

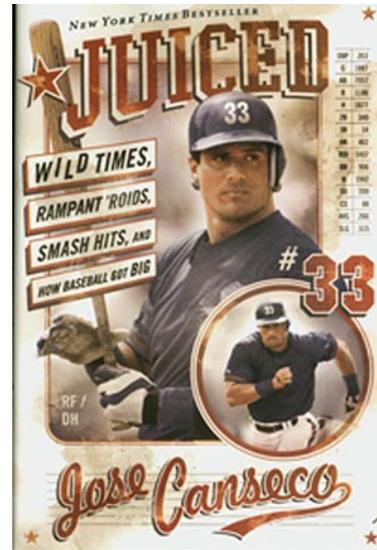
SportsLetter Interviews

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Steve Kettman

It's been called the "Ball Four" of the 21st Century. The controversial book "Juiced: Wild Times, Rampant 'Roids, Smash Hits and How Baseball Got Big" (Regan Books), has been on every major best-seller list since its publication in February, in part because ballplayer-turned-author Jose Canseco, like "Ball Four's" Jim Bouton, a former pitcher, has dared to expose baseball's "dark side."

Indeed, Canseco's allegations about performance-enhancing drugs so roiled the sport that Congress called special hearings to investigate Major League Baseball's drug policy.



What few people know is that journalist Steve Kettmann is the ghostwriter of "Juiced." Kettmann was a staff writer for the San Francisco Chronicle from 1990-1998, covering the Oakland A's as the paper's beat-writer from 1994-1998. His tenure coincided with Canseco for one year, 1997, during Canseco's second stint with the A's. Since leaving the newspaper, Kettmann had written extensively about steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs for such publications as the New York Times, the New Republic, and Wired.com. For Juiced, Kettmann interviewed Canseco over a period of several months, often meeting with the slugger at his San Fernando Valley home.

It's been a busy time for the prolific Kettmann. Last year, he wrote "One Day at Fenway: A Day in the Life of Baseball in America" (Atria Books — see www.kettmann.com). That book has already made the big screen:

the cover of “One Day at Fenway” can be glimpsed briefly in the new film “Fever Pitch.” SportsLetter spoke with Kettmann, by phone, from his home in Brooklyn.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: How well did you know Jose Canseco when he played with the A’s in 1997?

Steve Kettmann: A good friend of mine on the A’s beat was a guy named Pedro Gomez, who at the time was covering the team for the Sacramento Bee and is now an on-air reporter for ESPN. Pedro had gone to high school with Jose in Miami, at Coral Park High, and so they knew each other. There were times in 1997 when Pedro and I would run into Jose on the road, and we would hang out and talk a bit. It was a little different than the whole routine of being a reporter and asking a ballplayer a question.

SL: What was your opinion of Canseco then?

SK: As a reporter, I remember being struck that Jose was a more interesting quote than most anyone I talked to. A much, much more interesting quote than Mark McGwire, for example, because he understood what a reporter wanted. timing was interesting because, previously with the A’s, Jose had been the best player in baseball. By 1997, he wasn’t anywhere near that. This was nothing like his 40-40 year [when Canseco had 40 home runs and 40 stolen bases]. He still cared as much about winning and losing, but he was aware that he was getting along in his career.

SL: When you were covering baseball then, did you suspect that many of the players were taking performance-enhancing drugs?

SK: When I started in 1994, I don’t think steroids were on my radar at all. What I remember is one spring training, when Jason Giambi and Mark McGwire were both on the team and were very good friends, Giambi came to camp way thicker than the year before. It was like he had another layer on him. And, in front of us all at Papago Park [the A’s facility in Arizona],

McGwire joked about Giambi's "spare tire." At the time, every sportswriter — and even those of us who've reported on this issue a lot — went through the experience of having trouble putting it all together. There is just a part of you that always had trouble believing it.

One thing about baseball is that, even people who've never covered baseball think they're experts. I think it relates to a lot of us growing up with the sport. I played Little League for many years. I went to A's and Giants games with my brothers. You feel like you know the game. And the game that I knew had nothing to do with steroids. So, it always seemed like a foreign element — like, what does not belong in this picture. You mentally want to edit it out of the picture, even if you know it's there.

SL: Why do you think the media ignored this story at the time?

SK: The mentality [on a newspaper beat] is that your bosses don't want you to burn bridges. They want you, as a beat writer, to be the one that's around, to have access, to get answers to questions. They don't want you pushing the envelope on reporting. In no way is that an excuse. When I look back, I'm critical of myself — that I should have raised these questions more. I should have asked more and written more about it — and others should have as well. We should have definitely raised the question more. So, any criticism I make of anyone else has to start with criticism with myself.

For example, in 1997, I asked Jason Giambi directly about having used "andro" and what it was like taking it. He talked to me a little bit about it. He said it wasn't any big deal — he'd used it some and then he stopped. But I should have asked Giambi if he had used steroids. I should have said, "Have you experimented with anabolic steroids, Jason." He would have been mad. He might have refused to talk to me after that. He might have told other players not to talk to me. But I feel I should have done that.

