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Steroids in Sports: To Allow, or not to Allow?

“It is a very simple thing for coaches and sport officials to come out publicly in opposition to the use of performance enhancing steroids but then, on the basis of their demands on athletes, force the athletes to take them. This isn’t conscious coercion but a subconscious, almost subliminal suggestion that these athletes need to do something beyond their normal means to be the best they can be.” – Robert Voy, MD

Performance enhancers have been used in athletics ever since the original Olympic games from 776 to 393 BC. The word “dope”, was originated from the Dutch word “doop”- an opium choice that was extremely popular among the ancient Greeks. Besides opium, the Greek athletes also tried numerous other ways to enhance their performance. They gorged themselves on meat, drank wine potions, used hallucinogens, and experimented with herbal medications (Jenkins). Ancient Greeks were not the only ones who had the idea of enhancing their athletic performance in substance, however. Shortly after the Olympics, in 100 AD, the Roman Gladiators and chariot racers used stimulants and hallucinogens to prevent fatigue and injury, both for themselves and for their horses (Aziz). We speed up to the late 19th century, and see that athletes still want a greater edge to enhance their natural performance. French cyclists and lacrosse players drank wine with coca leaf extract- the source of cocaine and related alkaloids, to fight hunger and fatigue (Murray). In the 1904 Olympics, mixtures of strychnine, caffeine, heroine, and cocaine, were ubiquitously used by athletes and endorsed by their coaches. One form of this mixture is speculated as the cause of marathon runner Thomas Hick’s near death on the Olympic tracks (Gold). By 1928, the International Association of Athletics Federation, the international governing body for the sport of athletics, founded in 1912, for the first time in history, prohibited the use of doping in sports (IAAF). From

1940 to 1945, the Nazi's were reported to have tested steroids on prisoners and Hitler. According to his physician, Hitler's mental state before his death "exhibited characteristics that some scientists associate with heavy steroid use: mania, acute paranoid psychoses, overly aggressive and violent behavior, depression and suicidal ideologies" (Sports Illustrated). Shortly after, soldiers began using Amphetamines during WWII, to elevate their moods and give them greater endurance, and once athletes caught on to this, they began using them too (Brecher). In 1958, the FDA approved the first anabolic steroid for sale in the US. "Godfather of steroids", Dr. John Bosley Ziegler created this new FDA approved anabolic steroid called Dianabol, as a result of seeing the success of Russian Weightlifters who enhanced their performance with testosterone. (Peters).

In 1960, the first death due to steroids occurred, as Danish cyclist Kurt Jensen died on the tracks. Although his death was initially thought of as due to heat exhaustion, his autopsy revealed that there were traces of an Ronicol (an amphetamine) in his system. (NBC.com). Shortly after, in 1967, British cyclist Tommy Simpson, who was known to consume excessive amounts of amphetamine and brandy, died during the 13th stage of the Tour De France (Slater). Simpson's death compelled sporting agencies to take immediate action against doping in sports. That same year the International Olympic Committee established Medical Commission to fight doping. The Commission encompassed "three guiding principals: protection of the health of the athletes, respect for medical and sport ethics, and equality for all competing athletes" (IOC). In 1968, the first drug testing at the Winter Olympic Games in Grenoble France was enacted, followed by the summer Olympic games. None of the athletes tested positive in the winter Olympics, however,

Hans- Gunnar Liljenwall of the Swedish modern penthalon team lost his bronze medal because he was tested positive for excessive alcohol use (Mottram). In 1975 the International Olympic Committee added anabolic steroids to its list of banned substances. Thirteen years later, President Ronald Reagan signed an act outlawing non-medical steroid sales. To address concerns about steroids in schools, he added penalties for crimes involving minors, and the sale of drugs within one hundred feet of schools. Finally, in October of 1990, the Congress passed the Anabolic Steroids Control Act, which placed steroids in the same category (Schedule III) as amphetamines, methamphetamines, opium, and morphine (ESPN). In 1990, the World Anti-Doping was formed to internationally promote the fight against doping in sport (WADA History).

