

Performance-Enhancement and the Future by Steve Courson

Statement to:
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Committee on Government Reform
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Introduction

Esteemed members of Congress, representatives of the press, citizens and NFL personnel we are all here discussing a very unpleasant reality of modern sport. I come to you experiencing a unique perspective in this dilemma. I was a member of arguably one of the greatest teams in NFL history, a lineman, a strength athlete, Super Bowl Champion, admitted former steroid user, former high school coach and finally one who has given hundreds of prevention education programs in schools dealing with performance-enhancing drugs. I have been literally in the trenches as a user and as an educator who has observed the teen age situation first hand. The predicament with these various substances is not just an issue with the NFL but all sports and society as a whole. I believe more than anything it is reflective of the negative realities of modern training combined with the current intensity of competition.

This dilemma has spread to our high schools and junior high schools, it was essentially spawned out of a combination of competitive zeal, advancing science and societal ignorance. I commend President Bush with bringing this issue to the attention of the American people with his comments in his 2004 State of the Union Address. Pressure to win should not be a foreign emotion to any politician here, for you have faced the intensity of elections.

Experiencing the emotional trauma of a life threatening disease, dilated cardiomyopathy is a humbling experience. This fact was greatly amplified when previously I was an elite athlete. My illness and miraculous recovery has led me to contemplate these issues deeper than most. When I first started seeing heart symptoms in 1985 and was suspicious of their potential relationship with anabolic steroids, perhaps the scariest part was recognizing how little the medical community knew about these drugs. Today we still don't know whether my illness or the late Raider great Lyle Alzado's T-Cell lymphoma was related to the use of anabolic hormones because of the lack of definitive long-term longitudinal research. I do believe that higher body weights assisted by the use of drugs do create greater vital organ risk factors. Personally, the recovery effects the drugs had on my enhanced ability to train were the most addicting aspect of their use. The lack of research becomes increasingly more precarious for society in general as human growth hormone (HGH) and testosterone now are being promoted as the new "fountain of youth" in hormone replacement anti-aging therapy in clinics nationwide.

The short-term male hormone side effects of these drugs are well documented as well as the greater risks associated with adolescent use. Performance-enhancing drug use is as inappropriate for teenagers as any recreational drug of abuse. Current estimates range from 1/2 to one million adolescent users, one study estimated close to 80,000 eighth graders. The irony of young people using these drugs is that their bodies are geared for growth naturally without them. Using improperly at a young age training wise is as potentially negative to physical development as introducing extremely heavy weight training to a bone structure still growing. This can only be counterproductive.

History

Anabolic steroids systemically had their first known historical emergence with the world dominant Soviet Olympic Weightlifting teams of the 1950's. As the story goes the Soviet team physician and the

United States team physician Dr. John Ziegler were having dinner and drinks after the world weightlifting championships in Vienna in 1954. Apparently the Soviet team doctor got tipsy and spilled the beans that the Soviets were using testosterone in their weight lifters. This prompted Ziegler to work with the Ciba pharmaceutical company and our weight lifters, many who trained in York, PA. He helped create the oral anabolic steroid Dianabol, in 1958. Pandora's Box was now opened and by 1963 the drugs had spread to professional football. The San Diego Chargers hired the first strength coach in professional football, Alvin Roy. Mr. Roy had worked with the U.S. Olympic Weight Lifting team and understood the effectiveness of Dianabol. He later worked with the Chiefs, Cowboys and Raiders while passing in 1979.

