

Performance enhancing drugs in baseball



Baseball is cleaning up its image with a new drug testing policy implemented for the 2005 season. The new agreement between the players, the owners, and Major League Baseball to test for performance enhancing drugs is a vast improvement over the previous deal. There is still plenty of room for those who want to cheat. Let's face it; using performance enhancing drugs is cheating. The testing procedures approved with the new agreement are significantly different from those of the previous one. The 2002 agreement, baseball's first swing at steroid use, was set in motion for the 2003 season. The agreement called for testing half of the players during spring training. The other half of the players were to be tested during the regular season. If five percent of the players tested positive during the first test, random testing would be implemented for the 2004 season. If less than 2.5 percent tested positive, random testing would cease.

(Staudohar, 2005) Players basically knew when they would be tested. If they were tested during spring training, they knew they would not be tested again for the rest of the season. This system opened the door to the use of banned substances for the entire season. The players not tested during spring training knew they would be tested during the regular season at some point. Most were tested during the first half of the season and were able to pick up their use for the remainder of the season without fear of being caught. Those who did test positive received referrals to a treatment program for a first time offense.

(Staudohar, 2005) The new regimen called for increased random testing that was to occur throughout the year. Every player on a major league 40-man

roster is subjected to at least one random test during the regular season. Random testing during the off season was also approved for the first time. This was a big change for the players who had not previously been subjected to testing during the off season. (Staudohar, 2005) Stiffer penalties for first time and repeat offenders were also part of the new deal. A first offense costs a player a 10-day suspension, a second offense means a 30-day suspension, the third offense is a 60-day suspension, and a fourth offense means an automatic one year suspension.

All penalties are without pay. (Staudohar, 2005) The media has truly brought this subject to the forefront. This has adversely affected those players who have never used drugs by casting professional baseball into the dark shadows of the drug world. Today, players like Ichiro, Derek Jeter, David Ortiz, Johan Santana, or any of the games extraordinary players cannot approach a record setting season without the public assuming they are using performance enhancing drugs. Last season alone the testing labs for Major League Baseball performed over 40, 000 tests for performance enhancing drugs. These tests were performed at the World Anti-doping agencies testing facility in Montreal, Canada.

The current testing process employs an ‘ A’ sample and a ‘ B’ sample. Both samples are taken and sealed by trained professionals. The ‘ A’ sample is tested first and if a positive result is found, the ‘ B’ sample is unsealed and tested as well. The entire process from the collection of the samples through the testing processes are documented and verified by independent parties.

(Shaughnessy, 2006) With the new testing requirements and stiffer penalties, what is a player to do if he still wants to cheat? How does one still get that performance edge? According to Shaun Assael (2006) there are 4 ways to still beat the system. Increased testosterone is an exceptional way to boost performance. A normal person's body produces testosterone and epitestosterone in equal amounts. Major League Baseball allows for those with naturally high testosterone levels by allowing a 4: 1 testosterone to epitestosterone ratio.

This means that an athlete can enhance their testosterone level by 3 times its normal amount and still pass the test. Tests have shown this is enough for a significant performance enhancement. (Assael, 2006) There is also artificial epitestosterone that can be taken right before a test to balance out the ratio. If a player knows his testosterone levels are higher than permitted, all he needs to do is keep one of these pills handy in case of a random test. Pop the pill under the tongue minutes before the test and the ratio is balance to acceptable levels.

(Assael, 2006) The next way to cheat is by simply playing the percentages. During the off season only 60 of the over 1200 major league baseball players are randomly tested. This makes for only a five percent chance that a player will be tested during the off season. Most performance enhancing drugs are not detectable two weeks after discontinuing use. A player can use for most of the off season without fear of being caught, stop using before spring training begins, and still enjoy the added muscle. (Assael, 2006) Players can also use EPO, an amphetamine like substance, which the current tests do not detect, increases the bloods ability to carry oxygen through the body.

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This extra oxygen helps the body's muscles recover more rapidly. The MLB policy leaves it up to MLB and the player's union to determine a course of treatment and penalties for EPO users. (Assael, 2006) Lastly, HGH or human growth hormone is another performance enhancer on the list of banned substances. The problem is HGH is not detectable with a urine test. HGH can be detected with a blood test, but the players association, along with every other major professional sports union, has not and will not agree to blood tests.

This being the case, the question is not why would a player use HGH but why would a player not use HGH. It increases energy and reflexes and aids in recovery from injuries and fatigue. HGH is also very easy to acquire. With all the pharmaceuticals available through the internet these days anyone can get HGH. (Rawlings, 2006) How are using performance enhancing drugs cheating one might ask? What are the benefits? The short answer is that the drugs help the user to workout harder and longer building additional muscle mass and strength that would not have been possible without the drugs.

Another benefit is that drugs can accelerate the recovery time between workouts thus allowing for more workouts in a shorter period. Drugs can also shorten the time necessary to recover from injury allowing the player to get back on the field more rapidly. All this gives the player willing to use drugs a big competitive advantage. Big play equals big pay in professional sports.

There are serious physical risks involved with using banned substances. Although no proof exists to link performance enhancing drugs directly to most injuries, the number of injured players and the severity of the injuries

have increased dramatically in the past decade. Trainers say this is a result of overworking the muscles and overloading the skeletal structure beyond what it is capable of handling. This is a difficult argument to make with professional athletes. The athlete is truly the one responsible for making decisions about what is in their best interest.

Kurlantzick, 2005) What does all this mean to the average player still looking for an edge? Simply put, where there's a will there's a way. Play the percentages, take the stuff there are no proper tests for, and be prepared for the tests that can be beat. If a player is willing to take some chances, the performance benefits can be big. And make no mistake the monetary payoffs can be huge. A few more home runs and RBIs per season, more innings pitched and strikeouts can be the difference between a two year, \$2, 000, 000 contract and a five year, \$20, 000, 000 contract.

That is a big risk to reward ratio in my book.