

Steroids in America: The Real Dope

Contributed by Jack McCallum
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We are a juiced nation.

We are a nation on dope.

We are a nation looking for enhancement, a way to age gracefully, perform better and longer, and, at the outer edge, vanquish what was once considered that alltime undefeated opponent known as aging. We do that by Botoxing our wrinkles, lifting our faces, reconstructing our noses, despidering our veins, tucking our tummies, augmenting our breasts and taking a little pill to make sure we're ready when, you know, the right time presents itself. We also do it by injecting human growth hormone (HGH) and testosterone, America's new golden pharmaceutical couple.

Numbers are hard to come by because much of the flow of these drugs is illegal, but Dr. Mark Gordon, one of 20,000 members of the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine, cites a 2004 study that found that more than \$1 billion was spent annually on legal HGH. "And it's safe to assume it's gone up in the last four years," Gordon says. The Mayo Clinic reports that 2.4 million testosterone prescriptions were filled by U.S. pharmacies in 2004, more than twice the number filled in 2000. Mayo also estimates that three million people in the U.S. use anabolic steroids, the synthetic versions of testosterone that are illegal when they are used for nonmedical reasons such as building an impressive physique and increasing endurance for training. John Romano, senior editor at Muscular Development, the top seller among the dozens of magazines that cover powerlifting and bodybuilding, estimates that 15 million Americans use performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs).

Yet to judge by the blanket coverage given the bizarre Roger Clemens--Brian McNamee pas de deux; Congress's incessant (and in many cases politically motivated) effort to ferret out drug cheats among athletes; the table-pounding vows of various politicians to get drugs out of sports!; and the never-ending BALCO-Barry saga, one might conclude that PEDs are the exclusive province of professional athletes. When George Bush mentioned steroids in his

January 2004 State of the Union speech, he set the societal agenda. "The use of performance-enhancing drugs like steroids in baseball, football and other sports is dangerous," thundered the President. "It sends the wrong message that there are shortcuts to accomplishment and that performance is more important than character. So tonight I call on team owners, union representatives, coaches and players to take the lead, to send the right signal, to get tough and to get rid of steroids now." Massive applause followed.

O.K., performance-enhancing drugs . . . bad. Athletes who use them . . . bad. Influencing kids to use them . . . bad. On to the next problem.

That politicians have locked in on sports is understandable at one level (beyond the obvious fact that a nationally televised Clemens hearing will draw more attention than, say, an antitrust debate on C-Span). Athletic achievement is made to be measured and is available for instant analysis when performances improve, even incrementally. Athletes stand on pedestals, and pedestals are made to be toppled. A kind of moral ceiling hangs over sports, as degraded as that ceiling might've become in the 3,000 years since a bunch of Greeks began throwing javelins and racing chariots. Play by the rules. Play fair. Level playing field.

But what's happened is that the subject of PEDs has been conveniently compressed and poured into a small airtight bottle at which politicians and society at large can throw stones. We did roughly the same thing with cocaine in the '80s, when you might've thought that baseball players and an unfortunate 22-year-old named Len Bias were the only ones snorting the drug, along with a godless Hollywood elite, of course.

The truth is, sports do not define the culture -- they reflect it. Society's image of the ideal body is shaped largely by forces outside the chalked lines. And the belief that life can be improved, even extended, by drugs comes not from sports but from the burgeoning field known as antiaging medicine.

The music industry, hip-hop in particular, has glamorized the bad and buff body, which many kids embrace as a model. We didn't need the well-publicized probe into HGH and steroid prescriptions allegedly sent by an Orlando pharmacy to rappers to notice that Timbaland and 50 Cent are among the many rappers who are as powerfully muscled as blocking backs. Or as NBA superstars. "In the rap business," says one well-placed music-industry source, "guys look at an athlete like LeBron James, who's built like a tank, and they say, 'I want to look like LeBron.'" And that's how the record companies want them to look. The source confirms that steroid and HGH use "is absolutely happening in the [rap] industry" and puts the percentage of users -- an educated guess, he admits -- at "about one third." (Among the rappers named in the Orlando probe, Timbaland declined comment and 50 Cent did not return calls; as of Monday none had been charged with a crime.)

Congress called in leaders of the major sports leagues

after allegations arose about Bonds, Clemens and

scores of others.

PED use in the hip-hop world is as much about preparing for the job as simply trying to look good. The beast is a ripped physique, one that plays well in music videos, and the beast must be fed. The source describes one artist whom MTV would not feature because he was overweight. He was told to get in the gym. And, if he's like many other artists, he'll get in the gym, but he'll also get on the juice. It's a cycle of narcissistic necessity.

