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Sunburned A-Rod deserves a break

The Score

By SAM BORDEN
DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

This selfishness has to stop.

Sunbathing?

On a hot day?

In Central Park?

Come on, Alex Rodriguez, what were you thinking? Why not have Theo Epstein rub Coppertone on your back while you're at it?



Pensinger GETTY

Alex Rodriguez

Three errors in the game that night was bad enough, but then you go and foul a ball off your toe? A few less UVB's and maybe that ball goes over the fence instead of down off the little piggy that went to market, no?

"I think I looked good in the modeling picture, actually," A-Rod says, as if the whole thing is a joke.

And it is.

All of it is, because what was once a mildly interesting soap opera in which a glamorous star (Rodriguez) was routinely jilted by his admirers (the jeering Stadium fans) has now become a farce. Even the booing seems a little hollow.

The sunbathing situation is simply the latest sign of insanity. Snapping a photo of A-Rod - or any celebrity - is understandable, but to debate for a few days whether being outside in the morning with his wife and child hindered Rodriguez's performance on the field that night is ludicrous.

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Should we blame Shawn Chacon's awful season on the fact that it rained a lot on the days he pitched?

It's not like A-Rod was soliciting prostitutes in Central Park (Hello, Denny Neagle); or doing keg stands in Central Park (How do you like your burger, David Wells?); or spitting in someone's face in Central Park (Pass the chips, Roberto Alomar); or gulping down steroids in Central Park (Barry! We're over here!).

A-Rod was just catching some rays. On a rock. With his family.

Didn't even have a radio, God bless him.

Criticism is one thing and there are 252 million reasons Rodriguez doesn't ever get to complain about taking hits for what he does on the field - much of which has been poor lately.

Yet A-Rod still deserves at least a little perspective. Was laying out in the middle of the city the smartest choice he ever made? Clearly not, if only because he had to endure catcalls from his teammates, several of whom snickered that the photos made it look like he was trying to, ahem, crack Cinemax's fine late-night library of successes.

Funny stuff, but it also raises the question of how many more of these dramas A-Rod can take. It has been a tough run so far in New York for him and it figures to only get tougher. Despite the calls from the harshest of critics, the Yankees don't figure to trade A-Rod anytime soon since ... well, since he might be the best player in the game. And three days ago, A-Rod said there's no truth to the wild rumors that he may want out of New York.

"That's a ridiculous thought," he said.

It's admirable if he means it. But if he means it, he must know that he'll continue to be maligned by some observers for not being Derek Jeter or Bernie Williams or even a one-hit legend like Aaron Boone.

And there is some sadness in that notion. There is even more in this one:

Three thousand miles away from Rodriguez there is a player who inspires greater vilification than A-Rod, a player who is seen by many as the ultimate cheater and a player who may finish his baseball career in jail.

Yet Barry Bonds is an idol in his hometown and has a haven in his home ballpark, a sanctuary where he can go to step out of the hottest of spotlights for a few hours.

Kind of makes you wonder if A-Rod ever dreams about playing by the Bay, doesn't it?

The Score hears ...

By **MICHAEL O'KEEFFE**

Bonds not only one happy with grand jury

When a federal grand jury expired last week without indicting a certain embattled

slugger for perjury or tax evasion, nobody not named Bonds was happier than Andrew Morbitzer, the San Francisco fan who caught the embattled slugger's 715th home run ball two months ago.

Morbitzer will be at Mickey Mantle's on Central Park South tomorrow to show off Barry Bonds' historic ball to TV crews and promote its sale on eBay. The auction begins tomorrow afternoon and runs for 10 days. Morbitzer says he thinks the ball could fetch \$500,000 or more, although some memorabilia experts have told him it could go for much less, thanks to Bonds' starring role in baseball's steroid scandal.

"The fact that there was no indictment takes away some of the doubts about the value of the ball," Morbitzer tells The Score.

Morbitzer left his wife Megan to fend for their seats in the bleachers while he went for refreshments on that historic day. He heard the public address announcer say that Bonds was at the plate, but Morbitzer was more focused on beer, peanuts and a barbecued sandwich than the BALCO poster child.

And then the crowd roared.

Morbitzer looked up through a gap in the bleachers. He saw an ocean of outstretched arms and a baseball headed his way. He leaned back, stuck out his hand and caught the ball barehanded on a dead fly. "It didn't hurt at all," Morbitzer says. "I was in the moment."

Morbitzer says a "V-chested guy in a beautiful suit" grabbed him, identified himself as MLB security and swept him away. "I'm 6-2 and the guy just lifted me off the ground and carried me down the hall, with the TV crews and the media chasing us," Morbitzer says.

