

What is Wrong with Using Steroids?

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What is wrong with using steroids? Books have been written, congressional hearings held—and now an internal investigation by Major League Baseball has been undertaken—all to establish who used them. We've endured an encyclopedia's worth of editorial comment and volumes of chastising oratory attacking the integrity and character of suspected "cheaters". But there has been astonishingly little discussion of this basic question. Much has been assumed. And little of that stands up to scrutiny.

Steroids are commonly referred to as performance-enhancing drugs, as if this establishes that they deserve our disapproval. But it can't be the performance-enhancing qualities of steroids that make their use wrong. We believe, generally, that enhancing one's performance is good. Disciplined training, scientifically designed diets, vitamins, pain relievers, good coaching, state of the art training facilities, and so forth, all improve athletic performance. Caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, No-Doz, Viagra, antibiotics and the like enhance other types of performance. We do not normally object to the proper use of any of these. Notice that this also shows that it can't be the mere fact that steroids are drugs that make their use wrong.

But isn't steroid use cheating? After all, users get an unfair advantage. They are taking a short cut. This complaint springs from a misunderstanding of how steroids work and how much they help. If you started taking steroids but never exercised, you would get no noticeable benefits from their use. What steroids do is enhance the affects of working hard, allow longer exercise periods, and reduce the recovery time necessary between workouts. What is wrong with a product that allows people to work more efficiently, more frequently, for longer periods of time? Do you deserve less credit for your successes because you attained them while on caffeine? You still had to do the work, right? Steroids simply are not the short cut they are often assumed to be.

Nor is it clear how much of an advantage they provide, especially in baseball. Mark McGwire hit 49 home runs as a rookie. Barry Bonds was capable of hitting a ball 450 feet when he was a skinny kid in Pittsburgh. No one thinks they were using steroids then. Steroid foes often point to the explosion of home runs and the fall of age-old power-hitting records that occurred in the late 1990s when steroid use was at its alleged height. Fair enough, but one must also take into account the dilution of pitching, the juiced ball and the smaller ballparks. And how much of the improved performances of McGwire and Bonds must be attributed to the fact they honed their skills as they got older? Anyone who has watched Bonds over the last dozen years has

seen how he has systematically removed wasted motion from his swing and mastered the strike zone. Considering these other factors, how much did steroids do?

Perhaps the concern about cheating is this: Steroid use is against the rules. Ignoring the fact that they were not against baseball's rules until recently, the question remains, "why should they be against the rules?" The answer better not be, "Because it's wrong to use them"; that simply begs the question. Presumably steroid use should be against the rules if there is a moral objection to using them. This must be demonstrated, not assumed. If there is no moral difference between the use of steroids and the use of pain relievers, then it is arbitrary to consider one cheating but not the other. Nor does it help to argue that steroid use is cheating because it is against the law, since the same question applies: why should steroids be illegal if their use is not morally objectionable?

Often, anti-steroid commentators appeal to the dangers of steroid use. This does provide a moral basis for arguing that their use is wrong. However one feels about the government protecting people from harming themselves, there is a legitimate concern that individuals who use steroids coerce others into using them in order to compete. People should not have to expose themselves to undue risks in order to enjoy the benefits (financial or otherwise) of competition.

Notice that this claim against the behavior of others does not apply to most types of performance enhancement. I will get no sympathy, nor deserve any, if I claim that my opponent's workout schedule forces me to work harder. I can't legitimately complain that competitors who eat a healthy diet wrongly force me to give up cheese burgers. We are only concerned when one's behavior forces harm on another. So if steroids do not cause significant, long-term harm, this argument loses its force.

And there is scant scientific evidence that they do. In a 2004 literature review of steroid studies in the American Journal of Sports Medicine entitled, "Current Concepts in Anabolic-Androgenic Steroids", Nick Evans of UCLA says of steroid use, "Serious health problems are rare, and the more common adverse side effects are benign and reversible." The assumption by virtually everyone that steroids are dangerous is based on anecdotal evidence. We all have heard about Lyle Alzado and Ken Caminiti. We've seen the heart-felt and heart-rending testimony of the parents of suicides during the congressional hearings. There is a common sense feeling that steroids must be harmful in some way, but these stories and feelings by themselves do not establish a causal connection between steroid use and ill physical and psychological health.

