

What's So Bad About Performance Enhancing Drugs?

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The use of performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) in sports has sparked serious ethical debate.¹ Although this book is about philosophy and football, the arguments discussed in this chapter apply to every sport.

A recent investigation revealed that six players on the Carolina Panthers 2004 Super Bowl team were filling prescriptions for steroids. Barry Bonds, the San Francisco Giants' slugger and Golden Glove Award winner, will likely break Hank Aaron's career home run record before the end of the 2007 Major League Baseball season. Although Bonds denies ever knowingly using steroids, and has never tested positive for steroid use, many people believe that Bonds has been using steroids and other PEDs for years. Because of the suspicion of PED use, these fans discredit Bonds' baseball accomplishments. In 1998, Mark McGuire broke Roger Maris' record for most home runs hit in a single season. Despite his record-breaking hitting performance, many people are vehemently opposed to McGuire ever being inducted into the Hall of Fame because they believe McGuire's incredible hitting power was fueled by PEDs. Lance Armstrong, the American cyclist and seven-time winner of the Tour de France, has been repeatedly accused of using performance enhancing drugs and blood doping. If these accusations are ever proven to be true, Armstrong's reputation will sink from being an American hero to being a despised cheater.

Many people believe that the use of PEDs is morally wrong and ought to be banned from sports. Is there a good argument for this conclusion? This chapter will explain and evaluate carefully, three main arguments for the view that using PEDs in athletic competition is morally wrong. The first argument is based on the idea that the use of PEDs, such as anabolic steroids, is currently against the rules. The second argument focuses on the unfair advantage PED users have, regardless of what the current rules happen to restrict. The third argument is based on the health risks of PEDs to athletes.

The Against the Rules Objection

The first argument is very simple and straightforward. Many PEDs are banned. Currently, players can be fined and suspended for using PEDs such as steroids. Athletes are tested for steroid use, and if they test positive, they can be punished and prevented from competing. Shawne Merriman, a San Diego Chargers linebacker was suspended for four games in 2006 after testing positive for steroids. Athletes who use banned PEDs, and who either are not tested, or who find a way to disguise their steroid use and trick the test, are cheating.² Cheating is wrong. Here is the first of the three arguments in a nutshell.

- (1) Athletes who use PEDs gain a competitive advantage by knowingly violating the rules.
- (2) Any activity that gives an athlete a competitive advantage by knowingly violating the rules is morally wrong.
- (3) It is morally wrong for athletes to use PEDs.

When thinking about this argument, the use of PEDs could be compared to a marathoner jumping on the subway for 10 miles to relax and speed ahead of the other runners. The rules of the marathon require that runners stay on the course and that they run the entire race without assistance from subways, cars, rollerblades, bicycles, helicopters, etc. To do otherwise would break the rules and that is wrong. Using PEDs is a violation of the rules of the game and thus using them is obviously morally wrong.

While this argument is a very strong argument, and it captures the reaction many people have to Barry Bonds “beating” Hank Aaron’s record and Mark McGuire “beating” Roger Maris’ record, it does not show as much as some opponents of PED use might want to show. The problem with this line of reasoning is that it would show only that using PEDs is wrong given the current rules. That is, the argument shows that using PEDs is wrong because it is against the current rules, but it does not show that using PEDs *should* be against the rules because using PEDs is fundamentally wrong. *Should* the use of performance enhancing drugs be banned?

This deeper question, which is not answered by the Against the Rules Objection, is whether the rules are morally justified. Perhaps the rules are unjust. An athlete with a headache or inflammation in a joint could legally and morally take some ibuprofen before competition. The use of ibuprofen in such a case might very well enhance an athlete’s performance. An athlete suffering from depression might take an anti-depressant and that might enhance his or her performance. Is that morally wrong? What, if anything, makes anabolic steroids and other banned substances morally wrong for athletes to use? Suppose that sports did not ban the use of steroids. Would using steroids be wrong then? This argument does not address this deeper question. The second argument will address

this deeper question, and it attempts to provide reason to think that using PEDs is wrong, not just because of the current rules, but because of the inherent unfairness PED use brings to athletic competition.

The Unfairness Objection

The second argument, which is a popular argument in the PED debate³, will be stated as follows:

- (1) Athletes who use PEDs have an unfair advantage over athletes who do not use PEDs.
- (2) Anything that gives some athletes an unfair advantage over other athletes is wrong.
- (3) It is wrong for athletes to use PEDs.