Perhaps the most prominent name in the Orlando investigation was that of Mary J. Blige, an eight-time Grammy winner. Through a spokesman, Blige has denied steroid or HGH use. She did sing backup on a new Jay-Z song, You're Welcome, in which he addresses PEDs. Sort of. ("You would think I was on 'roids, I been hittin' so long, and I'm a big-headed boy/Nah we ain't on HGH, though I might pick up some weight when I'm runnin' through your state.") The 37-year-old Blige has the chiseled look that began taking over music back in the '80s. That's when rockers started showing up in tight-fitting T-shirts with buff bodies and arms of steel, and the Sweet Baby James paradigm, soulful and skinny, was pretty much chased off the stage.

Few segments of society depend as heavily on physical appearance as Hollywood, and it turns out that Sylvester Stallone, who may one day give us Rambo: The Assisted-Living Years, needed more than one-handed pushups and raw eggs at dawn to stay cut. Last May in Australia the 61-year-old Stallone paid \$10,600 to settle a charge of criminal drug possession after he was found to have 48 vials of HGH and several vials of testosterone. Stallone has since acknowledged that he takes HGH and testosterone regularly, and legally. "Everyone over 40 years old would be wise to investigate it [HGH and testosterone use] because it increases the quality of your life," Stallone told Time last month.

Adds a prominent Hollywood plastic surgeon, who requested anonymity because he has many clients in the industry, "If you're an actor in Hollywood and you're over 40, you are doing HGH. Period. Why wouldn't you? It makes your skin look better, your hair, your fingernails, everything."

Chuck Zito -- former Hells Angel, former bodyguard to the stars, former Hollywood stuntman and beefcake extra, former sinister presence on HBO's Oz -- was an enthusiastic steroid and HGH user for three years during his acting days earlier this decade. "It's just something everybody did," says

Zito, "and they're still doing it. It's ridiculous that we only talk about it in sports. You think these actors who suddenly get big for a movie, then go back to normal get like that by accident? You put 30 pounds of muscle on and you expect everybody to believe that just happened?"

While we affect that same "I'm shocked, shocked" response to steroid and HGH use that Captain Renault did to reports of gambling in Casablanca, steroids are all over the culture. *Bigger, Stronger, Faster**, a documentary about steroid use, was well received at this year's Sundance Film Festival. You might suspect that a football player on NBC's Friday Night Lights would dip into the steroid pool -- Smash, the star running back, turned to them after a bad game in a 2006 episode -- but if you watched the Lifetime movie *Love Thy Neighbor*, you also saw a young soccer-playing girl accused of using Winstrol, a popular anabolic steroid. In 1994 Ben Affleck starred in a made-for-TV movie called *A Body to Die For: The Aaron Henry Story*. After taking PEDs in an effort to bulk up and make his high school football team, Affleck/Aaron suffers a bad case of 'roid rage, losing his hair and developing acne. Willem Dafoe's Norman Osborn in the Spider-Man movies brought 'roid rage to a new level when he transmogrified into the Green Goblin. Search for steroids and HGH on the Internet Movie Database website and dozens of movies and TV episodes pop up.

It's uncertain whether hip-hop artists will find the irony amusing, but PEDs seem to be a part of life among the police as well. In a 2007 probe the names of 27 New York City officers and at least two dozen from the Jersey City force were found among those who purchased HGH or steroids. (None has been charged.) The prosecutor's office in Mercer County, New Jersey, is investigating a group of officers, mostly from Trenton, who are accused of illegally buying HGH. The investigation prompted the Trenton department to draft a policy to follow when it suspects an officer of using PEDs.

Stallone (above) and Blige were implicated,

though Blige denies using PEDs.

Gene Sanders, a police psychologist in Spokane, has estimated that 25% of officers in urban settings take steroids, many as a defense against street criminals. "How do I deal with people who are in better shape than me and want to kill me?" Sanders told ABC News as a way of explaining steroid use by the thin blue line.

Steroids may also be a major part of prison culture. And not just on one side of the bars. In a story that would be humorous if it weren't so ugly, Florida's then secretary of prisons, over a two-year period beginning in 2006 fired 90 people, most of them guards, for infractions that included the

importation and sale of steroids for the primary purpose of beefing up for interdepartmental softball games. There were also postgame orgies. All in all, it sounds like the makings of a Cinemax movie.