The security guy - a moonlighting San Francisco police lieutenant - took Morbitzer to a room, when MLB officials affixed a hologram to the ball that identifies it as genuine. Morbitzer and his wife spend a whirlwind few weeks doing press interviews and showing off the ball that passed Babe Ruth on the all-time home run list. They even thought about keeping the ball.

"It was fun to have it, but then reality set in," Morbitzer says. "San Francisco is an expensive place to live, and we decided we'd like a down payment for our own place."

Morbitzer says he may use some of the cash to take his wife to Italy. They've already decided to donate 10% of the proceeds to a charity.

"We have to do something for charity," he says. "This is such a lucky thing to happen to us. It's karma."

Wagner card saga continues

Bob Connelly, a tall man with gray hair and the understated confidence of a country gentleman, pulled a Lucite block out of the pocket of his suit jacket last week and plopped it on a glass table in an office 20 floors above Park Ave. South. He sat with sports memorabilia broker Mike Mangasarian, who is better known as Mike Mango and has long dark hair and a big bushy mustache that make him look a little like Salvador Dali.

A T206 Honus Wagner card - the most sought-after baseball card in the world - was embedded in the Lucite. Approximately 50 T206 Wagners are believed to exist, and even cards in shabby condition sell for more than \$100,000. A collector that Mangasarian wouldn't identify hired him to check out the card and report back his opinion. As a crew from HBO's "Real Sports" looked on with cameras rolling, Mangasarian picked up the block and studied it carefully.

"I figure it's a strong four," Connelly said, referring to the mark the grade on a scale from one to 10 he thinks it would receive from a card-grading service. "What's your opinion?"

"I agree," Mangasarian replied. "It's in that ballpark area."

And just like that, the most controversial baseball card in recent history gained instant credibility. Connelly, an auctioneer and appraiser from Binghamton, thinks the card could be worth up to \$850,000 and plans to sell it at an Aug. 15 auction.

The card is owned by John Cobb and Ray Edwards, two Cincinnati men who have waged a long and frustrating battle with the memorabilia establishment to prove the card is real. Cobb bought the card in the 1980s for \$1,800.

Reckless Yankee & Red Sox fans

This time of year the entire Atlantic seaboard doesn't seem big enough to contain the animosity between Yankee fans and Red Sox fans. So how do Bomber and Bosox fans coexist on a small tour bus for weeks at a time?

"It keeps things interesting," says fiddler and Yankee fan Cody Braun of Reckless Kelly, the smoking alt-country band that will appear at the Rodeo Bar on Friday. "There's a lot of jawing that goes on. We play a lot of PlayStation on the bus and there's always a lot of money and pride involved."

Braun grew up in rural Idaho, and his father was a Yankee fan because he liked their tradition and history. He passed his pinstripe passion down to Cody but younger brother Willie, Reckless Kelly's guitar player and vocalist, was more influenced by the hand-me-downs his mother's relatives sent from New England. "Nobody bothered to tell me when I was 4 or 5 years old that the team I had selected hadn't won a World Series in decades.

"But in 2004, I got paid back in full."

Top 5: Bill Belichick's favorite Bon Jovi songs

1. You Give Love a Bad Name
2. Living in Sin
3. Lay Your Hands on Me
4. Love for Sale
5. Keep Me Away From Your Wife (ok, we made that one up)

Say What?

"He challenged me to a fight, and wanted me to get up and punch him in the face."

Shea Hillenbrand on Blue Jays manager John Gibbons. Hillenbrand, who was originally designated for assignment, was traded to the Giants on Friday.

What's Up

TODAY

GOLF: Tiger hopes to keep burning bright as the British Open comes to a finish at Hoylake. 8 a.m., Ch. 7

CYCLING: For the first time since 1998, Lance Armstrong won't be sipping champagne as he rides the yellow jersey around the Champs Elysees. The Tour de France ends in Paris, with another American - Floyd Landis - in the maillot jaune. 7:30 a.m., OLN

TOMORROW

BASEBALL: The second half has barely begun and the Mets are already a virtual lock for the playoffs. Playing the dismal Cubs at Shea should help them pad their NL East lead. 7 p.m., SNY

FRIDAY

BASEBALL: Unlike the Mets, the Yankees could be the odd team out come October. The Bombers will need to beat up on the Devil Rays this weekend. They've won six of eight against the Rays so far in '06. 7:05 p.m., Ch. 9

FOOTBALL: Jets training camp opens at Hofstra and the Giants get started in Albany. Both teams have morning and afternoon practices.

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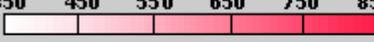
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