

Not all baseball stars treated equally in TV steroid coverage, says study of network news

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Three stars from baseball's steroid era, all with Hall of Fame-worthy numbers, got very different treatment over 12 years of national TV news coverage, according to a study by Brian Quick, a University of Illinois professor of communication and in the College of Medicine. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer, University of Illinois News Bureau

Retired baseball stars Barry Bonds, Mark McGwire and Rafael Palmeiro each had Hall of Fame-worthy numbers, each hitting more than 500 home runs.

All three also were tarred by allegations of steroid use.

Their stories, however, received very different treatment over 12 years of national television news coverage, says University of Illinois professor Brian Quick, lead author on a paper about that coverage and its effects, published online Nov. 20 by the journal *Communication Research*.

"We found that Bonds received more than twice as many negative stories on his alleged use as McGwire, and almost four times as many as Palmeiro," said Quick, a professor of communication and the College of Medicine. Those stories numbered 544 for Bonds, 252 for McGwire and 137 for Palmeiro.

Researchers also found that the news coverage on Bonds, compared with that on either McGwire or Palmeiro, was much more likely to focus on Bonds using steroids to gain a competitive edge rather than for rehabilitation from injury. Those references ran 131 to five for Bonds, versus 43 to 10 for McGwire and seven to one for Palmeiro.

The data is based on an analysis of 1,247 news transcripts from 2000 to 2011 from seven national networks - ABC, CBS, CNBC, CNN, FOX, MSNBC and NBC - obtained through LexisNexis.

Co-authors on the paper were Natalie Lambert and Chris Josey, both doctoral students in communication at Illinois.

Despite the bad press, and to the researchers' surprise, baseball fans surveyed online in 2011 for a separate study also included in the paper were much more supportive of Bonds being elected to baseball's Hall of Fame, over either McGwire or Palmeiro, Quick said.

"Despite the negative attention Bonds received in the news, and survey participants perceiving him as not very likeable compared to the other

two, these fans had a more favorable attitude toward his election," Quick said.

The survey included 325 participants from 42 states, all of them users of either ESPN's MLB team forums or Google Groups baseball forum.

Bonds is African-American, McGwire is white, and Palmeiro is Latino. Quick said the findings on television [news coverage](#) are not surprising in light of previous research on the way these racial and ethnic groups have been portrayed by sportscasters and the non-sports news media.

According to that research, sportscasters have frequently characterized black athletes as superior athletes with an inspiring background of overcoming hardship as a child, Quick said. White athletes are more often described as hard-working, intelligent and exceptional leaders. And Latinos are seriously underrepresented in the media overall, and often depicted in limited or marginalized roles.

Bonds, the son of a Major League Baseball star, did not have the up-from-hardship storyline working for him, Quick said. He also was not well-liked by the sports media. "He becomes the perfect villain, ultimately," Quick said.

Another key finding from the news transcript analysis, consistent with his own previous research, Quick said, was that damage to players' reputations from steroid use was cited much more often than the potential negative health effects. Reputation damage was cited in 984 of the 1,247 news stories, versus 195 that mentioned health effects.

As a specialist in health communication, Quick said he finds that concerning. "The underlying message to kids is that steroid use is OK, as long as you don't get caught," he said.

More information: The paper, "A Two-Study Investigation into How Television News Frames the Steroid Scandal in Major League Baseball and Fans' Support for Bonds, McGwire, and Palmeiro's Pending Induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame" is available from the journal *Communication Research* at [m.crx.sagepub.com/content/earl .../20/0093650214558253](https://m.crx.sagepub.com/content/earl.../20/0093650214558253) . The paper also will be published in an upcoming issue of the journal.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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