This argument is much more complicated than the previous argument, but it addresses the question of whether there is something inherently wrong with athletes using PEDs for their competitive advantage. The rationale for premise 1 is based on the fact that PEDs such as anabolic steroids, amphetamines, human growth hormone, etc., can help athletes get stronger, run faster, jump higher, hit harder, reduce body fat, and recover faster than athletes who do not use PEDs. Athletes who use PEDs, according to this premise, are cheating against their drug-free opponents. Would Ben Johnson have been able to beat Carl Lewis in the 100 meter sprint without the help of steroids? Is any steroid-free athlete capable of beating the homerun records of Roger Maris, Babe Ruth, and Hank Aaron? Have some outstanding athletes missed the cut for Olympic competition and lost out on a dream because they were competing against athletes who had the advantage of taking PEDs? Have some players missed out on multi-million dollar contracts because

someone taking PEDs ran a fade route a little faster or made a few more tackles behind the line of scrimmage?

Premise 2 is based on the idea that athletic contests, by their very nature, should be fair and square. Violations of fairness are wrong.

Although the Unfairness Objection is popular and plausible on its face, careful reflection will reveal important questions and problems for this argument. What makes a situation or event unfair? That is a giant philosophical question that cannot be answered adequately in this short chapter. For the purposes of this chapter, I will use the term ‘unfair’ to capture the basic idea that an unfair situation is one in which everyone does not get the same opportunities, treatment, and resources.⁴ On this basic interpretation of ‘unfair,’ it is clear that there is an enormous amount of unfairness in the world and in the lives of athletes. Due to economic circumstances or even luck, some athletes have better nutrition, “natural” supplements⁵, coaches, trainers, nutritionists, information, lawyers, and equipment than others do. Some athletes have more free time to train than others do. Some athletes are naturally smarter, faster, and stronger than others are. All athletes, whether or not they use PEDs, are not “playing on a level playing field” and that is, in the sense of ‘unfair’ at use here, unfair.

Given this interpretation of ‘unfair,’ premise 1 is plausible, but not obviously true. If PEDs were legal and available to every athlete, then it would seem that PED users would not have an unfair advantage. Realistically, though, PEDs are not legal or readily available. Moreover, even if PEDs were legal and readily available, they would come at a cost. There is no reason to suppose that all athletes would have the same opportunity to

purchase and correctly use PEDs. Thus, premise 1 will be accepted for the sake of this argument.

Premise 2 raises some extremely interesting and important questions. The main issue is whether all forms of unfairness (given the sense of unfairness assumed here) are wrong. Is it always morally wrong for an athlete to exploit an unfair advantage? Even if it is unfair that one player has better equipment than another, is it morally wrong for that player to use that equipment? Even if it is true that some athletes are better coached, fed, intellectually gifted, and equipped than others, is it morally wrong for an athlete to take advantage of the unfairness? Even if it is unfair that Jim Thorpe did not have the advantages available to current athletes, such as knowledge of biomechanics, sports medicine, nutrition, and highly breathable fabrics, is it morally wrong for current players to take advantage of this unfairness?⁶ It seems that a proponent of the Unfairness Objection is forced to accept this it is morally wrong. But if a proponent of the Unfairness Objection is forced to accept this much, then it seems that an advocate of the Unfairness Objection will be forced to conclude that the world of athletics (and beyond) is full of immoral activity. After all, it is certainly clear that in football and throughout the sports world, there is unfairness of the sort identified here. Since most people who are morally opposed to PEDs are not willing to endorse this extreme conclusion, it is clear that the Unfairness Objection is not an argument that is available to most opponents of PEDs.

The Harm and Pressure Objection

The third argument is based on worries about the health risks of banned PEDs to athletes and the pressure that athletes are under to engage in this risky behavior. Here is the third argument that we shall consider:

(1) Using PEDs is harmful to athletes and athletes are under enormous pressure to take PEDs.

(2) All things that are harmful to athletes and that place athletes under enormous pressure to do are morally wrong and should be banned from sports.

(3) Using PEDs is morally wrong and should be banned from sports.

