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steroids

Policymakers Tackling Teenage Steroid Abuse

BY DARCIA HARRIS BOWMAN
& JOHN GEHRING

Renewed concerns about the role of performance-enhancing drugs in professional sports have prompted national and state policymakers to focus on the problem of steroid abuse by teenagers.

This abuse isn't a new problem in athletics, but the issue has recently made its way back into the national consciousness.

President Bush mentioned steroids in his January State of the Union speech, warning that youngsters model the behavior of professional athletes and urging pro-sports leagues to get tough on users.

In California and Florida, state lawmakers alarmed by the unfolding doping scandal in professional baseball introduced legislation this year that would require schools to randomly test student athletes for steroid use.

Experts said those actions were well-timed.

Last month, the U.S. Senate held hearings looking into the use of steroids in professional baseball after the personal trainer of San Francisco Giants star Barry Bonds was indicted on charges of selling performance-enhancing drugs out of a Bay-area lab.

The last time the nation saw an upswing in steroid use among young people was 1998—the year Mark McGuire broke professional baseball's single season home run record.

The muscular slugger later admitted to using a steroid derivative called androstenedione, but medical researchers and other experts said the only message many adolescents took away from the controversy was that steroids equal glory.

"Kids are going to emulate and

admire what they see on a daily basis," said Peter Roby, the executive director of the Center for the Study of Sport in Society, based at Northeastern University in Boston.

Today's young athletes are growing up in a culture where athletic ability is an ever-more-valuable commodity, Mr. Roby said. "If you can find ways to enhance your performance," he said, "you are rewarded, so it's a risk-reward proposition."

'Start Paying Attention'

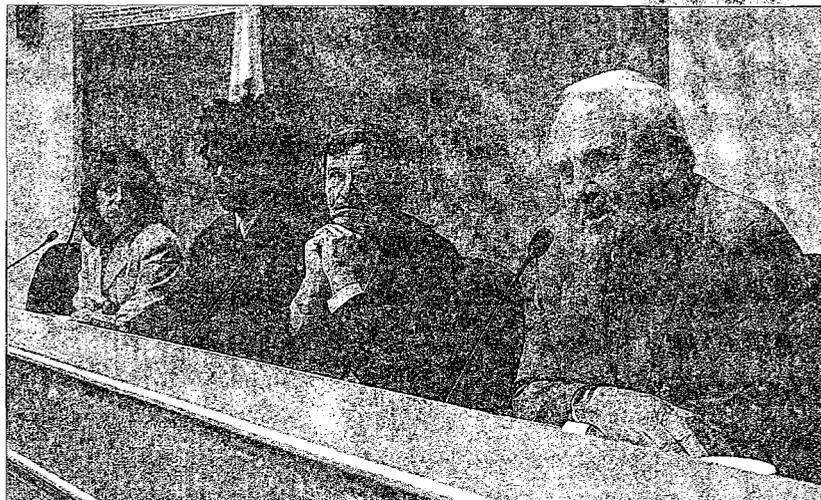
An annual study of 50,000 students led by researcher Lloyd D. Johnston showed that among 8th grade boys, steroid use jumped from 1.2 percent in 1998 to 1.7 percent in 1999 and 2000. And usage among boys in the 12th grade peaked at 3.8 percent in 2001 and 2002, up from 2.8 percent in 1998.

"In the years immediately following Mark McGuire's record, [young people's] perception of the dangers of steroid use declined appreciably—all they could see was that he looked healthy and he was being great," said Mr. Johnston, a professor at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research in Ann Arbor.

Mr. Johnston points out that the upward trend in usage finally showed a slight reversal last year.

Still, among the boys surveyed by Johnston's group in 2003, the drugs were being used by 1.8 percent of 8th graders, 2.3 percent of 10th graders, and 3.2 percent of seniors.

"Teens are 'juicing' just like many of the sports figures they so want to emulate—and coaches, parents, lawmakers, and students need to wake up and start paying attention," California state Sen.



From left, state Sen. Jackie Speier, San Francisco 49ers football player Kwame Harris, sports agent Leigh Steinberg, and former 49ers coach Bill Walsh talk about the dangers of steroid use by high school athletes. They were in Sacramento to testify at a California Senate hearing.

Jackie Speier said in a March 25 statement.

Ms. Speier, a Democrat, has proposed mandating random steroid testing in schools, banning the sale of legal performance-enhancing drugs such as creatine and androstenedione to minors, and requiring school coaches to receive training on the dangers of the drugs.

