

Pittsburgh Baseball Drug Trials

Historical Note

PROFESSOR MARK D. YOCHUM

DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW

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Discussion of an historical event requires context as history is change over time. 1985 is not quite history as a coda to the meaning of history is that the actors are all dead. The dead cannot lie and the lies of life are more easily caught out. Discussion of this time is of living memory and the discussion becomes an artifact for history, useful for when the story is retold but also as an insight for what we think now.

Part of the discussion will be a view of those times and this note is a brief on this author's memory by way of context. This note will include judgments that may prove to be factually incorrect or that do not jibe with other's perceptions. The Pittsburgh Baseball Drug Trials, a federal prosecution on Grant Street, happened first because of cocaine, cocaine in Pittsburgh.

I came to Grant Street out of Law School in the fall of 1977. I had gone to CMU, out in 1974. I am a Native, born like so many children of the 1950's, at Magee Women's Hospital. I went to high school in South Hills among Catholic folks of modest means. Other than some particulars, this vitae in outline describes the arc of many of the young men on Grant Street. I had friends and acquaintances in low and high places.

From the mid-Sixties until this time in the Reagan age, drugs meant marijuana. The anti-war elite seemed fueled by coffee and cigarettes but the easy rider smoked dope. The dealer of

the age, as grass grew from the hippie through the frat, from the loading dock through the clerks, from the mailroom to the big old mahogany desks, was a guy who knew a guy. In western Pennsylvania, we had nicely organized crime but we also had (and have) abundant secluded hills and dales, hardly trammeled forests of old moonshine glades. These growers were small, independent, used their own fruits, eschewed the city life, would shoot their own food and, perhaps, you as well. This is Pennsylvania/Alabama: fiercely independent, gun toting pot smokers. This dynamic allowed grass to be transferred with a minimum of direct organized crime interference. The guy who knew a guy usually knew the guy that grew it. Cocaine was an entirely different fruit.

There was this hidden dark side: heroin that made you feel like a hero. On Grant Street, in these days, I saw none of that life; the cliché of that age was curt, the junkies are in the ghetto. This product was the drug of addiction, of lassitude, petty theft by the users, violence by the purveyors, sophisticated schemes for importation, needles, fixes, overdoses. The business was the one too dirty for the Godfather, even if it was only sold to the blacks.

This perception, that heroin was a problem of the ghetto and, in-turn, that the ghetto was formed by drugs, informed the war on drugs. Heroin was viewed as a moral failing, primarily of black culture. While I am a witness to the marijuana culture of the age, I never saw heroin and never met (at least as I knew) a user or a dealer.

There were other drug cultures. The psychedelics, like LSD, were associated with the hippie movement. In college, in the early 70's, I saw a tab of acid or two. But this was a solitary drug, the ticket to an individual trip rather than the social drug, grass. Acid was scary by then, associated with psychotic breaks. A legendary tale was told burning into the collective psyche of

tripping collegians permanently blinded by staring into the sun. By our time period, Timothy Leary may not be dead but this aspect of drug culture had faded like an old tie-dye.

If the Sixties and most of the Seventies were sex, drugs, and rock n roll, the drugs in the chant was marijuana. This was the age where the Bic lighters flamed at concert arenas (including our Civic one) and the audience did not have them to ignite Marlboros. But, by the mid-Seventies, rock and roll was dying as the beat turned around. Our time period is the time of sex, drugs, and disco, and the new/old drug of the dance was cocaine.

As familiar as the world of grass was prior to this time, cocaine was unseen. Certainly, I had not seen the stuff, not before 1979. Cocaine comes from yet a different plant but was old in popular imagining. Didn't Coke used to have coke? Didn't both Sherlock Holmes and Sigmund Freud inject a 7% solution? There was an expression: coke fiend. He is one inflamed by the drug who takes an axe to his wife. One source of amusement in the cult and quirky old anti-drug film, "Reefer Madness", is that the users of marijuana do not act like users of marijuana but rather like the manic hyperactive coke fiends.

The marketing of powdered cocaine during this period is a larger story. Because the plant grew elsewhere, importation and distribution required more extensive and serious criminal enterprise to get to Studio 54 through Miami Vice. When supply and demand came in the mid-Seventies, a species separate from the old grass man emerged, the coke dealer.

I never met a coke dealer. We knew where they were, for people like us on Grant Street. They were inside and outside of the clubs, the discos, the band bars of Oakland. Your grass man did not sell coke and may be offended even by the ask. Just after this time my mother served on a jury in our Court of Common Pleas for a coke dealer nabbed in a buy outside the Decade, a

club of note in Oakland. Free, I told mom I would watch the trial and take her to lunch. Now here was a coke dealer, impeccably dressed, not in the style of the felon suited to be in court but in his own clothes clearly of fine fit and slick style, fairly good-looking white guy, groomed and coifed, average in size but solid. He could have been an effective pharmaceutical rep, which, in a sense, he was. His claim that he possessed with no intent to deliver was belied by his cache of the paraphernalia of the trade: scales, bags, money, and gun.

