

'Everyone cheats in baseball'

Placing the steroids era in fresh perspective, a new book reveals the unwritten codes of the game.

AMERICA IS BUILT on the shoulders of its honest icons—George Washington and the cherry tree, Honest Abe. We're raised to believe that cheating is bad, that truthfulness and integrity make the man. We warn against cheating in school, look with indignation at cheating spouses, and above all proclaim that cheaters never win. That last part, of course, is factually inaccurate. Cheaters do win. They win a lot. It's why they cheat. And in baseball, where every player seeks every advantage that can be comfortably tolerated (and some that can't), the concept of cheating is continually stretched to its limit.

If baseball is a business, cheating is almost an accepted business practice: It's generally abided as long as it stops once it's detected. This unwritten rule covers a wide range of endeavors: pitchers applying foreign substances to the ball; outfielders acting as if they've caught balls they actually trapped; hitters pantomiming pain from balls that didn't hit them. It's why, when Chicago Cubs slugger Sammy Sosa was caught using a corked bat in 2003, team president Andy MacPhail said, "There is a culture of deception in this game. It's been in this game for 100 years. I do not look at this in terms of ethics. It's the culture of the game." MacPhail might be easy to dismiss as a company guy protecting his star, but he spoke the truth. "Everyone cheats," said White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen, in 2005. "If you don't get caught, you're a smart player. If you get caught, you're cheating."

ONE EXAMPLE: SIGNS have been stolen in the major leagues for as long as there have been signs to steal, and players and managers generally accept the thievery as part of the game. It's why signals from the catcher to the pitcher, from the dugout to the field, and from the third-base coach to the hitter can be so complex. Sign stealing has been there "since the beginning of time," says legendary manager Sparky Anderson. "And it should be." The Yankees' Alex Rodriguez is respected for his ability to see and decode opponents' signs from the base paths. In the 1980s, future Hall of Famers Paul Molitor and Robin Yount were notorious for their sign-stealing

prowess with the Milwaukee Brewers.

When shortstop Chris Speier joined the San Francisco Giants as a 20-year-old in 1971, living legend Willie Mays pulled him aside for a lecture. "Listen, we get everybody's signs and we relay those signs," he informed the rookie, "so you better start thinking about it and doing it." Legend has it that Mays was alerted to the pitch for every one of the four home runs he hit against the Braves on April 30, 1961, thanks to Giants coach Wes Westrum, who had broken the Braves' code and was signaling the slugger with a towel. Mays in turn taught his secrets to Bobby Bonds, and Bonds passed them on to the next generation of Giants youngsters. "We were the best [sign-stealing] team I'd ever seen at the time," said pitcher Steve Stone of the Giants' 1971 squad. Westrum, he said, "would have all the [opponent's] pitches down" within three innings.

How widespread is sign stealing today? Consider this story: In 2005, Cleveland Indians closer Bob Wickman was trying to hold a 4-2 ninth-inning lead over Minnesota when he came to an uncomfortable realization: Twins outfielder Michael Cuddyer had been at second

base for two consecutive batters, which to the pitcher was an eternity. About two weeks earlier, Wickman had blown a save in Anaheim when Garrett Anderson of the Angels hit a low outside pitch for a bloop single to drive in Darin Erstad from second. Wickman was convinced that the only reason Anderson made contact was that the pitch had been tipped by Erstad. (When faced with Wickman's accusation, Erstad just smiled. "I guess we'll never know, huh?" he said.)

Wickman had no inside knowledge that Cuddyer or the Twins had done anything untoward, but he wasn't about to be burned twice by the same tactic. Rather than take a chance, the pitcher opted for an unorthodox approach. Wickman reasoned that if Cuddyer was on third base, his view to the catcher would be significantly hampered. So Wickman invented the intentional balk: Before his first pitch to the inning's fourth hitter, the stout right-hander lifted his left leg as he wound up, then froze. "As I did it, I'm thinking to myself, 'There it is, dude, call it,'" said Wickman. The plate umpire did just that, and sent Cuddyer to third. Wickman's decision was based on perverse logic—given Cleveland's two-run lead, it wouldn't matter if Cuddyer scored, but he couldn't afford to give up a home run to a hitter who knew what pitch was coming. It was the first balk of Wickman's 13-year career, but it might have helped him preserve the win. "Some guys couldn't believe it," Wickman said afterward. "I'd have no problem doing it again if a guy's standing there too long."

WHAT DOES PINE tar do for a pitcher? How about Vaseline? Spit? All are considered foreign substances and are banned under baseball's official rules. Generally speaking, the prohibited substances fall into two categories: Tacky stuff like pine tar or even mud are used by pitchers to improve grip in cold weather, but can also weigh down one side of the baseball, lending an extra degree of sink. Slick substances like petroleum jelly allow pitchers to deliver offerings at near-fastball speed but with substantially less rotation, because the



Kenny Rogers and his telltale tar patch

ball squirts out of the hand rather than being spun across the fingers upon release. This lack of backspin provides significant late drop. "Vaseline is the best and K-Y Jelly is next," longtime manager Charlie Fox once said. "The advantage to K-Y Jelly is that it doesn't adhere to the ball and can't be detected by the umpire."