Now after reading the history of athletes using performance enhancers in sports, and the regulations that have been placed in order to prevent the use of steroids, one may think that the issue of doping in sports is under control. However, this is far from the case. Perhaps the biggest scandal involving doping occurred between the years 1992 and 2004 in Major League Baseball. Before stricter drug tests were enacted, baseball players such as Sammy Sosa, Barry Bonds, and Mark McGuire chased long withstanding home-run records held by hall of fame athletes Babe Ruth and Hank Aaron well into their late thirties (well past the normal time of peak athletic performance). Barry Bonds now holds the record for the highest number of home- runs hit in over the span of a player's career. Although the players during this era were consistently scrutinized for using performance-enhancing drugs, it was not until the release of the Mitchell Report that the names of the players involved in the drug scandal became public. The Mitchell Report, formally known as the Report to the Commissioner of Baseball of an Independent Investigation

into the Illegal Use of Steroids and Other Performance Enhancing Substances by Players in Major League Baseball, was a 409 page report released in December 2007 by former United States Senator George J. Mitchell. Mitchell underwent a 21-month investigation in Major League Baseball, tracking the use of anabolic steroids and Human Growth Hormone. The report totaled 89 Major League baseball players who were involved in the use of performance enhancing drugs. Barry Bonds made the list (Mitchell Report).

The recent release of the report was accompanied with an investigation of the sources of these performance enhancers. One notable source was the Bay Area Lab Co-operative, a company owned by now convicted felon, Victor Conte. BALCO marketed “The Clear”, (tetrahydrogestrinone), an undetectable performance enhancing drug which was used by many high-profile athletes along with Human Growth Hormone, in the United States and Europe since the beginning of the Bay Area Lab Co-Op in 1984. Among the list of high-profile athletes who had been involved in the BALCO scandal were former professional football player Bill Romanoski and former three- time Gold Medalist Olympian and world champion sprinter Marion Jones. Because the drugs from BALCO were undetectable, Jones had never failed a drug test (Roleff). In a recent interview, Victor Conte told Berkeley journalism student Ian Stewart that current drug tests are more of “IQ-tests” that is, anyone with a decent amount of knowledge and common sense can avoid a positive drug test (Interview: Victor Conte).

Former Major League Baseball player Mark McGuire who, in 1987, broke the single-season home run record for rookies came out and admitted early this year that during the span of his career (1984 to 2002), he too engaged in the use of performance-enhancing drugs. Time and time again, we see the athletes we look up to in sport turn to

steroids to give them a greater edge and recover from injury faster (ESPN). As technology improves itself and more drugs are becoming undetectable, why not simply level the playing field by accepting them in sports? Many sports officials agree that we should simply accept and allow unfettered access to steroids in sports. Proponents argue that these drugs are simply part of the normal evolution of sports, and are comparable to legal performance enhancers such as caffeine and creatine, new and innovative training technologies and improved equipment, and healthier diets. They believe that it is hypocritical of our society to have a “quick fix- mentality” and use medicine and drugs to benefit numerous other physical conditions but condemn them in sports. Critics, however, state that accepting these drugs in sport would confer an unfair advantage and violate the spirit of competition, contributing to a “win at all costs mentality”. Additionally, they believe, it would make athletes bad role models for children and propagate drug use among them, would unfairly alter the historic achievements of former athletes, and would propose numerous health risks. Those who hold this viewpoint push for stronger efforts to detect and stop steroid use.

Perhaps one of the arguments that we often overlook when it comes to debating the rules of allowing or prohibiting steroids in sports is the mere analysis of what sport has been and what we want athletic competitions to look like in the future. Why shouldn't we use the newest forms of technology to truly achieve “greatness”? Would accepting performance enhancing drugs in sport merely raise the level of competition for athletes, or would it ruin the purity and purpose of sport by settling for a quick-fix mentality, instead of the mentality that hard-work pays off? According to Radley Balko,

“Sports is about exploring and stretching the limits of human potential...sports

has never been some wholesome display of physical ability alone.” To add on to this, Sam Shuster questions,

What is the difference between increasing skill and performance by training, and taking drugs? If it is the use of personal effort rather than outside help, then what of ropes, crampons and oxygen for climbing? What of advanced training by teams of sports physiologists who wire athletes to equipment monitoring heart, muscle, brain and nerves to optimize activity; or teams of sports psychologists improving your responses and neutralizing those observed in competitors? What of dieticians tampering with foods and additives - drugs by any other name - to improve performance? What is the difference between training at altitude and taking erythropoietin to achieve a similar effect?

