

Drugs in Sports: Are They Here to Stay?

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By Dr. Derek Conte

The world watched, in 2012, as a grimacing Lance Armstrong, 7-time Tour De France winner, admitted that he used many forms of Performance Enhancing Drugs (PED's) in competition, but he never tested positive once during his long cycling career and had, for years before that moment, proclaimed his innocence.

Milwaukee Brewer, Ryan Braun, the 2011 National League Most Valuable Player, was suspended by Major League Baseball for 65 games last month for using PED's. No mention of a positive test was made. Braun offered no resistance and accepted the suspension quietly, and evasively, though he had argued vehemently of his innocence when he tested positive for PED's in 2011.

Angel Heredia, a much-sought-after designer of PED's, was caught red-handed by the Feds and saved his own neck by testifying to expose the widespread use of drugs in sports in the post-BALCO era (remember Barry Bonds and Victor Conte?). In an interview with Germany's Der Spiegel magazine in 2008, Heredia said that all eight finalists in the 2008 Olympic 100 meter dash would be on drugs. No exceptions. He should know. He had helped twelve athletes win 26 Olympic and 21 World Championship medals, Marion Jones among them. A top PED alchemist, Heredia bragged about having 20 different PED concoctions that were totally invisible to any test.

The current menu of PED's include steroids such as Testosterone (T) or a precursor thereof, Human Growth Hormone (HGH), Erythropoietin (EPO), Amphetamines, Growth Factors and blood-doping (the re-injection of previously drawn blood), among others. PED's enhance lean muscle mass, makes more oxygen available for use and also allows for quicker recovery time after intense training which, among elite athletes, literally tears down the body tissues.

For maximum effect, PED's must be taken routinely and be timed with each particular phase of training. The trick the athlete's learned was to stop taking them long enough (weeks or months) in advance of the estimated testing times for the drugs to dissipate but still convey lasting benefits. In addition, a masking agent can be taken to "hide" residual drugs onboard. But this comes at a cost. Heredia said he offered a PED for every price point: ranging from a few thousand to one-hundred thousand dollars for the best, most invisible creations --- so testing positive would seem to indicate an athlete's carelessness or relative poverty.

It's a mixological race between the testers and the chemists who sell these steroid cocktails --- and the chemists are way ahead. They enjoy a great advantage because they have many moles in the research field who, for money, update them on what the testers are up to. The testers

are so far behind that the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA), which tests Olympic athletes, cyclists and pro boxers, had to use the latest tests on 7-year-old blood samples from Lance Armstrong to finally get a positive on him. But USADA has shown enormous inconsistency in its reporting of positive tests. While USADA crucified Armstrong years after the fact, it failed to report four different positive tests in real time from superstar boxer Floyd “Money” Mayweather to the Nevada State Athletic Commission. This prevented the testing of second samples which, if also found positive, would have resulted in serious sanctions. Mayweather’s powerful promoter, Golden Boy Productions seems to have some special juice with USADA (see: Thomas Hauser, BOXING’S PED MESS pts 1&2).

With the cooperation of a few well-positioned doctors and officials, the game is virtually clocked. This is why Armstrong and countless other athletes feel they’ll never get caught and, with hundreds of millions of dollars available to the best of the best, the risk is irresistible. For example, while Ryan Braun will lose 3 million dollars in pay during his suspension, he will still collect over one-hundred million over the lifetime of his guaranteed contract.

With billions of dollars being thrown at jocks by the team owners, promoters and sneaker companies, doping will not be easily controlled. Athletes are posed with the question: “If everyone on top is doing it why shouldn’t I get mine?”

From the 1950’s, Eastern Bloc countries used steroids to improve athletic performance in competition. Some of us remember them winning medals out of all proportion to their numbers. In the early 80’s PED’s appeared in Baseball and home runs started coming in big numbers from historically light hitters, but baseball looked the other way. Things peaked in 1998 when, not one, but two men broke Roger Maris’ record of 61 homers with totals of 70 and 66. Soon after, a player whose muscles swelled in one season hit 73. Now baseball is waking up, but the NFL and the NBA are still unconscious.

The unrelenting news of sports stars of all stripes caught with their pants down and a needle in their butts has been wearing heavily on weary public. According to Angel Heredia, the only way to wipe out PED’s in sports would require year-round random testing of each athlete twice a week, and that would virtually require a new agency of government involving tremendous amounts of personnel and money. Emotionally, we may want some retribution, but the fans may have fed the monster. Perhaps the best, and least likely, way to de-incentivize PED use might be for us to stop shelling out all that money for sports cable TV packages, Pay-Per-Views, ridiculously expensive game tickets and all those sneakers, hats and jerseys for ourselves and the kids. The will necessary to carry that out is, and always was, ours to exercise.

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