

Cheating and taking steroids in sports



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INTRODUCTION

“ Sports will either be a school of virtue or a school of vice, and that’s why the epidemic of cheating in professional sports is, and ought to be, a huge cultural concern.

Sports, at every level, is supposed to be a training ground for virtue, to mould the character of athletes, coaches and supporters so that they may learn lessons that may help them to achieve off-the-field as much as on. In few other venues are people able to learn as effectively the good habits of perseverance through difficulties, teamwork, striving to overcome obstacles, the importance of preparation and practice, and the courtesy and class we call good sportsmanship.

But the field, court, track, diamond, rink, pool and roadway can also cultivate vice, when results become more important than virtue, when winning becomes more important than winning fairly.

It has been hard to open a sports page recently without reading something to do with cheating and its consequences. Recently encountered readings include Bill Belichick and the clear contravention of the NFL’s videotaping policy; Patriots’ Safety Rodney Harrison and his suspension for taking an illegal substances; NBA referee Tim Donaghy and his expulsion for betting on games he was officiating; Barry Bonds and his tainted home run record, along with former heroes turned synthetic pseudo-supermen Jason Giambi, Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa, Rafael Palmeiro; Floyd Landis’ suspect yellow jersey and the expulsion of what seemed to be half this year’s Tour de France participants for blood doping and other violations; WWE icon Chris

Benoit and his steroid-induced murderous-suicidal rage; various college recruiting violations, Olympic scandals and much more. Professional boxing almost looks clean and honest by comparison.

WHY DO THEY CHEAT

Sports are a microcosm and stylization of life: goal-setting, preparation, effort, character, the integration of mind and body, competition, success and failure. It's all there in sports, distilled and intensified into a few hours' experience.

The usual answer is that cheaters have so strong a desire to win that they will strive to do so at all costs. Cheaters do have a desire to win, but by the time we are adults we know that a cheated victory is hollow. An adult cheater knows that he has not won through skill and effort, and he knows he will not experience the pride that comes from a genuine win. The only thing the cheater is left with is that he knows that other people will believe that he won and he will reap the value of their enhanced esteem.

So here's a hypothesis about the psychology of cheaters: Cheating is not motivated by a desire to win, but by wanting to be thought of by others as having won. Cheating is a kind of social metaphysics-what others believe is true is more important than what is actually true.

Another possibility is that the cheater knows the above-that a cheated win is hollow-but in the short run his intense desire to win crowds out his knowledge. So cheating is a failure to hold the context of why one is playing sports: strong desire overwhelms the cheater's knowledge, or through weakness of will the cheater ignores his knowledge to indulge the desire.

Cheating in a financial context: You cheat not because you want the win but because you want the money that comes with the win

Cheating in a social context: You cheat because you don't want your teammates to lose or because you want your teammates to have the win they want

Con-man cheating: You cheat just for the pleasure of pulling off a scam

Cheating that is malevolent: You want to see your opponent suffer a loss, so you don't care that the win is hollow-you enjoy knowing the other guy is hurting and/or that you deprived him of the experience of winning

WHAT ARE STEROIDS

Steroids are manufactured testosterone-like drugs that are usually taken to build muscle, enhance performance, and improve appearance. While some steroids are used medically to treat many conditions including asthma, chronic lung disease, skin conditions and allergic reactions such as poison ivy, non medical use of steroids can have serious side effects. Using steroids for cosmetic or athletic purposes is not sanctioned in the United States.

Method of Use

Swallowed in tablets or liquid or injected. Users take them in patterns called "cycling", which means they take them over a specific period of time, stop, and then start taking them again instead of continuously using them. Many users also take different types of steroids in combination with other drugs. This is known as "stacking".

Signs and Symptoms of Steroid Use

Steroid abusers often exhibit the following symptoms:

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- Rapid weight gain
- Rapid muscle development
- Acne flare up
- Fluid retention
- Yellow tint in the eyes and on skin (jaundice)
- Mood swings, depression
- Aggressive behaviour
- Premature balding

Drug Test Detection

Oral steroids can be found in your system up to several weeks after use.

Injected steroids can be found for several months after use.

Short-term Consequences

Use of steroids can increase muscle mass, strength, and endurance, but can also cause liver tumors, jaundice, water retention, and high blood pressure.

Some users show bad judgment because the drugs make them feel invincible. Other users suffer from uncontrolled aggression and violent behavior called “Roid Rage”, severe mood swings, manic episodes and depression. They often suffer from paranoid jealousy, extreme irritability and can have delusions.