More than softball is at stake in an ongoing civil case against Blackwater, the controversial security firm that supplies private guards to protect U.S. officials in Iraq. A lawsuit filed in November alleges that one quarter of Blackwater's guards take steroids and that the use of such "judgment-altering substances" was a factor in at least two incidents in which Iraqi civilians were killed. "Not to belittle the importance of steroid abuse in sports," says Susan Burke, the lead counsel for family members of civilians who were killed, "but this is an instance in which it may have led to death. It's obvious that when people have guns and their jobs involve being armed, it's critical to ensure that they are not on steroids." Blackwater says that steroids are not tolerated among its personnel. Meanwhile, a 2007 U.S. military police raid of the living quarters of a similar firm in Iraq, Crescent Security Group, turned up steroids.

At the heart of the incessant hunt for PEDs in sports is the message that the President was conveying in his State of the Union speech: Kids who hear about pro athletes using performance-enhancing drugs will use them too. It is always about our nation's youth, as if that were one heterogeneous group that marches in lockstep, buying its steroids and its Will Ferrell movie tickets in bulk.

The assumption that kids blindly emulate their sports stars is not just simplistic, it's also wrong. In a poll of teenagers commissioned by SI last month, 99% of the respondents said they would not use steroids just because a pro athlete does. Other studies have consistently shown that the majority of kids who use PEDs do so to enhance their looks, not to bowl over a free safety at the goal line or get something extra on their fastball.

If there is some knuckle-dragging musclehead out there who advocates unlimited PED use by minors, he has not yet surfaced. Zito is an unapologetic past user -- "There's no difference between someone taking a steroid and someone having their face lifted" -- but draws the line with teenagers. "Your body is still growing," he says, "and you should let it grow without drugs." Dan Duchaine was an anabolic-steroid pioneer who in 1982 wrote the *Underground Steroid Handbook*, a tract that offered a detailed breakdown of every PED known at the time as well as a guide on how to use the drugs. In the book's second edition he wrote, "I don't think children (teenagers included) should take steroids because all but one or two of the drugs can stop bone growth prematurely." Muscular Development's Romano, who says that he has "not one single regret" from a steroid-loaded past and would entertain the notion of adding anabolic steroids to his HGH and testosterone regimen, says he would not consider giving his eight-year-old son HGH or steroids until the boy has reached adulthood.

That, of course, doesn't mean large numbers of kids aren't using them, though it's difficult to determine how many. In the SI poll, 0.3% admitted taking steroids, and 0.3% said they took HGH. But Dr. Charles Yesalis, a retired Penn State professor and a recognized authority

on steroids, estimates that "at least half a million and probably closer to three quarters of a million children in this country have used these drugs in their lifetime." Adds Yesalis, "The teens I've talked to say [steroids and HGH] are as easy to get as marijuana." The Mayo Clinic has published information that one tenth of U.S. steroid users are teenagers, which by its estimate would put the figure at 300,000.

Zito (above) admits to juicing as an actor, while

Romano says he would consider adding anabolic steroids to his PED regimen.

A major concern about kids and PEDs is the manner in which the youngsters procure the drugs. "Because steroids and growth hormone have been pushed underground," says Romano, "kids are buying them off the Internet. Or from their older brother, or the guy at the gym. And the stuff they're getting is the imported junk from Mexico, the rejected veterinary crap. If they were using the best of the best stuff, that would be bad enough, but it's worse because they're using the bad stuff." Harrison G. Pope Jr., a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, an avid weightlifter and a coauthor of *The Adonis Complex: The Secret Crisis of Male Body Obsession*, doesn't believe that steroid use among teenagers is epidemic. But he agrees that the street purchase of PEDs is a major problem, ascribing it to what he calls "the most secret culture of any drug."

Indeed, steroids evolved through clandestine experimentation in dark gyms by men who, even as they displayed their freakish musculature, rarely talked publicly about how they got that way. Zito still kicks himself for having lied on the Howard Stern Show several years ago when asked if he was juicing. "I never lie to my friends," he says, "but I lied that day. When you were asked about steroids back then, you lied."

Predictably, when athletes in mainstream sports discovered PEDs, they too kept the secrets within the confines of the locker room, if not to themselves. Workout buddies sometimes exchanged stories -- what did Roger tell Andy? -- but often it didn't go any further than that. Steroid use was strictly "Don't ask, don't tell", even when averaged-sized players began to mysteriously inflate. Athletes had a lot more to lose than Zito, and their secrets got out only when publicity hounds like Jose Canseco started singing or subpoenas started flying. Even within the bodybuilding industry, outspoken PED proponents like Romano are rare. He says that the physician who prescribes his testosterone and growth hormone has made him swear that he will never utter his name in an interview, even though the prescriptions are dispensed lawfully.?

