

## COMMENTARY: ARE STEROIDS RAMPANT IN THE ATLANTIC LEAGUE?

Contributed by Brian Fitzsimmons and Bob Phillips  
Tuesday, 11 September 2007

The Atlantic League does not test for steroid useage. Perhaps it's time to start.

Photo courtesy of Flickr.com

We problaby should've known this from the beginning.

It's a big enough pill to swallow, knowing that good portion of Major League Baseball players have used performance-enhancing drugs at one time or another. But what happens when the dark side of sports leaks its way onto the playing field nestled at the bottom of the cracks, where former players have fallen through to compete as a last resort? Steroids in the family-friendly Atlantic League, you ask? That simply cannot be.

Yes, we should've known this from the start.

An individual affiliated with the Nashua Pride, a former franchise in the Atlantic League that now competes in the Cam-Am League, has offered the first mention of this taboo issue. In an article published on June 2 in the Nashua (N.H.) Telegraph, Dr. Pierre Dionne, the team doctor for the Pride, claimed several Atlantic Leaguers approached him looking for steroids. He stated that the Cam-Am league is "crystal clean" in contrast to the Atlantic League. "The Atlantic League, five years ago it was peaking...It wasn't unusual to come here every other day and be approached."

The Atlantic League will tell you that they are diligent in testing their players for drugs, with a regular routine of random testing. Rich Elliott, who covers the Bridgeport Bluefish for the Connecticut Post, confirms that policy first-hand, admitting that he once inadvertently walked in as a player was being tested.

But here's something the Atlantic League won't tell you: While the league tests for drugs, it does not test for steroids. That test is far too expensive for a league that, in general, operates on a shoestring. And, as we all know by now, even MLB doesn't test for HGH (human growth hormone). That means that Ricky Williams would be barred from playing in the Atlantic League (if he were so inclined to play baseball), but Jose Canseco would be (and, indeed, has been) welcomed with open arms.

With performance-enhancing drugs readily available, and several former major leaguers playing for their one last shot at the big-time, should it come as any surprise that steroid use is allegedly rampant in the Atlantic League? There is no reason to suspect that Dr. Dionne either concocted a tall tale or embellished things in the least. Toward what end would that serve? Besides, the league's history is enough validate Dr. Dionne's assertions by itself. Consider that:

Earlier in the decade, both Jose and Ozze Canseco -- twin brothers -- competed for the Newark Bears. Both were supposed to bring home runs, cheers from a growing fan base, and fun to the Brick City. It appears there is a strong chance that maybe they brought a CVS to the ballpark instead. Jose not only admits steroid usage, but says he is proud of it. Ozzie, meanwhile is the Atlantic League's version of Barry Bonds, holding the single-season home run record of 48.

- In an ESPN the Magazine article that was published last year, former Long Island Ducks pitcher Paxton Crawford admitted to using steroids during his career.

- Juan Gonzales, another suspected steroid abuser, played for two years in the Atlantic League.

- It even makes one wonder if Rickey Henderson, who played on the Bears for two seasons, was able to stay in such great shape at such an old age. For whatever reason, he did earn one half-season ticket back to the majors with the Los Angeles Dodgers, thanks to his performance in Newark.

- And then came the infamous Jose Offerman incident, when a former major league All-Star, one without a history of surliness or violence, completely "lost it" earlier this year in Bridgeport. (This was Offerman's second stop in the Atlantic League. He played for the Bluefish in 2003 before getting a ticket back to the big leagues with the Minnesota Twins, and later with the Phillies and the Mets.) When hit by an off-speed pitch in the calf (not anywhere close to the head), Offerman charged the mound and "allegedly" assaulted two Bluefish players with a deadly weapon. (We use the word "allegedly" loosely, as there were approximately 2,500 stunned eyewitnesses in the stands that night, and the entire incident was captured on film, frame-by-frame, by the Connecticut Post.) Offerman's case is still pending, and he has been suspended indefinitely from the Atlantic League, with little chance of ever playing again.

All of the above scenarios should've raised a red flag from the very start. But then again, how many of us believed -- or at least wanted to believe -- Rafael Palmiero as he stared directly at a panel of distinguished United States Senators, pointed a finger directly at them and adamantly said, "I have never used steroids. Period."

In the Telegraph article, Dionne continued to say, "I suspect -- these were players coming from the big leagues, and not from college -- it was professional guys, from major leagues, coming this way [i.e. being sent down]. One guy, I remember his quote: 'I need it to get back to the big time. It's the only way you can survive up there.' I'd say, 'Look, my job is to protect you [health wise]. I cannot give it to you. It ain't going to happen here.'"

The article by Tom King went on to say, "Dionne said that he was also asked to provide a growth hormone. Some of the drugs, Dionne said, are legal outside the U.S., in countries like Mexico, where some of the players either played or came from. Players would also ask for 'uppers.'"

Keep in mind there is a steady stream of players beginning the season in the Atlantic League, then going to the Mexican League where the level of pay is higher, and winding back up in the Atlantic League when the Mexican League concludes play.

Consider that none of the so-called "name" players in the Atlantic League actually want to be here. None of them. Some may certainly deal with it better than others, but playing for \$2,000 a month in front of crowds ranging between 1,500-6,000 every night, and having to endure the obligatory five-hour bus rides to York, Pa. -- this is not why anyone plays in this league. The Atlantic League is where players come to be scouted -- and signed -- by major league organizations. That, after all, is the stated mission of the league, is it not? Then again, the players who have been to the dance and are looking for that one last go-round just might need a little bit of a boost to help them get back to where they really want to

be.

You may infer anything here because without testing, there is no proof of any wrongdoing by anyone. But by simply looking the other way and doing nothing, the Atlantic League is begging for another Jose Offerman-esque incident to happen -- or worse yet, a Chris Benoit-like episode. This is hardly the stuff of which wholesome, clean, family sports entertainment is made.

It's high time for the Atlantic League to, at the very least, admit that a problem exists, and take real action toward resolving that problem.