

Hypermasculinity and sports

[Health & Medicine](#), [Drugs](#)



Varda Burstyn provides great insight on hypermasculinity and modern sport in her book, *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics and the Culture of Sports*. In this book, Burstyn asserts that performance enhancing drugs have become institutionalized as part of the “ hypermasculinization” in sports and society. Athletes use performance-enhancing drugs to receive an energy boost as a means of playing through the pain endured during a sporting event.

Especially in modern sports, competition has increased dramatically and athletes are willing to do anything they can to gain a competitive advantage. Monetary and materialistic incentives that are attached to winning in modern sports have catalyzed a need to attain even the smallest advantage. The source of athletes’ mentality of gaining a smallest advantage over competitors can be traced back from the time they were young to the time they reach the professional stage. The pressure to perform at a high-level consistently throughout his life has influenced the athlete to rely on drugs and has normalized the use of drugs in modern sports. However, using performance enhancing drugs comes with its fair share of disadvantages as well. Athletes who use steroids tend to have mood swings, increased aggression, violent behaviour and implacable lust. Nevertheless, the perceived benefits from consuming performance-enhancing drugs exceed the negative consequences for most athletes at any life stage. Achieving professional athlete status in modern sports requires physical and mental training starting during childhood. Parents put their children in a rigorous athletic program at a young age to develop and enhance the necessary skills required for a particular sport. As Burstyn states in her book, “ some parents attempt to prepare their children for university education at Harvard while

they are still in kindergarten, certain parents determine that their children will aim for the Olympics, and enter them into competition and rigorous training before they have learned to read" (Varda, 1999). Children trained and coached at a young age tend to overstrain their bodies and are pushed beyond what their young bodies can physically handle. To remedy this toll on their bodies, these same coaches and parents tend to give younger athletes certain drugs in an effort to expedite healing and give their kids a competitive advantage over other kids. In an article by Bryan Denham, he states that drugs consumed by most athletes can be classified as restorative or ergogenic. " Restorative drugs - pain-killers, muscle relaxants and among others, keep athletes on the field, sometimes longer than they should be. Shot of cortisone, for instance, can eliminate short-term pain. " (Denham, 2000) These drugs are often given to the child because his parents or coaches want the child to succeed and win in competition at any cost. The benefits received from winning trump the harmful consequences of using performance-enhancing drugs for these coaches, parents and children. The winning mentality is etched into the child's brain at an impressionable stage of their development. The young athlete becomes hardwired to believe that winning is the only thing that matters, and " the psychoanalytic equation runs something like this: winning = coach's approval= parent's acceptance= acceptance of self (self esteem)" (Varda, 1999). In other words, at an age in which self-esteem and peer acceptance is very important, children learn to measure their self worth by their success on the field of play. As kids continue to mature and enter their adolescent stage, their exposure to performance-enhancing drugs increases and the consumption rates also

increase. One study by the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association estimates a little over one million adolescents ages twelve to seventeen in the United States have taken performance-enhancing supplements or drugs (Korn, 2003). “ More recently, high school and junior high athletes have admitted taking performance-enhancing substances. Two studies have shown the rate of use of anabolic steroids by high school athletes to be approximately 10% ... in 1998 found a 3. 5% rate of use of anabolic steroids in the junior high population. ” (Metzl, 2002) Performance-enhancing drugs are slowly being integrated in modern youth sports because teenagers are not fully aware of the consequences they face from using performance enhancing substances. Instead, they think, by taking these drugs, they have everything to gain and nothing to lose. Each year the number of cases related to drug abuse or being caught with banned substances among the adolescent has continued to increase. The nature of youth sports has seen an increase in competitiveness. The “ win at all cost” mentality has fostered this environment of using performance-enhancing drugs (Metzl, 2002). Thus, by consuming the performance-enhancing drugs the athlete will excel in the sport and fulfill his desire to be victorious. This mentality becomes increasingly important as these young athletes continue to mature into young adults. High school athletes particularly feel significant pressure to use performance-enhancing drugs as a higher level of competition and the increased importance of winning coincide with an age when popularity and individual fame are recognized and rewarded. For example, a high school student who wants to start on the varsity football team, but does not have the ideal weight and body desired by his coach for a particular position, has