Long-Term Consequences

When the body experiences a build up of steroids in its system, conditions such as hypertension, high cholesterol, kidney disease, stunted growth, and heart damage are likely to occur. Women can experience irreversible deepening of the voice, shrinking of the breasts, menstrual irregularities,

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baldness and hair growth on other parts of the body, and genital swelling. Men can experience baldness, breast enlargement, sterility, shrinking of testicles and impotence. Steroids such as prednisone and other synthetic steroids can cause a rise in blood sugar by blocking the effect of insulin. Over time, users can develop diabetes.

WHY TAKING STEROIDS CONSIDERED CHEATING

Steroids give some players an unfair competitive advantage over others. But this response stems from the faulty underlying assumption that players have some “innate” ability or talent which is not dependent upon their environment. In fact, the only way steroids are different from other performance enhancers like protein shakes or nutritional supplements is because their side effects are worse and their performance enhancing effects are large. This efficacy, and the “steroid body” that goes with it, triggers fans’ pharmacological Calvinism, the belief that taking a pill for any reason is bad, and leads to the media labelling the steroid culture and users as alien, which are the factors that truly keep steroids on the wrong side of public opinion and MLB policy.

The first and most basic reason people view steroids as cheating is because they feel it gives players abilities that they otherwise would not have had. This is the position of every poll or article researched for this essay in the national sports media over the last four years. Again, the signs displayed in Philadelphia are representative. One 60-foot long sign said “Babe Ruth did it on Hotdogs and Beer. Aaron did it with class. How did you do it?” This question rests on the assumption that Bonds’ steroid use differentiates him from Aaron and Ruth, who set career home run records without steroids.

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But to simply say steroids enhances players' performance is easy. The deeper question behind that answer is "Why does that matter?" That question involves a number of different aspects of what it means to be a baseball fan. First among them, perhaps, is the notion of fairness. The US culture in general holds fairness as one of its central tenets, as part of the Puritan Work ethic and the capitalist ideal: everyone must deal fairly, so everyone has their shot to succeed if they work hard enough. That ideal is held to as strongly in baseball as any other sport. The problem with steroids, then, is not just that users have an unfair advantage over non-users. Widespread steroid use limits the free choice of non-users, because if they want to make a living they are almost forced to start taking injections, and having to deal with the side effects. This is called "free choice under pressure" by Thomas Murray (as reported by Peter Kramer).

There's no question, then, that the more players use steroids, the harder it is for others to stay clean. What are the implications of that for players, and what are players' responses? At the physical level, this spiral of steroids forces players to endure the side effects of steroids when they otherwise might not. At the level of consciousness, players have their free choice limited by steroid-fuelled competition, and free choice is also something this country values. Players respond to these concerns by claiming that steroid use supports American values. For example, a value much appreciated in sports is the desire to win above all else. Players that have that desire, like Michael Jordan in basketball, are often revered. So a baseball player might argue that he simply wants to win at all cost, even sacrificing his body to

steroids to win. Just because another, non-user does not want to win enough to take steroids, that doesn't mean the user should be punished for it.

There are other problems with the argument that using steroids is cheating because they give a competitive advantage. The biggest fault with it is that steroids are not the only thing in baseball that gives a competitive advantage when there was none before. Revenue and payroll differences and environmental factors like the skill of the training staff and the quality of the facilities can cause "unfair" competitive advantages between teams and players as well, but those discrepancies are considered part of the game. The responses to this argument are that taking a substance is fundamentally different from working out more or on better facilities because you do not have to work as hard to get the same results as someone not on steroids. But some players use a good diet to get into better shape, or take legal supplements to make their workouts more effective. This is exactly the way steroids work - they help to build muscle faster in conjunction with exercise and weightlifting, so those that work out the most are going to get the most out of steroids. Should the MLB disallow all possible supplements and mandate player diet and workout regimens to eliminate the possible advantage? Ultimately, you cannot justify getting rid of steroids because they give a competitive advantage, because baseball operates by identifying and using competitive advantages.

Despite the arguments above, most people would remain convinced that taking steroids was cheating. There are three primary reasons:

One is the notion of pharmacological Calvinism, two is the influence of the press on public perception of steroids, and three is the labelling of drugs in general and those who take them as alien. These are the real reasons that taking steroids in baseball is considered cheating today.

