

During the spring of 1995, George Steinbrenner, owner of the New York Yankees, reached an agreement with baseball star Daryl Strawberry that had the potential to pay him \$2,575,000 for the 1996 baseball season. Only five months earlier, Strawberry had tested positive for cocaine use and had been suspended from baseball. The agreement was severely criticized by Lee Brown, the former Police Commissioner of New York, and now the Director of drug policy in Washington, for sending "the worst possible message to children." "In the Yankees' zeal to build the gate," Brown said, "they are taking advantage of the fans, and they are destroying America's great pastime, and our youth. This isn't just fun and games, people die from drug abuse," protested Brown. George Steinbrenner strongly defended the signing, saying, "maybe I'll be disappointed, but I think that Daryl Strawberry can turn things around ... "

Was it ethically justifiable to sign Daryl Strawberry? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: It was ethically justifiable for George Steinbrenner to sign Daryl Strawberry. The signing does not glorify or condone Strawberry's use of cocaine. Furthermore, it seems highly uncertain that attempting to shun celebrity athletes or entertainers caught using illegal drugs would significantly discourage people in quite different circumstances, such as inner city ghettos, from doing so. Some actions of a person might be so heinous as to justify treating the person as a social outcast even after he or she has been punished. Cocaine use, however, does not fall into this category. As a separate point, Steinbrenner's observation that the contract might provide an incentive for Strawberry to avoid resuming cocaine use seems reasonable.

Case from the February 24, 1996 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1996.