

# Cheaters Shouldn't Prosper in Professional Sports Culture

The Chicago White Sox were involved in a scandal to “throw” the 1919 World Series.

Players were paid very little back then, which made them vulnerable to the deep pockets of sports gamblers.

They were paid off, the Sox lost the series, and the players involved are now infamous.

The most famous of the accused players was “Shoeless Joe” Jackson. His story was made famous by the movie, “Eight Men Out,” and by a lengthy reference in the movie, “Field of Dreams.”

By all standards, he would have ended up in the National Baseball Hall of Fame. His lifetime batting average alone would have been enough.

But he broke the rule; the “death penalty” in baseball. Anything involved with gambling is not allowed. Ask Pete Rose, who is still banned from the Hall of Fame.

Baseball, however, has not always been so “black and white” about all of its rules.

For example, everyone knows that “spitballs” - balls with spit or other foreign substances applied to them - are not allowed. Yet, Gaylord Perry was infamous for throwing “spitballs” and was elected to the Hall of Fame.

Perry was also famous, or infamous, for going to Old Timer Exhibition games and mocking his own behavior by over-the-top antics.

He was his own larger-than-life parody and everyone laughed. Not only was he not punished for his crimes, he was rewarded financially for the same.

That brings me to the Houston Astros. In 2017, Major League Baseball told its teams (my paraphrase), “Quit stealing signs from the catcher - or else!”

Stealing signs has always been a part of the game, but now teams were using cameras, phones and other devices. So, the MLB adopted rules to make it illegal

to use technology for such purposes.

The Astros were among those teams that had been rebuked. At the time, I was like a lot of fans, consoling myself with phrases like, “Everyone does it,” or “It can’t be that bad or there would have been stiffer penalties.”

Fast-forward to 2019. The Astros face the same accusations today, but they seem worse, and the MLB is currently conducting an investigation into the organization.

I believe in the principle of “innocent until proven guilty” and am hoping against hope that the Astros are cleared, but it doesn’t feel like that is going to happen.

It has cast a long shadow on a historically good stretch of baseball for the Astros. If this were the only blemish, I might be able to stand it - but it isn’t.

Last year, they acquired a pitcher named Roberto Osuna who was serving a 75-game suspension after being accused of assaulting the mother of his son.

In a town where the NFL’s Houston Texans had famously avoided “seedy” players, the Astros chose a different path.

The move felt dirty. Sadly, it was quickly forgotten until the playoffs this year.

After the Astros won the pennant, a front-office employee screamed, “Thank God we got Osuna!” - and another similar phrase containing profanity - at female reporters.

He was throwing the “Osuna” acquisition in their face. It was as if he was saying, “We got a dude accused of female assault and we still won.”

Although fired within a few days of the incident, was it a sign of a larger problem? Had the Astros become so intent on winning that they were willing to set aside moral conviction (acquiring Osuna) or cheating (stealing signs)?

Had this become a “win at all cost” culture?

Vince Lombardi once famously said, “Winning isn’t everything ... it’s the only thing.” Here is the difference: I never heard of Vince Lombardi cheating.

I have heard of the New England Patriots cheating. Many famous college

basketball programs were recently caught in a recruiting scandal. Every year, college football teams receive sanctions, and it seems like it is usually the ranked teams receiving the penalties.

Have we gotten to the point where only those who cheat can win?

In the 1970s, there was a quote in Sports Illustrated I will never forget: "80% of college football teams play by the rules. The others are in the top 25 rankings."

Maybe that is why I love the recent story of Matt Rhule, the football coach at Baylor University. All appearances are that not only is he winning, but he is doing it the right way.

Going back to the White Sox scandal. There was a headline that became famous. It is hard to know if the details were accurate or myth, but the phrase remained popular for years.

Supposedly, a reporter overheard and saw an exchange between Shoeless Joe and a young boy. The boy looks up at Jackson and says, "Say it ain't so, Joe." It is an image of innocence lost.

In recent days, a reporter in Houston on 97.5 FM told a similar story. "Dad, did all the Astros cheat?" the reporter's son asked.

"Looks like it," he replied.

The boy responds, "Even Altuve?"

One hundred years later, little boys are still losing their innocence as grown men they admire and look up to break the rules and break their hearts.

To be fair, we don't know yet what role Jose Altuve, the Astros' second baseman, might have played in the sign-stealing efforts.

The Astros are filled with great athletes, great men and great community citizens. Altuve seems to be all of those.

I think that is the part that hurts me most. I think the team could have won without Osuna.

I know that the former Astros executive did not have to rub Osuna's acquisition in

reporters' faces. I also think they were good enough to win without stealing signs using banned technology.

Am I a fool for still naively thinking you can win without cheating? If so, then I choose to remain the naïve fool that I am.

But then again, maybe one day I will be the one saying, "Say it ain't so."