Essentially this type of drug use was not viewed as cheating. By the 1970's, it is safe to say that the "diffusion of innovation" with anabolic steroids had spread to a certain degree to every NFL team. However, strength athletes across the sports spectrum were soon to realize the effectiveness of various anabolic hormones combined with proper diet and training. Pressure to win, medical ignorance and man's never ending search to enhance training played a crucial role. The NFL, at this time under commissioner Pete Rozelle had no enforced policy so NFL players and coaches became victims of the times. By the 1980's the use of anabolic hormones was widespread and the NFL responded by starting announced testing in 1987. Steroid use officially became cheating in the NFL in 1989 when punitive testing began with fines and suspensions imposed with those who violated the league's substance abuse policy. In 1989, NFL players such as Bill Fralic approached commissioner Tagliabue wanting random testing to be instituted to hopefully level the playing field. Commissioner Tagliabue responded favorably by initiating a random testing program tougher than any other professional team sport in the United States. However, is it enough?

The BALCO Investigation has been informative in evaporating some of the existing myth's surrounding drug use in elite sport. It is often been stated that only "a few bad apples" are using performance-enhancing substances. Yet, the allegations in BALCO involve some of the world's best athletes from across the sports spectrum. The significance of the threat that "designer steroids" present to modern testing technology has also been a product of the scandal. New evidence reported by a CBS 60 Minutes telecast involving the Carolina Panthers also reflect testing loopholes. Human growth hormone (HGH) and testosterone in low doses have long been a strategy used by athletes in many sports to avoid detection. In training for power, strength and size it is common knowledge that HGH works better when used with an androgen and testosterone is most definitely an androgen.

In 1989, prior to the beginning of random testing in the NFL there were 27 NFL players that weighed in excess to 300 lbs. In 2004, after 14 years of random testing, there were 350 NFL players that weigh in excess of 300 lbs. I don't believe for one second that every NFL player in excess of 300 lbs. is a product of modern chemistry, but the NFL is a business that highly values bigger, stronger and faster. Combine these facts with the knowledge that resistance training and dietary methods have not made significant scientific advances corresponding to the escalating sizes reflect potential prevalence of use. We will never because of both institutional and individual denial know percentages to the extent of steroid use in football. Again, intense competition is the catalyst for escalating size. One also cannot be oblivious to the fatal flaws in current testing technology. The NFL may want to consider taking advantage of the expertise of the U.S. Anti-Doping Commission to assist them in addressing the ever evolving challenges of drug detection. Regardless, whether this size is created naturally or unnaturally still presents health risk issues for players during and after football.

Gene Upshaw once stated during 1989 Senate Hearings, "Anabolic steroid use is an institutional phenomenon in football. By that I mean the impetus for steroid use most often has come from sports management, i.e. coaches, owners, and others who urge 'bigger and stronger is better'" Gene is correct, but incomplete in his assumption. For the "others" that he mentioned reflect a society that has not addressed its own addictions to increased performance and winning. This is also the same society that is enamored with "instant gratification" and the quick fix. For our dilemma with performance-enhancing drugs is beyond individual and institutional, it is societal. This is best illustrated by the large numbers of male and female users in gym's who do not compete in athletics and enhance their training with anabolic drugs based primarily on vanity and insecurity.

My biggest criticism of current NFL drug policy is its handling of amphetamines. The only effective way to test for them is to do periodic post game testing. This to my knowledge is not being done. Most drug experts consider the health risks of amphetamines greater than those associated with steroid use.

The history of doping reflects some startling parallels between elite sport and society. The Greeks of history in the ancient Olympics had performance-enhancing drugs. Primitive by today's standards they used wine mixed with strychnine and hallucinogenic mushrooms. That was the extent of their bio-medical technology. We first saw the emergence of stimulents, in the 1900's glandular products, the 1950's brought anabolic steroids and finally in the 1980's steroids combined with human growth hormone. The pattern has been unmistakable, the elite athletic fields have mirrored to varying degrees the bio-medical technology of the age. Now, we face the most de-humanizing challenge yet, genetic engineering. This technology could well represent sports Armageddon and I strongly urge all sporting federations and the NFL to be vigilant of the potential dangers that could negatively threaten the face and the economics of your industry.

