary rewards for their statistical success.

Raw power is appealing. The fans' thirst for excitement, the owners' quest for profit and the financial incentives for players all breed performance enhancement. But when anabolic agency fuels baseball's action, the next generation learns to value a quick fix more than the sacrificial spirit that gives the game its communal and religious character.

Worse than their potential for long-term medical harm, steroids threaten to dehumanize baseball. However well intentioned or freely chosen, using them traverses the limits of natural talent and personal effort that players share in common. In turn, our appreciation of the game and its quasi-religious appeal suffers.

To speak of baseball as religion now means acknowledging the sin of steroids. This sin mars human integrity when players aspire to be other than who they are, whether acting like animals (following only instinct and desire) or seeking to become like gods (having no limitations). This sin carries a mortal risk, for it portends the death of character - both the player's and the game's.

Since every human is tainted by sin, religion also speaks of mercy. So there should be no asterisks next to the names in baseball's record books, for those accomplishments still require the exercise of superior athletic skills.

But forgiveness does not mean forgetting. As a new season beckons us toward life again in the garden, we dream of something better. Until we reach true paradise, we should remember the wrongs that have been committed and seek a demonstrable resolve that, at least in this realm, players will sin no more.