I saw cocaine for the first time working on Grant Street. I never saw the clichéd use of a hundred dollar bill to snort the stuff. Rather, lines on the mirror were inhaled with a small copper straw. Or I saw the tiny medicine vials, a coke spoon, a tinier copper scoop, dug in and the serving brought to the nose. For a while, you could spot women who used (and some men). Eschewing the copper, they would grow a pinky nail extra-long and scooped thus.

Cocaine use was usually a private affair (unlike pot). People went to bathrooms to hide in the brightly lit dark. No circle as the bong went around, rather a stall in a club, the powder room in a house, private invitation, whispering, a check at the mirror after, if you remember, consume residue, straighten the tie or fluff the big hair, out into the dark and dance.

While grass and coke were equally illegal, nothing was equal about the experience. We parse now the addictive quality of our drugs. Among us then, the mythology of risk of addiction began with heroin, with unnumbered examples of the consequences. Your young professional, your middle manager, your schoolteacher won't do that. Pot was hardly viewed as addictive at all, less than cigarettes even. Alcohol was a separate topic but ubiquitous, a background drug in this period; users saw cocaine much closer to grass and distant from heroin. You can use it on weekends, no problem.

Cocaine, at this time, was much more expensive than marijuana but this comparison is not just leaf to leaf. In this period in the city made of steel, one of those vials, maybe 8 scoops or more, \$100; and ounce of marijuana, \$50. The ounce would produce about thirty (as my mom calls them) marijuana cigarettes. The coke is an evening for two; the grass could be a month for one. Why then out of the late Seventies blue sky, did the users start using? I will offer to you how it was offered to me, how every person that did use, had not used, thought about using, discussed it. The advertisement was the start of the chant of the time: sex, drugs and disco. Disco was the dance, cocaine was the drug because sex was the objective.

From the mid-Sixties to the mid-Eighties was an unusual time for sex. This writer never believed that sexual mores were worse in practice but certainly seemed to be more open and available. This age is the window framed by the pill and Roe v. Wade at the start, and the discovery at the end that the plague of AIDS targeted not just homosexuals, Haitians and intravenous drug users. In my experience, the bottom fell out of the powdered cocaine market in the mid-Eighties not just because of prosecutions but because of the examples of newly minted addicts and the deadly fear of the deadly AIDS. Spontaneous sex, fueled by the coke hit, rapidly became more frightening than the drug itself. Soon the powder began to disappear, the cocaine was newly cracked, cracked into a form more virulent still. Before the end of the decade, the head shops hardly had scales or the little utensils; now, there were glass blown pipes. Cocaine, the recreational sex drug of a certain class, became crack, a drug of stupor and near instant addiction.

The milieu of baseball and Pittsburgh and drugs before the trial was colored by a few factors by the fans. (What players really did then was unknown, private conduct not part of the

press.) Alcoholism and baseball (as well as any blank and alcoholism) was historical. Ronald Reagan played the old unfortunate sot Grover Cleveland Alexander in black and white well before our time. For my sentient lifetime, I had listened to our garrulous and instructive Bob Prince, the Buc's broadcaster, who would let slip in the gaps in the endless innings some (in retrospect) inappropriate inside baseball tidbits. It was likely from him that we learned about "greenies" or "bennies", amphetamines, uppers. Bowls of these little green pills were part of the club house buffets. These winked-at drugs were (to use our modern phrase) performance enhancing in the perception of the players. Their schedule and life style was exhausting and coffee and cigarettes could not wake you up like a palm full of greenies. In some sense, I felt that this common drug use facilitated the popularity of the powder among players. Cocaine produced the stimulation of the greenie, the sensation, the perception of improved play, all of that and more, all times some hideously large factor. Cocaine was all-purpose, lines for prowess at the clubs, lines for prowess between the lines.

Issues concerning the truly performance enhancing pharmacopeia did not arise until after our time. Steroids were around, untested, uncaught, but nowhere near, say, Russian – level sophistication until a little later. Barry Bonds erstwhile Buc, stood next to this author in his second year here, actually smaller than I, though taut spring solid. By 1993, his giant head began to explode. There was good reason, if one cared about the integrity of the game, to go after cocaine in the early Eighties, as the particular criminal delivery system could lead to extortion, bribery, and throwing games. While those concerns somewhat attend steroid and other PED's illegally used, modern prosecutions look motivated by health concerns and by competitive issues of another sort. Cocaine – you throw the game; PED – you win when you

should not. One other odd legal change occurred (we may ask why) in the character of law enforcement. In our subject time, Justice would not prosecute users. In the Bond age, it is justice for all.

Part of the tale of this time is Pittsburgh's race and poverty. The 1979 Pirates embodied a black presence of the first order in the national pastime, as a team. We grew up slowly in acceptance because racism is always here. In the early Seventies, my buddy and I dropped down to Three Rivers to watch an inconsequential game because watching those Bucs was fun. Arriving home, my radio listening father informed me that I had seen the first major league game in which a team had started a black nine. Famously, "we are family."