Pharmacological Calvinism is the belief that taking a pill or drug is morally wrong, because hard work, suffering and pain are essential parts of human existence. The concept figures prominently in Kramer's discussion of Prozac as a way of explaining the public's response to the drug, and the same can be said of fans and baseball players. This phenomenon can be seen in baseball lingo: someone who is clean is someone who is off steroids. This terminology might come from the MLB policies, but it probably comes from larger drug culture, and reflects the idea that even though it is tough to argue against steroids ideologically, there is still a taint to taking steroids, the sense that a player who takes them has lost some purity they might have off steroids. This also might be why players like Jose Canseco are ridiculed and reviled when they talk about steroids being the standard throughout the league: they are deliberately taking a stance against pharmacological Calvinism, and so automatically people hearing them want to reject the idea without listening to their analysis, which often is more logical than people care to admit.

Another effect of pharmacological Calvinism is that news reporters looking to cover steroids automatically assume a negative stance towards them, although that is also influenced by the dangerous side effects. Sports journalism is very pervasive. Every fan has to get their scores and results from somewhere, often on a daily basis. Sports fans also tend to spend a lot

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of time discussing sports, so ideas and opinions they read get discussed and argued about in their social circle.

The final reason steroids are considered cheating is because they work so well. And because they work so well, and so many ballplayers used them, the build of a user, his problems and habits, became commonly known and looked for. What is more, because of the negative press steroids got, fans were able to label them an other to dismiss steroids users as people holding alien values without really looking or considering how they might be motivated by the same things as regular fans. This can be shown by the massive amount of jokes about big heads, small balls, a common side effect of steroid use, and the vehemence of the national polls quoted earlier. For fans to say that anyone testing positive should be thrown out of the sport is quite harsh, considering that there are arrests of ballplayers all the time for a variety of other drug use charges and crime, and none of them are thrown out on the first offense. Something that might help explain this position is the legitimate use of steroids. Steroids are not like nutritional supplements of protein shakes that people might regularly take to get in shape, and they are not petty crimes or drug charges that baseball fans are familiar with or have committed themselves. They are treatments for sick people to help survive treatment, including treatment of diseases like AIDS, which already is somewhat marginalized in mainstream culture. And even in those diseases, steroids are something to avoid if you can. So that makes purposeful steroid users in sports all the more alien.

Ultimately, the reason why taking steroids is considered cheating goes back to the chemical properties of steroids themselves: they work too well at

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helping athletes build muscle, and combined with the country's pharmacological Calvinism, make for bad press and public perception. This leads fans to consider steroids cheating and justify it by saying steroids give an unfair competitive advantage, when the entire sport of baseball is built on just such advantages. If steroids were less useful, like nutritional supplements today, they would probably be legal, widely used, and just another part of the game, like spitting sunflower seeds. Unfortunately, because of the pressure on athletes who will do anything to succeed, steroids are only going to get more powerful and hard to detect, rather than more benign and legal. But that doesn't mean the steroid scandal won't go away. Already, journalists are trumpeting this baseball season as the post-steroid era. If history is any indication, people will think steroids solved, stop caring, only to be shocked again when the next great and popular surge of offense turns out to be the result of their beloved players using the next generation of performance enhancers.

CONCLUSION

The recent epidemic of cheating in sports reveals ethical and anthropological dimensions that must be considered if we wish as a culture to eliminate it.

The ethical dimensions go far beyond the violation of a particular rule governing a sports league. It goes to one of the bedrock principles of ethics, whether in sports players, coaches and fans believe that a good end never justifies immoral means. In the cases of cheating above, we see that the cheaters think that the end of winning – or doing better in competition – validates the dishonest means one takes to get there. There are now such

enormous financial rewards or losses hinging on sports outcomes that those of lesser character find far greater incentive.

The anthropological dimension refers mainly to the means one takes in violation of the ethical principle. Sports cheating today very often involve technological manipulation not just of the rules of the game - like with the Patriots' spy gate - but also of oneself through performance-enhancing drugs. In former days the path to improvement came through practice, coaching, exercise and experience. Now for many it comes through injections, pills and creams. Rather than improving one's skills, one seeks to make himself "better, stronger and faster" through technology - like a modern six million dollar man, or, if you consider the financial incentives for many pro-athletes, a hundred million dollar man. This comes at a huge cost. The death of pro-football player Lyle Alzado and 11 recent professional wrestlers through steroid use is enough of a warning. But we also have to be conscious of the huge temptation it places on all those who, at whatever age, wish to be successful college or professional athletes who cannot compete on their own with artificially-enhanced peers".

References:

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