



T H U R S D A Y , J A N U A R Y B L O G A R C

Why Does No One Suspect Randy Johnson of Steroid Use?

I'm not saying he did steroids. I just think it's weird no one else is. One of the main markers of steroid use, people think, one of the only things that actually shows up in the empirical record is that they allow players to remain effective later into their careers. Traditionally baseball players would start declining around the age of 30 to 33, and then drop off sharply after something like 35. During the Steroid Era, players were staying successful into their forties. So here's a career trajectory comparison between two of the best pitchers of the 90s and 2000s: Randy Johnson and Pedro Martinez. Let's look at each of them through the age of 28 and then after the age of 29:

Young Pedro: 125 W, 56 L, 1576.1 IP, 2.68 ERA, 168 ERA+, 10.4 K/9, 2.5 BB/9, 6.7 H/9, 38.5 WAA, 52.0 WAR

Pedro through his age 28 season was historically dominant. Actually, his age 28 season itself was historically dominant, as his ERA was less than half that of the next lowest qualifier in the AL.

Old Pedro: 94 W, 44 L, 1251.0 IP, 3.23 ERA, 139 ERA+, 9.6 K/9, 2.3 BB/9, 7.5 H/9, 22.9 WAA, 34.0

That's... not much of a decline. He was a bit worse, but still pitched at a Hall of Fame level. What he didn't do, though, was pitch for very long. Well less than half his career was after his age 29 season.

Young Randy: 49 W, 48 L, 818.0 IP, 3.95 ERA, 101 ERA+, 9.0 K/9, 5.7 BB/9, 7.1 H/9, 0.1 WAA, 7.6 WAR

During the same part of his life when Pedro was rocketing to stardom, Randy Johnson was... okay? Average-ish? His strikeout and hit rates showed promise, but he was walking batters like his name was Oliver Perez.

Old Randy: 254 W, 118 L, 3317.1 IP, 3.13 ERA, 146 ERA+, 11.0 K/9, 2.7 BB/9, 7.3 H/9, 68.1 WAA, 96.7 WAR

Randy Johnson had a Hall of Fame career entirely after his age-28 season. And not even a borderline one, a greatest-of-the-great one. It's a good thing, too, 'cause he might as well not have been in the league until age 29 at all. Unsurprisingly, he's second all time in WAR after the age of 29 to Cy Young; Phil Niekro, knuckleballer extraordinaire, is third. He was 880th in WAR up to age 28. Yeah.

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Now, there's a perfectly good explanation for why 28-year-old Randy Johnson had never been anything but a mediocre pitcher but 29+-year-old Randy Johnson was one of the most dominant pitchers of all time: he figured out his control. He always had the unhittable, strikeout stuff, but as Sandy Koufax will tell you, that only matters once you figure out how to throw it in the zone. Still, he did the same thing Bonds and Clemens and Palmeiro did. Actually, he did it even moreso: he had the most WAR of any player in baseball over the age of 35 from 1994 on. Yeah, including Bonds. Together they have a big lead over Clemens, and he's a ways in front of #4 on the list, Jamie Moyer. (Who, uh, wasn't doing steroids, I don't think.) So why, of the three people who put up more than 40 WAR after the age of 35 in the steroid era, is Randy Johnson exempt from suspicion? No one else seems to be. Well, that's not quite right: various people seem to be, like Frank Thomas, for no articulable reasons. But it cannot be denied that Randy Johnson had exactly the lack of age-related decline thought to be distinctive of steroid use. That's more evidence than we have on Piazza or Bagwell.

P O S T E D B E T W E E N : T O D A Y A T 1 2 : 3 3 P M
L A B E L S : S E R I O U S , S P O R T S , S T A T I S T I C S

4 C O M M E N T S :

B [reinnymike](#) April 12, 2014 at 12:33 PM

I found this article because I have been asking the exact same questions I'm my head. I loved watching the big unit pitch. I frankly don't care if he used or not. However it is impossible not to wonder given the era in which he dominated.

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Anonymous April 13, 2014 at 11:47 PM

Because he was skinny. People assume you have to be huge to have taken steroids, or benefit from them. He was apparently only 225 lbs at 6'10 -- there must be plenty of guys a whole foot shorter than him at that same weight.

Are you aware of his comments on the matter?

[From Sports Illustrated regarding his 4 CYA run 1999-2002 just before testing began] Johnson says that in those years he hired a professor from Canada to educate him on nutrition and training. He says that he used a hyperbaric chamber to improve recovery time and "dabbled in all kinds of powders and tried to put weight on." When asked what would have stopped him from using steroids at a time when baseball did not specifically ban them, Johnson pauses, then says, "Because I wasn't searching for anything other than to have the ability to throw the ball over the plate. You can do your homework. I've always thrown as hard as anybody in the game. There's no denying that. I've [also] always been skinny. I'm not denying that I went to GNC and all that stuff. I took a lot of different things that, you know, maybe at that time, maybe early enough, if I would have been tested, who knows? I could have been taking stuff had they tested me back then. Maybe I would have tested [positive for a banned supplement]. I don't know."

<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1155646/4/index.htm>

[Reply](#)

B [Robert](#) April 13, 2014 at 11:51 PM

That's interesting. And yeah, I think that's right, that it's because he didn't look like a big burly musclebound guy. Of course, my point wasn't that I think he took steroids, it's

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A B O U T M I

B R O B E R T

I am basically the least-electable white straight male you could imagine: pacifist, socialist, atheist, vegetarian, etc. I am someone who is interested in just about everything, spends most of my time thinking about politics, and thinks in a highly mathematical fashion. I tend to have a lot to say, so be forewarned, my posts are going to tend to be long. My philosophy on this blog, in the same spirit, is basically that when I have something I'm thinking about that I think is interesting, and especially when there's no one around to discuss it with in person, I'm going to post about it, sometimes in a fairly stream-of-consciousness-y way. Kind of like a hybrid journal/diary and blog.

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that his example casts doubt on the methods used to "incriminate" various other players. I think that point stands, so long as the assumption that steroid users will all look big and bulky is not actually an accurate one. But I'm not an expert on that subject.

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Unknown July 16, 2016 at 12:56 PM

Actually the answer is too simple for the accusers..he simply quit walking people

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