The rationale for premise 1 is that PEDs pose serious health risks to users. Among the risks are cardiovascular problems, liver problems, adverse effects on blood lipids, fertility problems, vision problems, extreme acne, baldness, anger and other behavior problems.⁷ Lyle Alzado, an outstanding defensive end for the Denver Broncos, Cleveland Browns, and Los Angeles Raiders, was diagnosed with brain cancer just before he wrote a *Sports Illustrated* article in which he admitted to using steroids throughout his NFL career. He not only confessed to steroid use, but according to Mike Puma, an ESPN reporter, “Alzado was certain the drugs were responsible for his cancer. He became a symbol of the dangers of steroid use.”⁸

Premise 1 is also backed by an acknowledgement of the pressure that athletes, even very young athletes, are under to take PEDs if they want to compete at the highest levels possible. Some of the athletes questioned in the recent Victor Conte BALCO investigation underwent dramatic improvements in their performance during the period in which they were suspected of having used steroids.⁹ In the *Sports Illustrated* article, Lyle Alzado admitted that steroids were his ticket to the NFL.¹⁰ Alzado explained that he was a mediocre junior college player, with no hope for a spot in the NFL, until he

started using steroids. Although many of the world's greatest athletes are under no suspicion of using banned PEDs, many athletes are suspected of, and perhaps guilty of, using banned PEDs. The world of sports is highly competitive and can be very lucrative and fun. The slightest edge can mean the difference between being merely a great high school athlete and being an Olympic champion. It can mean the difference between a job working in a coal mine and the job of linebacker for the Pittsburgh Steelers. It can mean the difference between coaching a high school baseball team and pitching for the New York Mets. If PEDs work, great athletes have a very strong incentive to take them.

Premise 2 is based on the claim that if something is very harmful, and if people are under a lot of pressure to do it if it is not banned, then it ought to be banned. Many people would argue that this is an excellent reason to keep heroin, for example, illegal. Heroin is very dangerous, highly enjoyable and beneficial in the short term for some people, and highly addictive, and so we have a moral obligation to keep it illegal.

The Harm and Pressure Objection is full of controversy. Premise 1 is a completely empirical premise and its evaluation is better left to the experts in sports medicine and sports psychology. Some very important facts would be helpful in an evaluation of premise 1. It would be important, for example, to know how serious the risks are for athletes using PEDs for their relatively short competitive careers. Many athletes would be willing to put up with some of the short-term side effects such as acne, baldness, anger, and temporary fertility problems in exchange for the benefits of being a professional athlete and a winner.¹¹ Moreover, it would be interesting to know how much PEDs actually help a typical athlete. Cal Ripken Jr. has never been suspected of using steroids and he was one of the greatest baseball players of all time. Would he have

been even better on steroids, or was he the best that he could be even without them? Barry Bonds was an outstanding baseball player when he was a young and lean Pittsburgh Pirate under no suspicion of drug use. Would he have had a great career without whatever made his body transform into what it is today? Would Barry Sanders, Jim Brown, and Dick Butkus have been better players if they were hopped-up on steroids? Finally, it would be interesting to know the effects of PEDs under legalized and carefully monitored conditions. Athletes are buying drugs from people like Victor Conte, who has no pharmaceutical or sports medicine credentials, and they are shooting up in locker room stalls. If PEDs were used properly and developed in reputable labs by top scientists, perhaps the risks of PEDs would be much lower. Perhaps PEDs could be developed that have very little risk and enormous benefits.¹² These are serious questions for the scientists to figure out. Knowing these empirical facts is essential before we can know what to think about the first premise of the Harm and Pressure Objection to PEDs. Premise 1 cannot be decided from the philosopher's armchair.

Premise 2 is the premise for philosophers. It raises a very important controversy that is much too large to resolve once and for all here, but we can at least lay out the basic debate for reflection and discussion. Some philosophers would prefer to leave the decision of whether to use a risky substance up to the individual athletes. Driving a race car, boxing, skiing, and playing football, for example, are dangerous activities. Although we require helmets and other safety gear, we do not ban these sports. Many philosophers would deny premise 2 and claim that even if the use of PEDs is dangerous and athletes are under pressure to use them, using them is not morally wrong and they should not be

banned from sports. The athletes themselves should decide whether to take the risk of using PEDs.

