

# MLB largely responsible for players' steroid abuse, researcher says

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The widespread use of illegal steroids among Major League Baseball players has been fueled by an "economy of bodily management," the free agent market and exploding television revenues, a UT Arlington assistant professor argues in a newly published research paper.

Sarah Rose, a labor and disability historian, says by attacking individual ballplayers' morality, commentators have obscured the more salient issue.

"Baseball is representative of the fact that Americans increasingly live in an age of biotechnology in which bodily modification for profit has become the norm and, often, an unstated job requirement," said Rose, who joined the UT Arlington Department of History in 2009 and is director of the University's Minor in Disability Studies program.

Rose is the co-author of a new article "Bionic Ballplayers: Risk, Profit, and the Body as Commodity, 1964-2007" published in the journal *LABOR: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*. Her co-author is Joshua A. T. Salzmman, assistant professor of history at Northeastern Illinois University.

The researchers found that while the league minimum salary remained at \$6,000 between 1954 and 1967, players' average salaries soared to \$16,000 in the mid-1960s. Teams paid these increasing salaries out of funds newly attained through television revenue. Between 1964 and 1979, revenues from television contracts rose from \$21 million to \$54

million.

During this time, players and owners investigated new ways to preserve and, eventually, enhance players' bodies.

The pair interviewed notable sports figures such as Nolan Ryan and Bob Costas and a wide array of [baseball players](#), team physicians, trainers, general managers, agents and union officials with careers dating back to the mid-1960s. The article focuses on Sandy Koufax, Tommy John, Frank Jobe and José Canseco, who in his own book admitted to using performance-enhancing drugs during his playing career. In fact, his tell-all claimed that the large majority of Major League Baseball players used steroids.

"Enticed by the prospect of riches, players and teams harnessed fitness training, reconstructive surgery, biomechanical analysis and performance-enhancing drugs to reduce wear and tear on players' bodies and, ultimately, radically alter them for profit," Rose and Salzmänn concluded in the paper. "This interplay between economic incentives and medicine created what we call bionic ballplayers: bigger, stronger, and at times, more fragile than their predecessors."

The study suggests that the question raised by steroids is not individual morality, but rather the morality produced by a political economy of labor that calls for both services and body parts rendered.

Ironically, as Rose and Salzmänn's article went to press, MLB Commissioner Bud Selig had just suspended 13 players for using steroids.

"Why has professional baseball players' steroid use been characterized as an immoral illegitimate bodily enhancement, when other medical interventions, such as 'Tommy John' elbow reconstruction surgery, have

been celebrated as career-saving cures?" Rose questioned. "While admittedly different, we show that both bodily interventions arose out of the same dramatic shifts in the business of baseball – shifts that drove the medicalization of the game and players' bodies."

The researchers contend that before the advent of salary arbitration and free agency, ballplayers were disposable parts in a high-risk work environment. But buoyed by exploding television revenues, the free agent market drove [players'](#) salaries into the millions, transforming the economics of bodily management.

Beth Wright, dean of the UT Arlington College of Liberal Arts, applauded Rose and the valuable impact that her research has on culture.

"Dr. Rose is making important contributions to the way we understand the history of disability and athletics and the pressure that the sports industry places on its talent," Wright said. "She is expanding the expertise of UT Arlington and adding context that helps us understand our world."

**More information:** Rose and Salzmänn addressed the steroid controversy surrounding New York Yankees third baseman Alex Rodriguez last year in an opinion piece published in the Chicago Tribune. It is available at [articles.chicagotribune.com/20 ... ers-bodies-contracts](https://articles.chicagotribune.com/2014-02-15/mlb-largely-responsible-players-steroid-123456789)

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