little choice but to use drugs to meet these criteria. The student knows that anabolic steroids and weight-gain supplements may be the only option they have if they expect to be allowed to play. Many students give in to this type of pressure where naturally their body and weight is short of coach expectations and in order to meet the expectations, drugs are the fastest option. A real life example of the above scenario was eloquently written in an article called Buff Enough? which tells the story of a young athlete, not unlike many others his age. " At age 16, Taylor Hooton was 6 feet 2 inches tall and weighed 180 pounds. By most standards, he was a big guy...except his coach's. Hooton, a promising pitcher on his high school baseball team in Plano, Texas, was told by his coach that he had to get bigger to become a star player. He decided the fastest way to accomplish that was to begin an intense weightlifting program-and to use steroids. " (Ingram, 2004) In this example, the coach, rather than warning his athlete about the dangers of drugs, instead emphasizes the importance of becoming a star player. This motivates Hooton to pursue taking steroids to meet his coach and his own expectations to rise to achieve this stardom. Thus, to Hooton, the benefits outweighed the consequences of taking the steroids because taking steroids represented the catalyst to help him move forward in his baseball career. Furthermore, if he got caught for using it he would be in the same position as he was in at the start. As an athletic student, being part of high school sport team is a part of the journey many aspiring athletes look forward to, especially after training from a young age. Not being able to make it or falling short of the expectation is like somebody robbing your manhood or your identity because it is who you are mentally defined as. For this reason,

many high school athletes turn to performance enhancing drugs to give them the edge they need to cover their underdeveloped body, skills or performance. It's a mentality of a warrior who would not give up under any circumstance and use whatever resources available to win or achieve his goal. The resource which provides the quickest results to high school athletes is steroids and "several national youth surveys estimate steroid use by high school boys at 4%-6%, up to 12% in one study and about 2% for girls" (Manning, 2002) Performance enhancing drugs have become such an integral part of modern sports that some coaches or sport physicians do not even discourage their athletes from using them. For example, "At a large public high school in Marin county, several football players recently asked the varsity coach whether it was OK if they took creatine, an over-the-counter sports supplement. "It's up to you" replied the coach,...He neither encouraged nor discouraged using the substance to build their muscles and increase their energy...Using stimulants or muscle-builders is becoming so normalized in youth athletics that Little League coaches give preteen players the caffeine-charged soft drink Red bull before games. Anything to gain an edge on the competition" (Ryan, 2004) Another reason high school athletes take performance-enhancing drugs is to show college scouts their capabilities. Competition among teammates can intensify with the presence of a college scout. After all, they are the ones who determine who is worthy for a scholarship at their respective college. In order to get an advantage over their own teammates or other competitors for the college scholarship, performance enhancing drugs can help the individual stay in the game for a longer time and acquire the attention of the college scout. Also, the drugs

can help individual's physique by giving the individual the masculine body that college scouts look for beside their skills. Hypothetically, if an individual athlete has the necessary skills but lacks the body or muscle, chances are he or she would not be offered a scholarship. After getting a scholarship for a college or getting an acceptance to a triple A league, it's one step closer to reaching the professional stage. At this stage competition gets very fierce among athletes because only a handful of athletes will get the chance to cross the threshold between college and pros. According to the article written by Jin Fain, 98. 3 percent of college athletes don't make to pros and of that 60 percent last less than three years. (Fain, 1986) The entrance to professional stage is very narrow and athletes will do anything to cross that line because of the amount of wealth they can achieve and making their ultimate dream come true. The atmosphere for athletes at college level is same as for high school level because in both levels they have to be scouted in order to advance. Those who lack the body and skills will rely on performance enhancing drugs to aid them in their goal to reach the professional stage. At the professional stage, performance enhancing substances have received a tremendous amount of attention in recent years. In past two decades, there have been many incidents that have come to light regarding drug use in sports, which include Ben Johnson's positive result for his drug test after he won the gold in the Olympics. Baseball players, Mark McGuire, Jose Canseco and Barry Bonds' use of steroids and the Mitchell Report have received the attention of the United States Congress and President of United States. The reason drug use in sports has received attention is because professional athletes are addressing that performance enhancing drugs are appropriate to

