

Ryan Braun's Suspension

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Introduction

In December 2011, a report surfaced that Ryan Braun, a left fielder for Major League Baseball's (MLB's) Milwaukee Brewers, had tested positive for use of a performance enhancing drug (PED). The use of PEDs such as steroids was banned by MLB, because they could give players who use them an advantage over players who do not. If the report was true and Braun was guilty of use of the PEDs, he would be suspended for the first 50 games of the 2012 season. When asked a few years earlier about alleged PED use by Alex Rodriguez of the New York Yankees, Braun said, "The best thing he can do is come out, admit to everything, and be completely honest. The situation will die a lot faster if he tells the whole truth" (Fainaru-Wada & Quinn, 2011).

Less than one month before the report, Braun had been named the Most Valuable Player (MVP) in the National League. Braun won the award over Matt Kemp of the Los Angeles Dodgers by a margin of 388 votes to 332 (Lacques, 2011). He had reached the top of his profession, but had he gotten there by violating the rules of the game? If he had, who would be affected by his actions, and how would he be able to regain their trust?

The 2011 Season

The Milwaukee Brewers' 2011 baseball season was one of the most successful in franchise history on and off the field. While their season ended in disappointment—the team lost the National League Championship series to the St. Louis Cardinals, a division rival and the eventual World Series champion—the team won 96 games and the National League's Central Division title. In addition, they set a franchise record for attendance, drawing over 3 million fans to their home games ("MLB baseball finishes," 2011).

Earlier in 2011, the Brewers signed Braun to a contract that would keep him in Milwaukee through the 2020 season. Even with the loss of free agent Cecil Fielder, one of the team's other top players, the Brewers had the reigning National League MVP under contract for nine more seasons and the rest of their core players signed for the next season. There was reason for optimism among Brewers fans, a group that had not seen a World Series since the team moved to Milwaukee more than 40 years earlier.

The Positive Test and Braun's Appeal

Braun's positive test was obtained from a urine sample taken while the Brewers were in the playoffs. He insisted that the test was a mistake. Braun and other MLB players were tested regularly for use of PEDs and other banned substances. In Braun's case, he had been tested not only since he entered the major leagues in 2007, but also while he played minor league baseball before that. He had never had a positive test before the one that was reported in December 2011 (Fainaru-Wada & Quinn, 2011).

Braun appealed the findings of the test and the suspension that would have gone with it. He argued that "protocol had not been followed in the testing," and questioned "the chain of custody and collection procedure" of the sample that was taken ("Ryan Braun wins," 2012). Specifically, Braun and his representatives questioned why the man who collected the urine sample kept it in his home for nearly two days instead of immediately shipping it to a lab for testing. There was no evidence that anyone had tampered with the sample. However, because there were questions about the chain of custody, there were also questions as to whether the sample that tested positive actually belonged to Ryan Braun. MLB argued that, because the sample was sealed, the collector "acted in a professional and appropriate manner" (Quinn & Fainaru-Wada, 2011).

The arbitrator who heard the case and arguments from Braun and MLB overturned the findings and the 50-game suspension. Braun stated that the ruling was "the first step in restoring [his] good name and reputation," and that "the truth is on our side" ("Ryan Braun wins," 2012). He also made the following statement about the positive test:

There are a lot of things that we heard about the collection process, the collector and some other people involved in the process that have been concerning to us. But as I've dealt with the situation, I know what it's like to be wrongly accused of something, so for me to wrongly accuse somebody wouldn't help (Withers, 2012).

In the process of the appeal, the identity of the man who collected the sample in question was leaked to the media. Dino Laurenzi, the collector whose conduct Braun had suggested was "concerning," issued a statement in his defense. He refuted the claims about the protocol not being followed and the samples being out of his possession. Further, he stated that the samples had been stored correctly and requested that further questions be directed to his attorney. (Thompson, 2012)

Braun played the entire 2012 season, posting numbers similar to those in the previous season. However, the Brewers missed the playoffs, and he finished second in the National League MVP voting.

The Confession

The first couple of months of the 2013 baseball season did not go according to plan for the Brewers. They limped into June at the bottom of the Central Division standings. To make matters worse, ESPN reported that MLB was considering suspensions for about 20 players, including Ryan Braun. According to the report, these players were suspected of having connections to a Miami-area clinic that had allegedly distributed PEDs. The report also stated

that suspensions for Braun and other players might be for 100 games, because of connections to the clinic on top of their previous denials (Quinn, 2013).

When asked about the report by a group of reporters, Braun maintained his innocence, though not quite as forcefully as he had in 2011:

I've already addressed everything related to the Miami situation. I addressed it in Spring Training. I will not make any further statements about it. The truth has not changed. I don't know the specifics of the story that came out today. I've already addressed it, I've already commented on it and I'll say nothing further about it. I hope that you guys can respect that (Rosiak, 2013).

A few days after the report, Braun was out of the Brewers' lineup because of a thumb injury. That injury led to him being placed on the disabled list and missing the rest of June as well as the first week of July. By the time Braun returned to the field on July 9, the Brewers had the second worst record in the entire National League.

Braun's return was short-lived. On July 22, MLB suspended him for the remainder of the 2013 season. The suspension came after Braun met with MLB investigators who presented the evidence they had against him. Braun and his representatives negotiated the suspension for the remainder of the season—a 65-game suspension without pay—instead of the potential 100-game suspension (Axisa, 2013).

After the suspension was announced, Braun released the following statement:

As I have acknowledged in the past, I am not perfect. I realize now that I have made some mistakes. I am willing to accept the consequences of those actions. This situation has taken a toll on me and my entire family, and it is has been a distraction to my teammates and the Brewers organization. I am very grateful for the support I have received from players, ownership and the fans in Milwaukee and around the country. Finally, I wish to apologize to anyone I may have disappointed—all of the baseball fans especially those in Milwaukee, the great Brewers organization, and my teammates. I am glad to have this matter behind me once and for all, and I cannot wait to get back to the game I love (Axisa, 2013).

The loss of their best player doomed an already bad 2013 season for the Brewers. They spent the rest of the season battling the rival Chicago Cubs for last place in the Central Division. They also had to be concerned about the impact of the suspension and the poor season on their fans. Their home attendance was down by over 15 percent from 2011 (Thomas, 2013).

Late in the 2013 season, there was a report that Braun had made comments to other MLB players in 2012 about the man who had collected the positive sample during the 2011 playoffs. Braun claimed that Dino Laurenzi was a fan of the Chicago Cubs. More serious was the allegation that the collector was anti-Semitic; Braun's father was Jewish. Laurenzi and those who knew him denied the claim that he was anti-Semitic. However, the report was another negative against

Braun among fans and players, including Matt Kemp who “told reporters people in the game felt ‘betrayed’ and that he was ‘disappointed’” (Passan, 2013).

Looking Ahead

Ryan Braun’s professional career had been interrupted at the age of 29. His achievements on the baseball diamond were being called into question because of his use of PEDs. In addition, his reputation had been damaged by his repeated denials after the positive test. Whether he would be able to return to the level of performance that won him the MVP award in 2011 remained to be seen. The more immediate concern was what he could do to repair his reputation and regain the trust of those who had been affected by his use of PEDs.

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