DESIGNER STEROIDS: UGLY, DANGEROUS THINGS

THE WORD IS OUT. THE MEDIA ARE POINTING FINGERS. SUBPOENAS HAVE BEEN ISSUED, AND MANY ATHLETES ARE RUNNING FOR COVER.

"Designer" steroids are in the news and circulating in the bloodstream of some very successful, unethical, and unintelligent athletes—and the situation appears to be getting uglier by the minute.

Exactly what is a designer steroid? Simply put, it is an anabolic drug that has been structurally manipulated to mimic the muscle-building effects of testosterone, while sidestepping a positive test result. The drug "designers" are very well-versed on the mechanisms of the current testing technology and have the bioengineering expertise necessary to fool the system.

Those of us who hold sacred the integrity of athletics at all levels must understand that we are not dealing with some college kids delving in bathtub chemistry.

Individuals with serious scientific acumen are on a mission to produce the perfect performance-enhancing drugs—ones that build muscle and are invisible.

BY KEN MANNIE Strength/Conditioning Coach, Michigan State University

WELCOME TO THE AGE OF STEALTH STEROIDS

ESPN recently reported that more than 40 track athletes were subpoenaed to testify before a federal grand jury that is investigating a prominent sports "nutritionist" on what is being called "an international doping conspiracy." Several track and field performers have tested positive for Tetrahydrogestrinone, or THG, which is the most talked about designer steroid.

Even more frightening is that many experts contend that THG may be only one of a bevy of other chemicals that unscrupulous biochemists have feverishly produced to fly under the
testing radar.

Now that THG is detectable, the questions remain: How long have athletes been using this stuff and what else is out there that we still can’t detect? Could there be a multitude of these undetectable compounds in the illegal, performance enhancing drug pipeline?

Terry Madden, Director of the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, indicated that what appears to have been uncovered is “intentional doping of the worst kind.” People who are one step ahead of the system have taken the cat-and-mouse game of circumventing the testing technology to another level.

And while track and field is being indicted as a major offender of THG abuse, other sports – including the NFL, NHL, and Major League Baseball – are being scrutinized for having potential participants in this dangerous game of hormonal roulette.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the NFL are considering retroactive testing of urine samples to examine the extent of THG abuse. This could result in medals being stripped and suspensions being imposed.

For some inexplicable reason, MLB and the NHL are still dragging their prehistoric knuckles on implementing year-round, random, unannounced steroid testing. This “hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil” mentality continues to erode the credibility of these sports and victimizes the clean players through guilt by association.

The ugly possibilities presented by these recent revelations make corked bats and spitballs seem relatively insignificant.

**THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM**

The scourge of illicit anabolic steroid abuse in athletics is nothing new. They were formulated back in the 1930’s for treating a host of muscle wasting diseases and sexual dysfunctions. However, the reported dosages used for performance-enhancement and/or increased muscular size are 10-100 times the medical indications.

Unprincipled doctors, coaches, and athletes have channeled them into sports. Their motive is simple: Bigger, stronger muscles can equate to more strength and speed, and steroids offer a potential shortcut to that end.

That assumption can be debated to a degree, but most experts seem to agree that steroids – when combined with aggressive training protocols – can achieve those intended goals at a faster rate and to a higher level in most cases.

The majority of people who abuse steroids are not athletes. They are everyday Joes and Janes who have erroneously believe that the health risks have mysteriously diminished.

Kids are taking steroids in a variety of ways: orally, through intramuscular injection, and even in gels or creams that are rubbed on the skin. Contrary to the reports in underground publications, there is no scientifically substantiated “safe” way to put this poison into your body.

Some abusers believe that you can avoid the negative side-effects by “cycling” or “pyramiding” the doses from low to high for 6-12 weeks, then backing-off for a few weeks before resuming the process. The efficacy of these techniques is strictly anecdotal, with no sound science to support any

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either self-esteem issues about their bodies or are simply looking for a cosmetic quick fix.

Evidence from a survey conducted by The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) revealed there was a significant increase in steroid use in 8th-12th graders from 1991-1999. Among seniors, there is also a noted decrease in the perceived harmful effects of the drugs.

Whatever we’re doing in our schools from an educational standpoint doesn’t appear to be having an impact.

The bottom line: More kids are using steroids, and, for some unknown reason, one method for all individuals.

Your odds of choosing a safe steroid cycle are about as good as winning the lottery.

**OVER-THE-COUNTER DEATH PILLS**

The Anabolic Steroid Control Act of 1990 banned the illicit distribution of all then known steroids. However, Congress could not foresee the new wave of over-the-counter (OTC) anabolic drugs known as “pro-steroids” and "precursor steroids."

Two such compounds in the pro-steroid classification are 1-testosterone and...
4-hydroxy-testosterone, which escaped mention in the legislation because they were virtually unknown. The drug manufacturers claim that these are “natural” substances and market them as dietary supplements that increase strength and build muscle.

These anabolic compounds have surfaced on nutrition store shelves in alarming numbers. It must be understood that these compounds have all the markings of full-blown anabolic steroids. How did these chemicals slip through the legal barriers and proliferate as OTC dietary supplements?

Here are the loopholes: The steroid precursors convert to illegal drugs only after they have been ingested.

The pro-steroids – which are much more potent than the precursors because they don’t require conversion in the body – are either difficult to detect, or are undetectable by current testing procedures.

The deleterious effects of using these so-called supplements, however, is considered by many experts to just as serious as any other class of anabolic steroids.

Athletes, coaches, and administrators must be cognizant of these OTC products and thoroughly examine the labels on any purchased supplements for potentially dangerous steroidal compounds. Someone who is qualified to identify these chemicals on the list of ingredients should be called on before any supplement distribution takes place.

**FINAL REP**

The sports community must realize that fortune and fame – rather than ethics and fair play – are the motivational fuel for many athletes. And there will always be plenty of chemists, whose sole motivation is money, willing to satisfy those needs through any means necessary, as their motivation is strictly monetary.

Those of us who have the power and resources to curb this problem must attack it aggressively on several fronts:

1. **Stay ahead of the testing tit-for-tat game so that our technology is up to snuff with the clandestine labs that are hard at work hoodwinking the system.**
2. **Incorporate the very best testing procedures at the collegiate, professional, and international levels on a year-round, random and unannounced basis.**
3. **Institute strict penalties for athletes who test positive for anabolic drugs.**
4. **Encourage the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to take more of a pro-active role in regulating the OTC supplement industry, especially with the advent of pro-steroids and precursor steroids.**
5. **Intensify and update the educational programs at the junior and senior high school levels on a yearly basis.**

The exposure of the designer steroid conspiracy should be a wake-up to all coaches, administrators, parents, the governing bodies of high school associations, the NCAA, professional sports, and state and federal lawmakers. There are athletes out there searching for external growth at the risk of internal death, and they are getting plenty of help from people who really don’t care about them.

To all athletes, both young and old, I remind you that dying is not winning!