Athletes who abuse steroids often abuse other drugs as well, making it difficult to know the effects of steroids alone. Who knows what else Alzado and Caminiti did to themselves? What dosages did they use and with what frequency? What other drugs did they take? In any case, a few tragic stories do little more than confirm our steroid biases. Studies under controlled, objective circumstances do not show that steroid use causes long-term harm.

Nor do we know whether steroid use leads to suicide. It is possible that the psychological states that incline one to end his or her life also lead to drug use, steroids included, in order to alter those states. Many users suffer from low self-esteem and poor body image. Unfortunately, some people with low self-esteem kill themselves. Would they have done so whether they used steroids or not? Possibly so. Steroids produce documented psychological side effects, including increased aggression and euphoria, but these do not connect steroids to suicide nor do they seem to justify banning their use.

Anabolic steroids have legitimate medical uses and, in pharmacological doses, have been shown to be safe. Of course, athletes sometimes take suprapharmacological doses. We do not know what level of use will eventually cause problems. Surely some level will. Just about anything can cause harm if abused, including aspirin, water, kitchen knives, lawn mowers and bridges. But we don't make these illegal or judge their use immoral simply because they can be abused. If there is a safe way to use steroids, why would we object to people using them in that way?

There is always the concern that children will be adversely affected, either because legalizing steroids will make them more available and/or kids will be influenced to use them if sports heroes do. The first consequence is not likely to occur. Steroids are already available to any kid who wants them. In fact, keeping them illegal guarantees a healthy black market. By legalizing and regulating steroids, distribution will be more closely monitored and the drugs themselves will be safer. Regarding the "role model" concern, the best way to combat the influence of athletes on kids is education. Tell kids what we know about steroids and, when they reach adulthood, let them make their own decision. Teach them that the possession of great athletic gifts does not guarantee good character. Treat steroids like we treat nicotine and alcohol; we don't recommend their use but we respect your right to use them.

It's interesting to note that Congress seemed quite concerned about kids when the issue was the suspected use of steroids by some vague percentage of baseball players. They do not seem at all concerned about the beer advertising children are bombarded with during every sports program on the air. You can see plenty of ballplayers using nicotine on your television, and yet no one's calling for a federal investigation. And why does auto racing get a free pass on its tobacco sponsorships? Nicotine and alcohol do far more damage to America's children than steroids. Whatever is driving the steroid issue in Washington, it certainly isn't the wellbeing of our children.

Recently, the anti-steroid contingent has been trumpeting the sanctity of baseball's cherished records. They call for everything from asterisks to banishment from the record book. Steroids must be banned, they say, to protect the integrity of the game's sacred history. What they ignore of course is that each baseball era has produced its relative advantages and disadvantages. As a few recent commentators have noted, Babe Ruth had a great advantage because he did not have to play against the

best players in the country. Neither did Joe DiMaggio when he hit in 56 straight games, nor did Ted Williams when he hit .400. Segregation kept the depth of talent in the major leagues artificially low. Would their numbers be the same with the likes of Satchel Page, Judy Johnson or Cool Papa Bell running down line drives, throwing wicked breaking balls or back-handing grounders in the hole. And does anyone think that pitching records set before the mound was lowered are tainted? Are records established when amphetamines were popular tarnished? The concern here seems rather selective. Any of these conditions is at least as advantageous to players as steroids are.

So what is wrong with using steroids? A lot of damage has been done to the personal and professional reputations of athletes during the Great Steroid Panic. With so much at stake, there is a burden of proof on those who are critical to show that they are right to be so. But they have shirked this duty. There may well be reasons for thinking that steroid use is wrong, but no convincing arguments have yet been put forth. It is reasonable to expect that these arguments will be forthcoming. If they are not, then apologies should be.