Both Sam Shuster and Radley Balko in their arguments are basically equating steroids with other legalized stimulants, or performance enhancers. However, they fail to address the extent to which these materials genuinely change the nature of the athlete and their abilities. Would allowing these drugs turn athletes in to chemical induced machines instead of disciplined, hard working adults?

On the other end of the spectrum, Timothy Noakes, MD, Professor of Exercise and Sports Science at the University of Capetown, argues that there is a huge difference between steroids and other more subtle forms of performance enhancers. He states,

When used by fully trained, elite athletes, [performance-enhancing] drugs can improve performance to a much greater extent than any combination of the most intensive, sophisticated, and costly nonpharmaceutical interventions known to modern sports science (New England Journal of Medicine).

Noakes indicates that other forms of performance enhancement and training cannot be compared to steroids, because steroids ultimately give an unfair advantage to those who use them. He also mentions that allowing performance-enhancing drugs would separate athletes from natural humans “by a margin determined by the potency of drug combinations they have used”. What strikes me as somewhat ironic in his argument here is that, in all honesty, the vast majority of people are not football players in the NFL or

major league baseball players. The rest of the public, is, in a sense, separated from sports stars and professional athletes because they lack the training, drive, motivation, and most of all, genetic ability to get to the point that the professionals do. According to British essayist Professor Lincoln Allison;

Sport is valuable because it gives everyone the chance to participate and because it allows us to watch and take sides as professionals exhibit those *non-physical* qualities that set them apart from others with possibly the same *physical* characteristics; qualities such as skill, tactical awareness, judgment, courage, vision, risk, assessment and strategic thinking...an athlete who uses performance-enhancing drugs just moves up to the level appropriate to her underlying ability (Roleff).

If those who have attained that level of sport already and have a distinct drive to be the best are not legally allowed to do so, there will inevitably be the emergence of a black market as happened in the Mitchell Report and the Bay Area Lab Co-op. It is also important to note, when taking Noakes's argument into consideration, that as humans, we are not necessarily "natural beings" as he points out. Jose Canesco, former steroid user in Major League baseball reminds us that

We human beings are made up of chemicals...carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, phosphorus, potassium, iodine, nitrogen, sulfur, calcium, and iron. If you can learn about the chemicals that make up life, and study the hormones coursing through our bloodstreams that give our bodies instructions, you can learn how to improve your health through controlled use of steroids. And you can do it safely (Roleff).

We must remind ourselves that this former Major League baseball player did thorough research and detailed searching for information on steroids. He felt the benefits of these drugs in his performance, and continues to be a proponent of steroid use in sports. Although Jose definitely has an interesting point, that we as humans are made up of chemicals and adding a few more doesn't seem like such a bad idea, the problem with the former Major League baseball player and steroid users argument is that, we know that the majority of people, especially kids will not research as much as he will on the subject

matter and will simply read a few articles on steroids and think they are experts. The sound bites that the vast majority of us get, and the intellectual laziness of our culture will merely compel people to experiment with taking pills before doing the extensive research needed to really understand how to use them. Additionally, most of us lack Yale health professionals telling us which drugs are safe to use and to what extent in sport. With misinformation and glimpses of the truth, steroid use among both adults and young athletes may not only skyrocket if they were accepted, but would also be potentially and dangerously abused.

This leads to the question, if steroids are accepted in professional sports, how would children and amateur athletes be affected? According to Greg Schwab,

For many male high school athletes, pro athletes are major influences. They are the role models. Young athletes often believe that steroid use by their role models gives them permission to use. That it is simply part of what one must do to become an elite athlete (ProCon.org).

Although accepting performance-enhancing drugs in sport may send the wrong message to amateur athletes who look up to them, according to Radley Balko,

Survey data actually shows that teen steroid has mirrored the use of other illicit drugs over the years. It went up mildly in the 1990's and since either dropped slightly or leveled off since 2000. It's likely that the same trends that govern cocaine or marijuana use govern teen steroid use far more than what's happening in sports pages. In fact, a study released in 2007... found that the most reliable indicator of steroid use was a teen's own body image and self-esteem (Intelligence Squared Debate).