Other philosophers would disagree and paternalistically contend that the harm is so great, and the pressure is so great, that allowing the use of PEDs is morally wrong and ought to be banned. Such philosophers would argue that if athletes believe they substantially lower their chances of winning -- or of even competing at all -- by not taking steroids, then if they are dangerous, they are, in a sense, coerced to harm themselves.

Some other philosophers might be willing to allow adult athletes the autonomy to use PEDs, but make the use of such drugs illegal for children who have not yet reached “the age of reason.” Clearly, this serious philosophical debate must be worked out before we can accept premise 2.

Testing

Another serious issue is testing for steroid use. There are many masking agents that athletes can use to beat the tests. Moreover, in some sports, tests are not performed frequently or randomly and athletes know about the tests well in advance, giving them ample time to prepare. Some PEDs, such as amphetamines, will only show up if an athlete is tested within approximately one day of ingestion. Proponents of legalization might argue that since we cannot accurately test for PEDs, we should not ban the drugs even if they lead to massive advantages for users. Others would say that we ought to ban PEDs but urge much better and tougher testing procedures.

Conclusion: Should there be a Ban?

So, is it morally wrong for athletes to use PEDs? The strongest argument against their use is the Against the Rules Objection. However, that objection shows only that it is wrong because it is against the actual rules. It does not support the conclusion that the rules are good rules or that PEDs ought to be banned. Over the years, new fabrics have been developed. New running shoes have been designed. New helmets have been created. New supplements have been concocted. Which ones should be allowed by sports and which ones should not? The Against the Rules Objection does not answer this question. The second argument we considered, The Unfairness Objection, is faced with serious questions and problems. Defenders of the Harm and Pressure Objection still have a lot of work to do. The harms of PEDs, if developed and used under legalized conditions, need to be clearly demonstrated by science. In addition, it also needs to be shown that we ought not leave the decision of whether or not to take on the risks of using PEDs to individual athletes. Until such work is accomplished, the jury is still out on the Harm and Pressure Objection to performance enhancing drugs. After considering three interesting arguments, we have found a strong argument against using PEDs given the current rules, but we have not found a strong argument for the general conclusion that using PEDs ought to be against the rules. The Harm and Pressure Objection may well turn out to be an excellent argument. At this point, however, it raises many questions that must be answered before we can rationally conclude that PEDs ought to be banned from sports.¹³

¹ Some PEDs are banned and some are not. Unless clarified, this essay will focus on the controversial PEDs that are banned such as anabolic steroids, growth hormone, amphetamines, etc. and not the innocent performance enhancing drugs such as ibuprofen.

² An important issue that I will not have space to take up in this essay is the very serious issue of testing. How do we know who is using steroids? If there is a good argument against PEDs, then a lot more work needs to be done on developing accurate tests as well as random and frequent testing.

³ For an excellent discussion of this argument, see Roger Gardner, “On Performance Enhancing Substances and the Unfair Advantage Argument” in *Philosophy of Sport: Critical Readings, Crucial Issues*, ed. M. Andrew Holowchak (Prentice-Hall, 2002).

⁴ There are other legitimate senses of ‘unfair,’ but I believe none of the most obvious senses will do a better job of getting this argument off the ground. I stick with this interpretation for the sake of clarity and simplicity.

⁵ An important issue that cannot be addressed here involves clarifying the differences between natural supplements, food, drugs, acceptable PEDs and unacceptable PEDs and what the distinctions mean for this debate.

⁶ If it is not morally acceptable, what should an advantaged athlete do? How should a smarter or better coached and morally sensitive athlete behave? How should sport morally handle the unfairness?

⁷ National Strength and Conditioning Association conference handout, April 2007 meeting.

⁸ Mike Puma, “Not the Size of the Dog in the Fight” ESPN Classic

http://espn.go.com/classic/biography/s/Alzado_Lyle.html

⁹ For an interesting discussion of this investigation and the use of PEDs among top athletes, see *Game of Shadows: Barry Bonds, BALCO, and the Steroids Scandal That Rocked Professional Sports*, Mark Fainaru-Wada and Lance Williams (Gotham Books 2006).

¹⁰ Lyle Alzado, “I Lied” *Sports Illustrated*, July 8, 1991.

¹¹ It is worth noting that everyday, ordinary patients are willing to take medications with serious side effects for problems that are not life threatening.

¹² Similar issues come up in some discussions about the legalization of prostitution and currently illegal drugs such as marijuana.

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