consume until their caught and the benefit they receive outweigh the consequence. In the modern world, individual's power is determine by his wealth and fame. The ultimate wealth and fame an athlete can earn is at the ultimate level of sport, the Olympics, which has its own share of trouble with performance-enhancing drugs. " Galen observed Greek athletes in ancient time imbibing wild berries to gain stimulant effect and give themselves an advantage over fellow competitors. " (O'Brien, 2006) In the ancient Olympic Games, Greek athletes would compete amongst different athletes from various city-states of ancient Greece (2006). The Modern Olympics is the greatest stage for any athlete to demonstrate his or her skills, represent their nation and be crowned as the best in the world by winning the gold. Each athlete is motivated to win gold at any cost since this is what they have been training for at a young age. " Winning at all cost" is an attitude, a mindframe, a way of life for these athletes grew up with. It's this motivation and pressures to win the gold that would influence the athlete to take performance enhancing drugs to give themselves advantage over their competitors. Winning gold, in the Olympics represents the ultimate wealth and fame that an athlete could achieve at an individual level and at national level. When they come back home with gold medal they are treated as a hero, just as a warrior would be treated when he comeback from winning a battle. Also, gold medalist receive large amount of wealth from the corporate world through sponsorship and endorsement. In the book Burstyn gives example of Bob Goldman's famous two scenarios survey which was presented to one hundred ninety eight athletes who participated in the Olympics. Scenario one asked the athletes, if they would take the banned

performance-enhancing substance if it came with two guarantees, the first was they will not be caught and second was they will win. Amongst the surveyed, an overwhelming majority of one hundred and ninety five said yes and three said no. The second scenario was would the athlete take the banned performance enhancing drugs that come with two other guarantees. One is they will win every competition they enter for the next five years, but then they will die from the side effects of the substance. Amongst the surveyed more than half the athletes said yes. Goldman conducted this survey in continued years and the response was similar (Varda, 1999). One of the reasons the survey had similar response was because of the mentality of winning at all cost and achieving the wealth and fame that comes from winning. Losing does not give the athlete the wealth or the fame but winning does. The corporate world and pharmaceutical industry has had significant influence on how performance-enhancing drugs are becoming institutionalized in modern sport. It has significant influence because pharmaceutical companies are releasing performance enhancing drugs that cannot be detected during drug test. If they are detected during the drug test, they would develop a new drug that would not be detected and it would become an on going cycle. Pharmaceutical companies will constantly supply the performance-enhancing drugs as long as there is demand and that demand is not going to disappear as long as the athlete have the mentality of winning at all cost. The other big influence is the corporate world that is willing to offer athletes lucrative contracts in exchange for “superstar” endorsements. For example, NBA player LeBron James signed a 7-year, over ninety million dollar contract with Nike before he even played his first NBA

basketball game. (Rovell, 2003). The overall wealth achieved by consuming performance enhancing drugs comes with a price of damaging your body physically and mentally. In the example of Taylor Hooton, his side effect from laying off steroid was severe depression which led to him committing suicide a month after his 17th birthday. (Ingram, 2004) . Burstyn describes anabolic steroids as “ hypermasculine performance drugs par excellence”, for which I think is true. (Varda, 1999) Performance enhancing drugs gives the athlete a warrior’s strength for him to excel in the sport but at the same time its give warrior’s weakness such as aggressive behaviour, pre-mature death, mood swing and violence behaviour. Even with all these negative side effects, athletes will continue to consume the drugs because of their exposure to the drugs at each stage of their life and the benefits they receive. Also, drug testing among athlete does exist at college and professional level but chances of them being detected are less likely because pharmaceutical companies release designer drugs that are synthesized specifically to evade routine drug testing methods. Also, implementing drug test at college and high school level for athlete cost tremendous amount and some colleges and high schools don’t have the necessary funds to implement the drug test. With this limitation, performance enhancing drugs are becoming institutionalized as part of the hypermasculinization of sports and society.