



## The asterisks should start in the pre-blacks baseball era

By DeWayne Wickham

The [indictment of Barry Bonds](#) last week has a lot of people clamoring for an asterisk to be affixed to his home run record. Such a footnote, presumably, would proclaim that Major League Baseball's reigning home run hitter title is tainted.

Federal prosecutors in San Francisco allege that Bonds lied when he went before a grand jury four years ago and denied having "[knowingly](#)" used anabolic steroids, a performance enhancing drug. If convicted of the perjury and obstruction of justice charges, he could end up behind bars.

*(Photo — Bonds: Has hit 762 home runs to date. / AP)*

Bonds wouldn't be the first baseball record holder to suffer such a fate. [Denny McLain](#) of the Detroit Tigers, the last pitcher to win 30 games or more in a single season (he won 31 in 1968), did two stints in prison. The first was for conspiracy to distribute cocaine, racketeering and extortion; the second came years later after he was convicted of stealing \$2.5 million from the pension fund of a meatpacking business he co-owned.

### No asterisk for McLain

Neither of these convictions caused an asterisk to be attached to the baseball records that McLain holds. In 1968, he was the unanimous winner of the American League's [Cy Young award](#), which goes to the league's best pitcher. The following year, he shared this honor with Mike Cuellar of the Baltimore Orioles.

Of course, those who want Bonds' home run record to be saddled with an asterisk might argue that unlike McLain, the former San Francisco Giants slugger's alleged offense had a direct effect on the game of baseball. Some of his 762 home runs, they will contend, were aided by steroids he allegedly took.

But baseball officials would venture out onto a very slippery slope if they use that reasoning to stigmatize Bonds' record.

"If you want to reanalyze baseball records, the game's biggest offense was that it kept blacks out," says Kenneth Shropshire, director of the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Sports Business Initiative.

He's right. If baseball is going to start putting asterisks on the records that were aided by the misconduct of people inside the sport, then they should begin with all of the records achieved before 1947. That's when baseball [ended its whites-only era](#).

## **Remember Gibson?**

Babe Ruth hit all of his [714 home runs](#) from 1914 to 1935. His record as the game's top home run hitter lasted until 1974, when Hank Aaron, a black who began his career in Negro League Baseball, [topped him](#). In 1927, Ruth's most prolific season, he hit [60 home runs](#). But if the racism of baseball owners hadn't kept [Josh Gibson](#) out of the game, Ruth might never have held the home run title.

Gibson, another Negro League player, hit 84 home runs in 1936 and as many as 962 in a baseball career that spanned 17 years — all of them before Major League Baseball ended its ban on black players, according to the Negro League Baseball Museum.

The last MLB pitcher to win 30 games before McLain was [Dizzy Dean](#) in 1934, when he went [30-7](#) for the St. Louis Cardinals. That was seven years after [Willie Foster](#) compiled a 32-3 record for the Negro National League's Chicago American Giants. Dean might never have made it into the record books if racism hadn't kept Foster from pitching in the majors.

But there is no asterisk behind Dean's achievement. Ruth's home run record carries no such stigma.

During his 24-year Major League career, [Ty Cobb](#), of the Detroit Tigers, had a .367 batting average — the highest ever achieved. [John Henry "Pop" Lloyd](#), who played for 13 Negro League Teams over a 27-year span, had a career batting average of .368.

Of course, we'll never know whether these black players would have done as well in Major League Baseball — or if the records set during the sport's white-only era could have been reached if the color barriers were lowered earlier.

So if the sport wants to put an asterisk beside tainted records, it shouldn't start with the one Bonds now holds.

*DeWayne Wickham's column appears every Tuesday in USA TODAY.*

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