The spitball was outlawed by baseball in 1920, but banning a practice doesn't stop people from doing it. Use of the pitch grew so pervasive in the 1950s that Commissioner Ford Frick briefly lobbied for its relegalization. ("Restore the spitter?" asked Dodgers shortstop Pee Wee Reese. "When did they stop throwing it?")

Even as the spitball was forbidden, it continued to evolve. In the 1960s, Yankees great Whitey Ford mixed up a concoction of turpentine, baby oil, and rosin that he stored in a roll-on deodorant container that he freely brandished in the dugout during games. In 1974, partly in response to complaints about Cleveland Indians pitcher Gaylord Perry, a rule was implemented that removed the mandate for hard proof in an umpire's spitball assessment: Henceforth, the peculiar movement of a pitch provided ample evidence. It didn't take long—all of six innings into the season—before Perry earned his first official caution under the new rule. Not that it mattered: By the end of the season, he had won 21 games, made the All-Star team, finished fourth in balloting for the Cy Young award, and was thrown out of exactly zero games for doctoring balls. "The more people talk and write about my slick pitch, the more effective I get," Perry wrote in his autobiography, *Me & the Spitter*, published that same year. When Perry claimed, upon the book's release, that he didn't throw the spitter anymore, Twins manager Gene Mauch quipped, "But he doesn't throw it any less, either."

FOR ALL THE ways pitchers can cheat, hitters—aside from receiving stolen signs—are pretty much limited to doctoring their lumber. The industry standard for bat augmentation involves drilling a hollow core into the barrel, about a half-inch wide and up to 8 inches deep—then packing the hole with cork or various forms of shredded rubber, which can remove up to 2 ounces from a 2-pound bat. A plug is then inserted, and the bat end is sanded to look as much as possible like a whole piece of wood.

The practice has been going on for generations, but its effectiveness is still up for

interpretation. While lighter bats equal faster swings, skeptics counter that the bat's decreased mass negates most of that advantage. One thing to which corked bats can contribute, however, is a positive mental attitude. Put simply, because a player thinks his bat is quicker, it might actually be. "Quickness is everything, but thinking about quickness usually makes you lose quickness," said one big-leaguer with experience in the subject. "If you think your bat makes you quicker, then you stop thinking about being quicker and you probably are—not because of the bat, but because you're not thinking about it."

Efficacy of the argument aside, there's no disputing that many players buy it. In 2005, St. Louis Cardinals manager Tony La Russa remembered "a rage of corked bats in the American League," referring to a period when he was managing the Chicago White Sox and Oakland A's, in the 1980s and 1990s. The list of guys who have been caught using doctored bats contains such prominent names as Sosa, Albert Belle, and Graig Nettles. Norm Cash, a four-time All-Star with the Detroit Tigers, may provide the best example of what a doctored bat can do for a player. In 1961, using a bat he later admitted was filled with cork, sawdust, and glue, Cash led the American League with a .361 average, hit 41 home runs, and drove in 132 runs. Still, it's difficult to believe that the slugger went cold turkey on altered bats a year later, when his .243 average represented the largest single-season drop-off ever for a defending batting champion. Cash was a firm believer in getting away with whatever he could. Throughout his career, on the rare instances when he was on base when a rain delay was called, he would try to advance illicitly before play resumed—returning to third base if he had been on second, or to second if he had been on first. That he never got away with it didn't matter; teammates appreciated his effort.

REMEMBER OZZIE GULLEN'S dictum suggesting that a player isn't cheating if he isn't caught? There are all kinds of ways to go about "not cheating," each of which offers its own subtleties and intrigue. When La Russa mentioned corked bats, he was trying to explain why he hadn't tried to get Detroit Tigers pitcher Kenny Rogers thrown out of a 2005 World Series game when it appeared that the lefthander had been sporting a patch of pine tar on the palm of his hand. Instead of asking the umpires to check the hand, he apparently asked them to have Rogers

wash it off between innings. His point was that opponents shouldn't expose cheating by the other side unnecessarily. "I detest any BS that gets in the way of the competition," La Russa said.

One reason this code of chivalry exists is that calling out a rival would be opening a can of worms. An incident from 1987 proves the point. New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner was watching his team play the California Angels on television, and was shocked when the camera zoomed in to show close-ups of what appeared to be a small bandage on the palm of the left hand of Angels pitcher Don Sutton. The Yankees television broadcasters brought it up whenever the pitcher appeared to grind the ball into his palm between pitches. It was, they said, probably why Sutton's pitches possessed such extraordinary movement that day. He was in all likelihood scuffing the baseball.

Outraged, Steinbrenner called the visitors' dugout at Anaheim Stadium and lit into Yankees manager Lou Piniella. Was he aware, asked the owner, that Sutton was cheating? "Our television announcers are aware of it," yelled Steinbrenner. "I'm sure the Angels are aware of it. You're probably the only guy there who doesn't know it. Now, I want you to go out there and make the umpires check Don Sutton!"

This wasn't exactly breaking news about Sutton. He had been thrown out of a game in 1978 for scuffing. By 1987, he was among the most discussed ball-doctors in the game.

"George," Piniella responded, "do you know who taught him how to cheat?" Steinbrenner confessed that he did not. "The guy who taught Don Sutton everything he knows about cheating is the guy pitching for us tonight," Piniella said. "Do you want me to go out there and get Tommy John thrown out, too?"

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