Not long after, while the melody lingered on, the team began a long (just a decade then) decline. But for a while Pittsburgh baseball burned (perhaps too quickly like cocaine) with local celebrities. We would see them, we would talk with them, black or white. We would offer them things, they did not have to ask.

By 1985 the City of Champions was not. This time marks the end of steel as we knew steel. There was no more smoke, anywhere, but somehow everything seemed darker and greyer. Grant Street was alright because the law deals in misery and takes a cut off the top. I dislike maxims but poverty begets crime and corruption and drugs. Our reputation is of a party town and the latent sadness of the party then was, well, this is the end of greatness. And then, another insult, the Pittsburgh Baseball Drug trials.

Why baseball? I have set this experience of the time on the field of Grant Street. I knew (in my judgment) from the Mon to the bus station people who knew what I knew about cocaine in the early Eighties. We knew the lawyer who stopped coming in, then disappeared. The

lawyers then were virtually all men (no women take part in the story of the trial, just background dancers.) The women of Grant Street were mostly staff and we watched some of them fade away. We heard (some saw) bowls of cocaine tucked inside a Grant Street mahogany desk, a canapé for clients at the start. No deep under cover operation would have been required to find what was so often in plain sight. No one called a cop. Why not the Pittsburgh Grant Street drug trials?

I suspect what I have described about Grant Street, cocaine use and community knowledge, was true in all major league legal communities. (I do know well Los Angeles then but another story for another time.) We know other communities, particularly apropos, politicians and entertainers, suffered the same dynamic. Drugs in Hollywood is a cliché, drugs in television, drugs down the show business line. Roy Cohn, cocaine user, entangled with Studio 54, had Ed Meese's ear and the number of Nancy Reagan's private line, but no D.C. drug trial, no Hollywood drug trial?

By 1983, we lived in the hot time in the rhetorical war on drugs, and Mrs. Reagan was the prophetess of the simple, obvious solution: "Just Say No." Much scholarship has since attended the perniciousness of this final solution. There was little concern about the multiple causes of addiction. The problem was you, a moral failing in you. C'mon, Just Say No; Nancy said no, you can too. She appeared on the sitcom Differn't Strokes. At the time, I was appalled by the arrogant simplification. With cynicism, I would suggest, as in the age of McCarthy, that the media of age, delimiting their own cocaine culture, embraced the campaign. Individual actors in the war participated for their own reasons, of course; many, no doubt, motivated, as the prosecutors in our case, by honest altruism. However, in retrospect (and to some extent at

the time), “Just Say No” was not just ironically stupid but worse, with little veil, an imperative directed at the black community. The latter was patent in 1985. Her appearance in Arnold’s school was a TV classroom that was integrated. She asked if any had “experimented,” the thoughtlessly unscientific euphemism of the time. Some multi-colored hands were raised. We forget or remember the lack of black presence on TV except for the few black comedies. Yet, the massive P.S.A. campaign of the time featured mostly urban dancers, dressed in faux street-wise get ups, dancing on some urban stoop like Sesame Street, all to the tiring disco track, singing “Just Say No.” It was clear as to who ought to be saying no and who were obviously saying yes.

I have with purpose and sense omitted names, dates, and places that would be the stuff of honest history. You must take my word that there are names, dates and places. The history requires my demise. I, however, will tell two tales that offer a particular connection to our time.

After the Bucs won the Series in 1979, a buddy of mine and I decided to see them on the road. We went to Montreal to watch at Stade Olympique. I persuaded my friend that we had enough scratch to afford a night of fine dining in Vieux Montreal at a French restaurant in the old quarter. Everything was very French and everyone in the place, francophone. But, three small tables away sat our broadcasters for the Bucs, speaking English in their radio voices, easily broadcast to our table. They must have thought, of course, that there wasn’t another yinzer in the joint. We were stunned by the conversation we really did not want to hear. Yes, it was an extended discussion of drug use by the team. The use was so pervasive that (and this phrase was riveted in my brain) they wondered how they even took the infield practice. For me, this trial was sadly no surprise.

The second story is Pittsburgh irony. I grew up in the South Hills, where massive Baldwin rubs against Pleasant Hills and Whitehall, on Grace Street, a new (in 1960) plan of Ryan Homes, streets given virtuous names. It seemed like virtually all were Catholic, went to the populous St. Elizabeth grade school, then for high school divided into catholic options – St. E’s (D.O.D. circa 1980), Central Catholic, Serra or the “Protestant” Baldwin High.

This neighborhood was middle class when we had a middle. In the summer, vacant ballfields were always available for the neighborhood boys. On those days in the Sixties, lots gathered; we could often easily have nine a side. There were future law professors, concert pianists, dentists, doctors, captains of industry and Vietnam vets. Among this group, before he went to Baldwin was Dale Shiffman, one of the dealers in the trials. I can still see his house in my mind’s eye. I try to think back but there were no clues on the playground that one day he would be the guy that knew a guy.