The NFL, more than any sport in America captures the attention of the American public. The NFL has a long and storied history and satisfies vital social, economic and psychological needs for this country. In Pittsburgh, when the Steelers play the entire city is buzzing. You can't walk down the street without seeing a sea of Black and Gold. Restaurant and bar owners, hotel owners, street vendors, various shops all depend upon NFL revenue. Yet, the NFL must not forget its fans, must not forget those players and coaches who have struggled in the past to make it what it is both financially and image wise today. Competition is the life-blood of capitalism, which is part of what makes this country great and is essential in creating profitable business. The NFL is a dangerous work place, but that is part of its allure for fans and players alike. Congressman Bunning stated at the baseball hearings on how baseball was America's game, in that same light is not football also America's game? Where football is certainly a game for everyone to watch it is not one for everyone to play.

Adolescent Use

It is very concerning when high school coaches, parents and administrators reflect denial about a drug situation that national health statistics reveal as alarming. What kind of leaders are they? Unfortunately we as a society base the hiring and firing of coaches even in high school on primarily winning and losing. This reflects the "win at all costs" mentality of elite sport. This may be appropriate when big money is at stake, but is it elsewhere? This mentality in youth sport needs to change. How can coaches teach valuable lessons about preparing youth for life when their value is based only on wins and losses? It is not just our youth that are receiving mixed messages from big time sport, but our coaches and parents as well. We as a society in this age can ill-afford these misguided philosophical messages of winning regardless of the costs to dominate our youth sports landscape. More than anything we need to bring youth sports back into perspective as a "training camp" for life. Where this may not be a realistic philosophy in an environment of adult big time sport, big money and big business entertainment, it is imperative for our youth. Teaching the intrinsic values of sport should be the number one goal and placing them on a pedestal above winning. Sport teaches invaluable lessons in the game of life. Learning how to prepare for success, developing an intense work ethic, recognizing the importance of teamwork and last but not least learning not to quit when things get tough, these all are useful tools in the game of life.

All of these values were instrumental in me defeating a life threatening illness and I understand their worth all too well. Today, my experiences have led me to teach advanced dietary and exercise strategies geared at overweight adults and children.

Solution

It is easy to point out the problems but what about finding solutions. Starting with our youth, educational prevention programs are important but are not a panacea. School districts are pondering drug testing, but can we afford the cost? In my home state of Pennsylvania they are implementing body mass index (BMI) ratings of all students in our battle against childhood obesity. Body mass index is kg/m² and is a measurement of weight in ratio to height. One strategy would be to educate school nurses and officials on what might be the telltale signs of anabolic drug abuse in a radical change in BMI primarily in lean mass

along with other symptoms that may be red flag. These signals could be followed up with limited testing and then if needed medical evaluation and treatment. This would lessen the prohibitive costs of “across the board” drug testing while lessening the overall invasiveness of interdiction efforts. Recently, I spoke with my scientific mentor in this area Dr. Charles Yesalis of Penn State. He mentioned how he would be willing together with other experts to draw up a “profiling” prototype to be used to teach school nurses and medical officials as a preliminary evaluation tool. This could help school medical officials identify potential students at risk and funnel them to appropriate medical attention or discipline. This would be a way to use an existing medical evaluation in our fight against obesity to help contain another issue of risky adolescent behavior.

Philosophically, I have never been a huge believer in “big government” being over-involved in private business or “invasive testing.” However, used judiciously for the right reasons as a safety net for a public health issue involving children I believe such government actions are both appropriate and required for the general public’s best interests. I would strongly suggest the adoption of a national school steroid policy combined with preventative legislation prohibiting non-medical genetic engineering and gene doping .

Obviously, funding for research for both long-term health effects and to improve drug detection technology are a basic need in strategies of containment or eradication. I would support the idea that the athletic federations themselves should assist in financially helping to clean their own mess. Ultimately, the reality facing us is that how we now shall proceed will determine the sports/social environment of our future. Are we willing to embrace these challenges, how much do we care about preserving the joy of sport for our youth and what is the price of business?

Sincerely,

Stephen P. Courson