

Officials Make Deals to Learn Who Made Drug Deals

Contributed by MICHAEL BRICK
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For months, city detectives had been watching as Atwood, 34, amassed steroids, human growth hormone, Ecstasy and exotic thyroid stimulators. Last May, the police made their move. Outside the Hooters lot, officers pulled over the Hummer. But instead of filing drug charges, they turned Atwood over to federal prosecutors running a more ambitious investigation.

Three days later, federal agents began arresting seven other bodybuilders across the state. One of them, David C. Jacobs, 35, known to friends as Bulletproof, publicly boasted of having evidence to link players for the Dallas Cowboys and the Atlanta Falcons to steroids. No such evidence has been revealed, and those teams have strongly denied his statements.

Prosecutors could have tried Atwood and Jacobs on multiple counts of drug conspiracy, seeking to make an example of two bodybuilders suspected of distributing steroids. But instead, they made deals that could keep both men from serving any prison time. Law enforcement officials would not disclose the final targets of their investigation or say whether the names of steroid customers would ever be revealed.

The deals struck with Atwood and Jacobs, indicate a shift in steroid prosecution methods and goals. As the use of performance-enhancing substances draws concern from the halls of Congress to the offices of high school coaches, prosecutors

have turned their onetime prime targets into partners in a broader endeavor.

Atwood

and Jacobs were enlisted to cooperate in Operation Raw Deal, the federal government's most aggressive drive yet to interrupt the importation and traffic of performance-enhancing drugs through nutrition stores, gyms and Web sites. In September, authorities in 10 countries coordinated the arrests of more than 120 people, seized more than \$6 million and collected 11 million steroid doses, 3 boats and dozens of weapons.

Since

then, prosecutors from San Diego to Rhode Island have been making deals with distributors to build their cases. The distribution networks for steroids are amorphous, unlike the traditional narcotics cartels led by strongmen. They thrive on the anonymity of the Internet, the discreet camaraderie of the locker room, and the reckless entrepreneurship of home laboratories and pharmacies.

"Our

goal is to go after the bigger fish," said Steve Robertson, a special agent for the Drug Enforcement Administration. "You start looking at other dealers, customers, things like that."

Although

customers were rarely prosecuted in the past, the names of police officers, prominent athletes and entertainers have appeared in news accounts of several cases around the country. Customer lists have not been revealed.

"It

runs the gamut," said Rusty Payne, a spokesman for the D.E.A. "Lots of different kinds of athletes, weekend warriors, gym rats, girls, dealers/remailers, a lot of traffickers, people who have never taken steroids in their life but make a lot of money selling them." From 2001 through 2005, when prosecutors focused their efforts on sophisticated, high-end laboratories, only 46 people were sentenced under the federal guidelines for steroid trafficking, according to the United States Sentencing Commission. In the past four months, however, at least 10 people have pleaded guilty to federal steroid-distribution charges, court records show.

Drug

policy experts said the prosecutors of Operation Raw Deal could seek, at best, to disrupt the steady flow of performance-enhancing drugs.

"Use

goes down when price goes up or availability is reduced," said Jonathan P. Caulkins, a professor of public policy at Carnegie Mellon University. "We also know that ongoing enforcement pressure forces dealers to operate in inefficient ways, greatly increasing their costs of operation and, hence, increase the final retail price. So even if an operation doesn't create a price spike, if it's part of the background level of enforcement that forces the dealers to keep their heads down, then it may be doing some good."

Definition
and Diversifying

The

police here began investigating a tip on Atwood early last year, soon after his arrival on the bodybuilding scene from Wisconsin. By traditional measures, he was a prime target: a ranked professional star in his sport whose downfall could serve as an example.

Atwood, who declined a request for an interview, was reared in Milwaukee, lifting weights to build strength for high school football. In gyms there, he was regarded as friendly and passionate about the sport.

"The guy trained like a monster," said Tony Frontier, an amateur weight lifter in the 1990s who now works in education. "Didn't have a chip on his shoulder, didn't have a sense that he would use his strength to intimidate anybody or to his own advantage."