According to Balko, teenage boys would rather look good for other teenage girls than trying to emulate the looks of Mark McGuire and Barry Bonds. However, this data is obviously from our current culture, which, for the most part, scorns upon drug use in sports. If we adopted a more relaxed attitude towards steroids in athletics, this would obviously change the attitudes of sports spectators and sports amateurs as well. In my

interview with former San Diego High School football player Ryan Ta, he notes;

Although less than 20 percent of my teammates were noticeably using performance enhancing drugs, they were constantly reinforced for it because coaches would reward them for their achievements without scrutinizing the possibility that drugs were helping them (Interview).

Therefore, there is a great risk that steroids would be used more rampantly as attitudes toward the drugs change. Additionally, Balko does not specify the samples that were surveyed in the study released in 2007. We do not know where these teens were demographically, or if they were even athletes at all.

However, if, hypothetically, the public, International Olympic Committee, and World Anti-Doping Agency did adopt more relaxed attitudes and decided to accept the use of drugs in professional sports, why would it be a problem if amateur athletes used them as well? This is where the dimension of the health-risks posed from these steroids needs to be addressed. Is it really, in fact, dangerous to use performance- enhancing drugs? Proponents of allowing access to these drugs argue that there is no clinical proof that steroids will lead to death. However, studies and numerous examples prove differently. Ken Caminiti, an admitted steroid user and abuser and the former Most Valuable Player of the National League, died at the young age of forty. Lyle Alzado, former NFL player died of Brain cancer in May of 1992 after using steroids and human growth hormones for two decades. Professional wrestler Chris Benoit killed his wife and seven-year-old son before committing suicide on June 25, 2007 (Yesalis). It was reported that “Benoit had ten times the normal level of testosterone, an anabolic steroid, in his body at the time, as well as amounts of Xanax and Hydrocodone” (ESPN.com). In addition to these deaths injuries in the game tend to increase as well. During the baseball steroid era between 1992 and 2001, “The number of players on the DL (disabled list) rose

from 352 to 465, a 32% increase. Days spent on DL went from 17,920 to 27,779. Players were also hurt more severely. Days spent on DL per injury increased 55% over that span". Steroid users also are proven to feel the "roid rage" long after they are done using the drugs. According to a recent study at Northeastern University, 100 hamsters were injected with steroids. Long after the steroids were discontinued their "anterior hypothalamus, known to regulate aggression, continued to pump out more of a neurotransmitter called vasopressin, which includes aggression" (Clark). This demonstrates that, the aggression from steroid use, perhaps outlives the benefits as permanent damage is shown in the hamsters brains. A major limitation to these studies is that there is no scientific proof of a link between steroids and these deaths. Although the three men listed who died at very young ages were avid steroid users and perhaps abusers, the steroids were most likely used concurrently with other drugs and there is no telling what substance actually caused their deaths. However, where it gets dicey is the proof that there is such a thing as "roid rage" as shown in the hamster example. Steroids, although they may not cause deaths, do affect athletes' aggressive tendencies, which ultimately lead to violence and in some cases, may result in death.

This brings us to question, if we do allow unfettered access to these potentially unsafe drugs in sport, how would this affect the fan base? Would fans scorn upon the athletes they once looked up to simply because they will use artificial performance – enhancers to give themselves a greater edge? Additionally, would allowing these drugs in sport decrease fan turnout, cooperate sponsorship and revenue? On one side of the spectrum, we remember how exciting it was to watch Mark McGuire, Sammy Sosa, and Barry Bonds chase home run records we once thought were untouchable, fans were

thrilled and wanted to see more and more, regardless of how juiced up the athletes were.

As Carl Thomen reports,

When an inquiry into the Tour de France found widespread use of EPO drugs the supporters didn't care. A full house was present to watch Mark McGuire break Major League Baseball's homerun record, even though it was common knowledge that he used performance enhancer nandrolone. So, if doping does not influence what we really value in sports prowess, and, if as a matter of fact, spectators don't care, then why not allow it? (Thomen).