With secrecy comes hypocrisy, and the hypocrisy surrounding PEDs is mind-boggling. Take the rappers, for whom admitting acts of lawlessness, such as PED use, would seem to be part of the drill. But Timbaland trumpets the bodybuilding and weightlifting regimen that turned him from a 300-pound blubber factory into a buff bodybuilder. The most intriguing part of 50 Cent's story is his transformation from 12-year-old Queens drug dealer Curtis James Jackson III to a 32-year-old workout freak. He even has his own flavor of Vitamin Water, and last year Coca-Cola bought the company that manufactures his drink for \$4.1 billion. How would all that jibe with performance-enhancing drugs? "You don't want to be a faker," says the industry source. "That's the game."

Schwarzenegger's annual festival features

cartoonish hulks and a supplement expo

Or take California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who despite having used steroids to help him become a seven-time winner of the Mr. Olympia title, bodybuilding's top prize, was named by George H.W. Bush in 1990 to head the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. By all accounts Schwarzenegger (who says he stopped using steroids well before it became illegal to sell or possess them without a prescription, in '90) worked tirelessly and brought unprecedented attention to the council, decrying steroid use all the while. But there was the overmuscled Arnold model for all to see. The governor continues to say that PEDs have no place in sport, yet tacitly endorses their use with his annual Arnold Sports Festival, a carnival of muscle porn in Columbus, Ohio, that includes bodybuilding contests and an expo featuring supplements pushed by cartoonishly sculpted hulks. "Even though performance-enhancing drugs have been part of his life," said one exhibitor at last week's festival who requested anonymity, "what can Arnold do? He has to say he's against them."

To a large degree, that describes the position of many Americans, certainly those in Congress and within the sports establishment: They have to say that they're against performance enhancers; they have to bang the gavel and declare, as Delaware senator Joe Biden did in 2004 during a hearing on drugs in sports, "There is something simply un-American about [using PEDs]!"

But it's not un-American. It's entirely American, that search for an edge, that effort to be all you can be, that willingness to push the envelope. That's what Andy Pettitte was doing when he took HGH. That's what Debbie Clemens was doing when she took HGH. That's what male collegiate cheerleaders are doing when they bulk up on anabolic steroids so they can lift more weight, or more female cheerleaders, according to author Kate Torgovnick in her new book, *Cheer!* That's what a rapper is doing when he receives a package of PEDs at his hotel. That's what Schwarzenegger was doing when he loaded himself with steroids years ago. That's what Kevin and Peggy Hart are doing in the privacy of their bedroom with their HGH and their "test," now as familiar a morning ritual as tea and toast.

We are entering a brave new world. A serious academic and research war rages between those who say that HGH and testosterone are natural substances that need to be replenished when the body's supply runs low and those who proclaim such a philosophy as quackery. "There are very basic questions we're trying to get answers to," says Gary Gaffney, associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Iowa's College of Medicine. He is against doctors prescribing HGH and testosterone for antiaging reasons, and even dislikes the term. "Is aging a disease? Should it be treated?" Gaffney believes there hasn't been nearly enough testing on the potential long-term effects of HGH and testosterone-replacement therapies. And his message is being heard. "If you could prove to me that HGH is not harmful," says Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban, "I'd be the first in line to get some. But I don't know that."

Dr. Gordon, who in a book promoted the phrase "interventional endocrinology," largely because he recognizes that antiaging raises so many eyebrows, comes from the opposite perspective. "Isn't my dispensing medication to lower blood pressure an antiaging [effort]?" Gordon says. "Otherwise, you'll die, and I call that true antiaging. It's the same thing with testosterone and HGH."

Crucial medical questions are being debated by serious medical people, yet we seem determined to hear them only in the limited context of Roger Clemens's injected buttocks. Pro sports shouldn't stand apart from discussions about performance-enhancing drugs, but they shouldn't frame them either. Who is George Mitchell, a former politician who conducted baseball's steroid investigation, to be asking for legislation to make HGH a controlled substance on par with anabolic steroids, as he did recently? Has he been spending secret time in a research lab all these years? We need to realize that someday, perhaps not far down the road, the names of Clemens, Bonds, Mitchell and Rep. Henry Waxman will be mere footnotes in a story that goes far beyond baseball clubhouses and congressional hearing rooms.