

# Baseball Bioethics

**DNA testing may cause some baseball recruits to strike out.**

I am writing this column during a holiday to the south shore of Boston. This city is besotted by baseball. This year the Red Sox could make it to the World Series, although the smart money is on teams like the New York Yankees, the Los Angeles Dodgers and St Louis Cardinals.

No one is betting on the hapless Pittsburgh Pirates. They have set a record for consecutive losing seasons – 17 years – yet its fans are hopeful. The old management had squandered the team's funds by buying stars at their peak and failing to invest in young players, but the new management is buying and nurturing young talent. This explains why the Pirates are so keen to recruit 16-year-old shortstop Miguel Angel Sano, the hottest prospect that US baseball scouts have seen in a long, long time.

But months after the international signing season began, Miguel Angel is still cooling his heels in the Dominican Republic waiting for a visa. Why? Because baseball's impresarios want to check whether he is really 16. If he is 19, as some suspect, he could be much less valuable. "In the eyes of baseball, there's a huge difference between 16 and 19 years old," an international scout told the *New York Times*. "It's night and day." Baseball players are ready for the scrapheap by their early-30s, so every extra year of sporting life adds to their value.

Mr Sano was told to have DNA testing to check whether he is really the child of his parents and a bone scan to determine his age. His sister is also being tested as a cross-check. A lot is at stake. More than 300 Latin American players in the major and minor leagues are believed to have falsified birthdates since



2001. If he really is a youthful 16 he will have a good crack at a US\$4 million contract.

This alarms some bioethicists who suspect that DNA testing is really being used for discriminatory purposes. As the *Times* notes, the new Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA), which is scheduled to take effect in November, prohibits US companies from making DNA testing a condition of employment. The information could be used to determine susceptibility to disease or ill-health, so people with "bad genes" could find themselves unemployable and unable to get health insurance.

Some ethicists think that Mr Sano's case is different: it's a matter of protection against identity fraud. But others say that baseball authorities could use the genetic information to see whether they are getting a healthy player.

"It's a tough area to figure morally and in all kinds of directions," one scout said. "Can they test susceptibility to cancer? I don't know if they're doing any of that. But I know they're looking into trying to figure out susceptibility to injuries... things like that. If they come up with a test that shows someone's connective tissue is at a high risk of not holding up, can that be used? I don't know. I do think that's where this is headed."

Genetic testing has other dangers as well. The results could reveal that the

biological father is not the man married to the player's mother. The news could tear the player's family apart.

Since GINA has not come into effect yet, it is unclear whether it will be against US law to do genetic testing on prospective employees who are not US citizens. But it is sure that baseball clubs will be tempted to do so. The Pirates have invested US\$5 million on an academy in the Dominican Republic to take advantage of its rich pool of talent. Genetic testing would help to ensure that they don't waste their money.

The *Times* investigation revealed that teams have been conducting DNA tests on prospective players for several years. If genetic testing has stealthily made inroads into US sport, what is happening in China? Or in Africa, where scouts for European soccer clubs are scouring the continent for mega-stars?

In any case, the baseball player who set the record for the most career grand slams of all time would never have passed a DNA test. His name was Lou Gehrig, and he is remembered today as much for giving his name to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, the disease which killed him, as his sporting prowess.

Like other technologies, genetic testing for sporting ability could be a gigantic con job.

Michael Cook is editor of the bioethics newsletter BioEdge ([www.BioEdge.org](http://www.BioEdge.org)).