Mark McGuire's steroid use was not considered "common knowledge" until the end of his career, when he admitted to using androstenedione. In addition to the sympathy Mark McGuire got for his injuries at the end of his career, the use of performance-enhancers was not considered "cheating" to the extent that it is now. The drugs Mark McGuire (and other Major League baseball players) used were prohibited from Major League Baseball as recently as 2004, after the formation of the World Anti Doping Agency at the tail end of the steroid era (1999). Only this year, on January 11, 2010, Mark McGuire fully admitted to the public that he had used performance enhancing drugs on and off for a decade during his baseball career, which he fully regrets. The list of banned substances from the World Anti-Doping agency has grown significantly over the past ten years, as technological improvements have grown. We really do not know how fans would react if this process was reversed and substances which have been condoned in the past decade were allowed and even encouraged in the future. Nicholas J. Dixon, PhD, published in *Journal of Social Philosophy*:

To the extent that the public perceives that a performance-enhancing drug reduces the role of skill and replaces it by chemically induced brute strength and endurance, it is likely to lose interest in the sports in which it is used. It is not that people are not interested in science fairs; it is just that people expect sport to be a different kind of test, one in which athletes' own qualities are the major determinants of success.

Dixon points out that, now that the fans are more knowledgeable of the power of performance-enhancing drugs and the advantage it gives athletes, they will be less likely to support the use of them in sports. However, in my opinion, American culture has literally become so obsessed with watching sports, that the public's disdain on performance enhancing drugs will have a minute, if any, impact on actual fan turnout at professional sport events.

The debate on performance enhancing drugs in sport is ultimately about the athletes themselves and the ethics of sport, not the fans. If the adverse side effects of steroids are not yet one hundred percent proven, would permitting these drugs in sport ruin the beauty of watching athletes achieve goals through hard work and discipline? Would allowing these drugs open up a chemically induced win at all costs mentality, or would it just raise the level of competition to match the athletes true underlying ability? It all comes down to what we want out of sports, and how we think of sportsmanship. Richard Pound, BCL former president of the World Anti-Doping Agency reminds us that athletes take these drugs to get an advantage. He notes,

If everyone else is doing what they're doing, then instead of taking 10 grams or 10 cc's or whatever it is, they'll take 20 or 30 or 40, and a vicious circle simply gets bigger. The end game will be an activity that is increasingly violent, extreme, and meaningless, practiced by a class of chemical and or genetic mutant gladiators. The use of performance-enhancing drugs is not accidental; it is planned and deliberate with the sole objective of getting an unfair advantage (Intelligence Squared Debate).

Is this ultimately what we want from our athletes, do we want machines, or human beings that endure pain and challenge to become better and stronger? As Richard Pound states, if performance-enhancing drugs were allowed in sports, rather than competing with each others skill levels, athletes would instead be competing with each others genetic endurance of chemicals for their bodies. According to the World Anti-Doping Agency,

Anti-doping programs seek to preserve what is intrinsically valuable about sport. This intrinsic value is often referred to as 'the spirit of sport'; it is the essence of Olympism; it is how we play true. The spirit of sport is the celebration of the human spirit, body and mind, and is characterized by the following values: ethics, fair play and honesty, health, excellence in performance, character and education, fun and joy, teamwork, dedication and commitment, respect for rules and laws, respect for self and other participants, courage, community and solidarity. Doping is fundamentally contrary to the spirit of sport (WADA).

The World Anti-Doping agency presents a strong argument against allowing steroids in sports. Throughout history, and even before the prevalence of major performance-enhancers in sport the sole purpose of the game is to embody the true spirit of sport. Sports, as in anything from schools to driving to jobs, have a set of rules. Allowing something so powerful as blood doping and unfettered access to performance enhancers would change the rules of sport in a way that would obstruct everything that the games stand for. Teamwork and sportsmanship, two essential facets of the game, would go out the window as athletes would become more aggressive and more intrigued with the manipulation of chemicals rather than the true nature of training to improve themselves. As noted earlier, performance enhancers will always be used in sports through training equipment and substances like caffeine, but allowing the use of steroids may be taking it a bit too far. To save the spirit of sports, and save amateur athletes from drug abuse, we should continue to channel our funding to enact greater drug tests and ban steroids in competitive sport. As Joe Lindsay sums it up, "there is an implicit contract that the sweat and effort we see before us is real and natural. Do you want to see who's the best athlete, or just who had the best access to pharmaceutical enhancement?"

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