I also remember during my first two weeks with the A's, I was talking with Mark McGwire. He looked me up and down and then urged me to try the MET-RX stuff he had in his locker. He meant it in a friendly way. The point is, if I had expressed more interest and looked into it and talked to him about it, I could have established a dialogue with him about supplements.

I think there's a mind-set in sports-writing where people think if they've studied up on a player's on-base percentage and know who was the rookie of year in 1972, that they know a lot. Most good baseball reporters — including the ones whom I consider the best two, Roger Angell of the *New Yorker* and Buster Olney, now with *ESPN The Magazine* — talk about how much they don't know. If you remember how much you don't know and ask questions, then you would probably have asked questions about steroids and other performance enhancing drugs.

SL: In writing the book, you spent a lot of time with Jose: did you ever feel that he was doing it for the money or that he had an axe to grind?

SK: I have not seen any detailed information on Canseco's finances. But I never got a sense of him being in financial need. He lives in this mansion in Encino, where he just did all this work on the house, with a big waterfall and pool. He's living a very comfortable life and driving very nice cars. I also know, from other sources, that he's made some good investments over the years. Now, did he have an axe to grind? Canseco feels that he was made an example of by baseball to send a message to other players about steroids. He felt that he had been treated unfairly by people in baseball and that they had some things to answer for. A lot of people dispute his allegations as paranoid and delusional. But based on how defensive baseball has been on the steroid issue in the last few months, I don't think Canseco's position should be dismissed out of hand.

SL: Canseco has contradicted himself on a couple of points since the publication of the book - one point being his retreat from stating that steroids, if taken under a doctor's care, are okay to take. Has that hurt his credibility?

SK: My impression on that is that Canseco's position has evolved. I haven't spoken to him in a while — he's doing a reality TV show for VH-1. He and I had many conversations on this theme — about how, in the future, as we learn more about steroids, a large number of people who are in their 40s, 50s, and 60s will be using them in ways to be more youthful or have more physical vitality. On that narrow point, I think that his thinking hasn't changed very much.

Now, did his awareness of the dangers of steroids increase because of the experience of seeing parents of kids testifying about that? I think absolutely, and I think that's a very good thing. It's important to remember that *Juiced* starts with a warning about how teenagers should not use steroids, and that it's more dangerous than ever at that point in kids' lives. As far as Jose saying now that steroids are a mistake — I think that, in the future, he will walk a very narrow line in educating people about steroids, both in terms of their dangers and potential benefits.

SL: What part(s) of the book do you feel the media has ignored or overlooked?

SK: I was surprised that people mocked Canseco for expressing his feelings about what it's like growing up in the United States as a Latino. He felt that he was confronted with racism when he was a minor leaguer, and his sense of racism existing in U.S. culture and baseball shaped his sense of what he could accomplish in baseball. Some critics dismissed that out of hand, basing it on the fact that there had been other Latinos in the game before him, but that doesn't take into consideration how much things have changed from when Jose was in high school to now.

In general, it was clear that as the book was being widely read, a lot of people were becoming a lot more aware about steroids. That was what I expected. But I thought that there would be a few people who would be interested in exploring some of the other things in the book. For example, Canseco told a number of stories about umpires, alleging that Roger Clemens used to get umpires starting times at exclusive golf courses as a way to curry favor with them. Other than maybe one reference, I saw very little written about that.

On another note, ballplayers have said to me and other reporters that the steroid element of the book wasn't much of a surprise. Everyone knew about that. There was some surprise at Canseco violating "the code" of the locker-room. Many players wish he had not been so frank in talking about the sex lives of ballplayers.

SL: The book caused Congress to hold hearings about Major League Baseball's drug policy: Did you feel that it was appropriate for Congress to

hold the hearings?

SK: I can't speak to what factors led Congress to hold the hearings, but I think having some mechanism for greater accountability in baseball is probably a good thing. The mere fact that when Major League Baseball officials showed up and presented a policy on steroids that was at odds with what they had publicized before, that showed the hearings were useful. They first said that anyone caught using steroids would be suspended. All of a sudden, they were saying that the player would be suspended or face a fine. That showed a lot of people that baseball officials were used to being able to give an explanation without having to nail down their position.

SL: Do you feel that Major League Baseball would have started to get its house in order without Congress' prodding?

SK: MLB did start to get its house in order, but let's remember that it all started with Sen. John McCain and his efforts. Clearly, pressure from Washington is one of the major forces leading baseball to take stronger actions on steroids.

SL: Why do you think Major League Baseball was so slow to address the problem of steroids?

SK: I think it basically boils down to there being no commissioner. There was once a commissioner — Faye Vincent was the last commissioner. Bud Selig was an owner. He was put into power as a representative of the owners. He certainly isn't capable of much leadership.

SL: What did you think of Bud Selig's reaction to the allegations of widespread steroid use in Major League Baseball?

SK: I think Bud Selig has been less than truthful in talking about what he knew about steroids and when he knew it, and I think it's disappointing. I think that Bud Selig has been dealing from a position of strength — overall, baseball is doing great right now — but he's acting like he's dealing from a position of weakness.