'Ugly Possibility'

While steroids can enhance athletic performance, build muscle, and speed up recovery time, there are a host of medical reasons for teenagers to steer clear of the drugs.

Anabolic steroids are synthetic compounds that mimic the effects of the male sex hormone testosterone. According to the National Institute of Drug Abuse, use of such drugs by adolescents can halt bone growth and damage the heart, kidneys, and liver.

In males, steroids override the body's natural production of testosterone and can lead to impotence,

shrunken testicles, and breast enlargement. Women using the drugs may experience irregular menstrual periods, growth of body hair and loss of scalp hair, a deepened voice, and reduced breast size.

Users tend to bulk up dramatically and quickly. They develop stretch marks, increased acne, mood swings, and jaundice.

Often, though, the outward signs of steroid abuse can be subtle enough to escape even the trained eye.

Dr. Stephen G. Rice, a pediatrician at Jersey Shore University Medical Center in Neptune, N.J., who specializes in sports medicine, gives physicals to some 2,000 high school athletes a year. Even so, he can't recall having recently tagged any of those adolescents as steroid users.

"It's harder than you think to identify steroid use unless you're really, really, really looking hard," Dr. Rice said. "That said, I can't imagine that if I were a coach, seeing a kid day in and day out and knowing what normal development looks like, ... that I wouldn't see it."

"And that," he added, "raises the very ugly possibility that coaches don't want to see it."

The question for many schools and districts is how best to deter students from using steroids. Testing for such drugs, even randomly, is expensive, and schools rarely undertake the endeavor.

The 35,000-student Paradise Valley Unified School District in Phoenix, for example, spends \$21,000 annually on the testing

in Lowell, Mich., doesn't see steroids as a major concern for his school, use of other substances has become a problem.

For instance, he said, creatine has become more popular with his student athletes over the past few years. A legal supplement that can be bought in almost any nutrition store, creatine is credited with helping develop more muscle energy that allows for longer, more intense training and makes recovery time between workouts shorter.

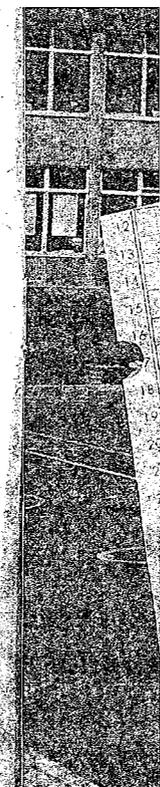
"When [the substances] are being mixed in school, we have a concern about it," Mr. Hovrla said. "This is just a shortcut, and that's what kids want—shortcuts to get bigger and faster."

Mr. Hovrla's coaching staff didn't pay much attention to creatine in the past, but students caught using it today know they'll be punished by having to sit out games.

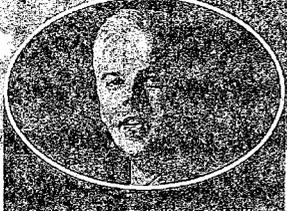
Deterring Steroid Use

Some experts argued that education is the key to changing teenagers' perceptions about steroids and other performance-enhancing substances.

One popular approach for boys that is used in schools in more than half of the states is ATLAS, or Athletes Training and Learning to Avoid Steroids. Over the course of 10 sessions lasting 45 minutes each, a faculty adviser and peer leaders supervise a number of interactive activities with a focus on exercise and



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The 35,000-student Paradise Valley Unified School District in Phoenix, for example, spends \$21,000 annually on the testing, at a cost of \$79 per student. Since 1990, the district has conducted urine testing in all five of its high schools between one and four times a month.

However, school officials said they rarely find a student who tests positive for steroid use. They believe the testing serves as a strong deterrent.

Even without testing, some athletic directors and coaches say they're well aware there's a problem with the use of performance-enhancing substances.

Although Barry Hovrla, the athletic director at the 1,200-student Lowell Senior High School

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The program's creator, Dr. Linn Goldberg, said he can produce studies that show ATLAS and a companion course for girls are effective in decreasing steroid use among participants. The U.S. Department of Education has agreed, giving the programs its "exemplary" label.

"Steroid abuse" is not a problem of morality," said Dr. Goldberg, the head of the division of health promotion and sports medicine at Oregon Health and Science University in Portland. "Kids can be deterred from doing this."

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