

SHOE LEATHER

## ROID WARRIORS

by Ben McGrath

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A-Rod

For Alex Rodriguez, we now know, the early years of this decade, when he was pumping himself full of Primobolan, seemed like a “different culture,” a mini sixties revival without much oversight. “It was such a loosey-goosey era,” he said in his televised confession, lips quivering. Hard as it may be to believe, he wasn’t entirely full of it. “Even in our own newspaper, back then, I got a lot of ‘Not another steroid story’ looks from people,” Teri Thompson, an editor at the *News*, said the other day, during a brief lull between the latest A-Rod follow-up and the start of Barry Bonds’s perjury trial. “Everyone has kind of come around to the fact that this is a huge story of our time. But it was a lonely beat out there for a couple of years, anyway.”

Thompson, who grew up in Arkansas in the sixties, and took a mid-career sabbatical to earn a law degree, is the media’s premier steroids watchdog, having presided over the *News*’ sports investigative unit, or I-Team, since 2000. She now has three reporters at her disposal, and deploys them widely in pursuit of all things drug-related. (Their stories are typically accompanied by a syringe graphic.) At a time when investigative journalism is coming under assault, the I-Team makes an unlikely inspiration for would-be Woodwards and Bernsteins.

“This is Jose’s original manuscript, before the lawyers got hold of it,” Thompson said, referring to Jose Canseco’s best-selling “Juiced,” which is often credited with exposing the so-called “steroid era.” In the version on Thompson’s desk, its title was “The Chemist.” On a nearby bookshelf, she had a “Mustache of Justice” coffee mug, featuring a likeness of Representative Henry Waxman, who questioned Canseco at congressional steroid hearings in 2005.

Nathaniel Vinton, the newest member of the I-Team, took a seat next to Thompson and recalled his initiation into the beat, a year ago. “I flew straight to the first hearing on Capitol Hill,” he said. “And then went straight from there to seedy Pasadena, Texas, for, like, a month.”

“Nate almost got us killed there,” Thompson said. “We were in this rental car with a G.P.S., and we were trying to figure out where Andy Pettitte’s father lived. So we were in this cul-de-sac kind of place where these big houses are all stuck together, and Nate pulls over. I’m like, ‘Look, people have seen us driving around this block forty times. I’m from the South. They’ll come out with a gun any second.’ All of a sudden, these three guys from three separate houses come out toward our car, and I’m like, ‘Go, go, go!’ ”

“It was really sketchy,” Vinton said.

Thompson went on, “I have a relative who works at the D.E.A. He was like, ‘You have no idea—these steroid people are dangerous.’ You know, he listens on a wire. He’s like, ‘They’re talking about you.’ ”

The other two I-Team members, Michael O’Keeffe and Christian Red, joined the conversation. Red is the I-Team’s foreign correspondent. He has been dispatched to the Dominican Republic more than a dozen times, as well as to Venezuela and Panama, to the home towns of Latin-American ballplayers, where drug enforcement is more lax. “The diciest was the plane from Mérida to Caracas,” he said. “Two weeks later, the same plane I was on crashed into a mountain. Everybody died.”

“It reminds you, even though it’s sports reporting, of how dangerous it can be,” Thompson said. “What about your drug deal?” she asked Red, who had recently returned from Santo Domingo, where he went undercover and purchased A-Rod’s favored meds.

“It was an edgier part of town,” he said. “This guy just got in the car with us.”

“People are always asking, ‘Where’s your steroids?’ ” Thompson said, as Vinton reached for an accordion file and began pulling out bags of seized drug labels and boxes obtained from a Deep Throat involved in the F.B.I.’s Operation Equine, back in the early nineties. “We have the ephedra samples, too,” O’Keeffe said, prompting Thompson to open a drawer and retrieve a bottle of Xenadrine, a supplement that the pitcher Steve Bechler had been taking before he died of heatstroke, in 2003.

O’Keeffe is a former crime reporter, and he looks the part: long hair, goatee. “It’s just a little more specialized,” he said of his I-Team work. “Instead of the daily diet of murder and mayhem, it’s, you know, sports, murder, and mayhem. People always say to me, ‘You have a great job, you get to go to all these games.’ And I go, ‘No, I don’t. I spend more time in courthouses than in locker rooms.’ When we walk into the locker room, people will say, ‘What are *you* doing here?’ ”

“ ‘What player are you here to expose?’ ” Red said.

On a dry-erase board behind O’Keeffe’s head, Thompson had scrawled a quote from the newspaper baron Lord Northcliffe: “News is what somebody somewhere is trying to suppress. The rest is advertising.” There was an arrow connecting the word “somebody” to the name of the lawyer Rusty Hardin. His client Roger Clemens, the I-Team’s sources say, could be indicted for perjury sometime this spring.

ILLUSTRATION: TOM BACHTELL