I've kind of enjoyed the Selig style in some ways. He's friendly and he obviously loves baseball. But in thinking about the controversy enveloping baseball over the last few months, it's hard to imagine the NFL having its top official not stand front and center and be accountable. It seems as if Selig has only spoken on this in small sessions with reporters of his choosing or after he had been dragged kicking and screaming to the subject.

SL: Do you feel baseball's "dream season" of 1998 was a factor in Major League Baseball not dealing with the problem?

SK: To me, all conversation about steroids in baseball — and what anyone should have done about it — comes back to 1998. That is the key year. There obviously were steroids in baseball before then. But it was in 1998 when the character of the game was shaped by the steroid revolution in a way that was hard to ignore.

In a sense, steroid use brought about a revival of baseball, especially after so many people tuned out baseball after 1994 [when the World Series wasn't contested]. People have trotted out numbers to show that attendance didn't go up that much in '98 and that the summer of '98 didn't really help baseball at all. I just laugh at that. You couldn't get on a subway or talk to anyone without hearing everyone talking about it. Maybe it didn't translate directly into ticket sales, but as far as re-establishing a deep connection with baseball, the summer of '98 was very powerful.

Now, I'm not critical of anyone in baseball for what they did prior to '98. In some quarters it was seen as maybe not a bad thing to have the game more exciting - because of more home runs because of more muscle. When a thorough history is written of this whole period, I think most people will find that to be a pardonable response. But I think subsequent to that, there's been a real failure in being intellectually honest about the effects of steroids on baseball, positive and negative.

SL: How do you think baseball historians will look back on the "steroid era"? Should we throw out the records for this era?

SK: I think that the records should not be thrown out, and I don't think that

asterisks should come into play. Baseball has had different eras. At one point in the 1960s, they lowered the mound.

In general, the reason why it's important right now for people like Bud Selig and others to delve into questions about the legacy of these recent years is precisely so that baseball historians can look back and say that this topic has been given an honest hearing. There shouldn't be this feeling of baseball having these dark secrets that they're desperately trying to hide. I don't see this as some kind of scandal. Performance-enhancing drugs have been a part of sport for a long time - and I think they always will be.

I believe that, far from hurting baseball, the controversy over steroids has helped the game. I compare it to when George Steinbrenner was making his name by firing managers and being on the back page of tabloids in New York all the time. A lot of people thought that was bad for the game. In fact, it got people more interested in baseball. It was part of raising baseball to a new level where people were really fascinated by it.

With steroids, if you're a real fan of a team or a real fan in general, I kind of doubt that your opinion about baseball will be wildly affected by hearing that large numbers of players were using steroids.

SL: Despite all of the problems, ticket sales are up and interest in baseball is strong: why do you believe this has happened?

SK: Under Bud Selig's leadership baseball did some things that were good for the game. I think the wild card really helped in markets where previously fans might have started checking out in July and August. It really helps people stay interested. I think the inter-league games have created match-ups that generate excitement. And, having written a book on the Red Sox and Yankees, the last two post-seasons have been all-time greats.

SL: What about Mark McGwire — is his reputation irreparably damaged?

SK: No, it's not. All Mark McGwire has to do is to speak out on steroids in a way that people find credible. If McGwire were to go on TV and say

that at some point in his career he experimented with steroids and now regrets it, I think that a large number of fans would rally to his side. Look at Jason Giambi. He never really apologized for steroids, but he almost did and saw a lot of good will from fans. I think the threshold is very, very low. I think fans would be willing to take even a limited mea culpa as a sign of courage. If McGwire is never heard from again, then he has buried himself. Jose Canseco's book didn't do it; McGwire did it to himself.

SL: How about some of the other players mentioned in the book: how will history judge them?

SK: I think history will judge them harshly. I'm inclined to think that, sooner or later, the truth will come out, with the full legal consequences.

Another sportswriter, Howard Bryant, has a book coming out this summer called "Juicing the Game." I think that book will contribute to an understanding of the kinds of struggles that were going on behind the scenes related to steroids.

SL: Is Major League Baseball's current drug policy tough enough? What more can Major League Baseball do?

SK: To me, the main issue is human growth hormone, which is at least as important as steroids. The whole "juiced" thing that Canseco talks about is really HGH together with steroids. At best, baseball is talking about that they can develop a [urine] test to detect HGH by next year sometime. Right now, there's only a blood test for HGH, and it's unlikely that baseball players will ever agree to a blood test.

SL: What does the future look like for performance enhancing supplements?

SK: I think that, within five or ten years, we'll see more and more of gene therapy and designer steroids. They're constantly developing new designer steroids. I have no doubt that some of the highest-paid players in baseball right now are using designer steroids because they have tons of money and can pay for this cutting-edge, high-grade stuff.

SL: “Juiced” made number-one on the New York Times best-seller list, and yet your name isn’t on the cover of the book. How does that feel, as a writer, to be deprived of that public credit?

SK: A lot of books are published every year that have ghostwriters who go uncredited. From the very first days of the project, it was my understanding that it would be that way. And I was completely fine with that.