Through the 1990s, Atwood refined his exercise routine, studied kinesiology and managed fitness clubs. In publicity materials and magazine interviews, he described a regimen of 13 workouts a week to train each muscle. In a typical day, he ate three protein shakes, cereal, oatmeal, three pounds of chicken, a potato, rice, steak, more chicken, then an egg-white omelet with protein powder.

In 2002, he won in his professional debut in Toronto at 5 feet 11 inches and 255 pounds, 70 pounds below his off-season weight.

"He came with just an incredible combination of size, symmetry and proportion, so he was one to watch," said Milos Sarcev, a competitive bodybuilder and gym owner in Fullerton, Calif.

That victory became Atwood's calling card as he traveled to competitions in the Netherlands, Russia, Hungary and San Francisco, with middling results over the next four years.

"After that, the criteria was more toward the smaller, symmetrical, so his physique was really rewarded no longer," Sarcev said.

To supplement his income, Atwood sold health foods, vitamins and supplements through his retail storefront, Mass Results in Greenfield, Wis., before moving to this north Dallas suburb a few years ago.

In May, as Atwood drove away with the fake steroids, officers arrested him on a traffic violation. Searching his red brick town house, they confiscated \$6,986 in cash, 2 computers, scales, tablets and capsules, a hollowed-out book, a 2007 Lexus and a Harley-Davidson motorcycle.

Court records show he was not charged with any drug violation "due to the fact that this is still an ongoing federal investigation." Prosecutors would not say

whether he would be charged with a crime.

A
Plea to Name Players

Meanwhile, federal agents were investigating Jacobs, a less-successful bodybuilder with deeper local roots. He was listed as a senior in the 1991 yearbook for Plano Senior High School without a photograph.

In promotional materials and social networking sites, Jacobs appeared as a great pile of muscle, tattoos and intensity, topped by a buzz cut. Posing beside strapping women with glowing tans, he described himself as a Bible reader, a teetotaler and a "movie fiend."

Jacobs operated the Supplement Outlet from a storefront on President Bush Highway. The shopping center adjoined an LA Fitness gym, where he sought customers among the staff. He made an imposing first impression.

"Tatted-up and just huge as anything and looks mean," Colby Lee, a gym employee, said of Jacobs. "But when I actually started talking to him, he was just a super-nice guy."

Lee began visiting the Supplement Outlet daily for energy drinks and workout advice but rarely saw any other customers.

"At that point, I was suspicious," he said. "I was like, How is he paying for this?"

When federal agents arrested Jacobs on charges of conspiring to distribute steroids, which carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison, they confiscated cash, laptop computers, Harley-Davidson motorcycles, a Hummer, a Mustang, a noise filter, semiautomatic pistols, rifles and a double-barrel shotgun.

Through the summer, six other people connected to Atwood and Jacobs were arrested and charged with conspiracy to distribute steroids. Most have pleaded guilty to the federal distribution charge. In interviews, investigators and defense lawyers described the six as bodybuilders who were supplied by Atwood and Jacobs and who were familiar with one another partly through competitions and mostly through online sales.

Jacobs pleaded guilty and could serve only probation for his cooperation. One law enforcement official said the case now spanned "Texas and beyond."

On the eve of his plea in November, Jacobs told a local television program that he intended to name steroid users who play for the Cowboys and the Falcons.

"Obviously, that's one of the reasons I am here and pleading guilty," he told the station, without offering proof or names. The teams denied that their organizations had any connection to Jacobs. One investigator, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the case was not finished, said Jacobs "likes the limelight, I guess."

The investigator added: "But I think a lot of what he says is true. He's been able to back up a lot of the stuff he claims."

Jacobs could not be reached through telephone calls and a knock at his door. His lawyer, Henry E. Hockeimer, said: "It's an ongoing investigation. He's cooperating."

The assistant United States attorney for the Eastern District of Texas handling the case, Samuel W. Cantrell, did not return calls.

But another law enforcement official, who insisted on anonymity because the case was active, said people who bought steroids from Jacobs, Atwood and the others could face prosecution.

"We typically only prosecute distributors, not users," the official said. "There are exceptions."