

Degrees of separation: Athletics Anonymous

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Years from now, if any sports fans sitting around playing the parlor game of “Degrees of Separation” draw the names of “Barry Bonds” and “Chris Benoit,” the likeliest route for them to try to identify the least amount of separation will be through a chemical supplier or manufacturer.

Now, the social impact of these great athletes has never, to my knowledge, loomed large in the communal queer consciousness. Yet the roles, perceived or real, that drugs played in their lives and careers should be of vital concern to all of us. The cultural values they engender directly impact the life of any person who wishes to play sports to the best of his or her abilities, but who also may not be able to compete, or even to live, without medical support.

For us, the concern should not be who is juiced, but why they are juiced.

Of course, Bonds and Benoit are very much in the sports news these days. Bonds, the finest power-hitter of our generation, blasted his 750th home run Friday night to pull within 5 homers of all-time major league leader Hank Aaron. Virtually everyone on the planet whose ZIP code does not begin with the digits “9-4” believes Bonds’ enormous productivity in recent years has been bolstered by boosters banned by the game. Despite this, he overcame a more than 100,000 deficit in nationwide voting in the final week to be named to the National League starting lineup for All-Star Game to be held Tuesday in San Francisco.

Across the continent in Georgia, the previous weekend was a busy and fatal one for the Benoit family. Friday night Benoit, golden boy of the professional wrestling circuit, butchered his wife, Nancy, with a knife. Saturday he strangled his mentally impaired son, Daniel. On the third day he hanged himself.

The following Tuesday, World Wrestling Entertainment marked the occasion with a three-hour, televised tribute.

Benoit’s friends, family and fans had long known he had been using performance-enhancing substances, including testosterone. Police found anabolic steroids in his home after his death and federal agents conducted two raids on his physician’s office. Dr. Phil Astin faces federal charges for improperly prescribing medication.

Pro wrestling depends on an illusory mix of athleticism and entertainment. That is why performance-enhancing drugs are so prevalent in pro wrestling (and to varying degrees in other high profile sports as well). Fans want to see beautiful, buffed, massive physiques. They want them to be stronger than life, faster than life, larger than life. So many elite athletes begin by chasing excellence and end up chasing acclaim.

As reality began to sink in, many described themselves as “stunned,” “shocked” and “surprised.” WWE’s initial response was to assert “steroids were not and could not be related” to the killings. WWE Chairman Vince McMahon then backpedaled, saying, “Our reaction was reacting to the hysteria of the media.” [Translation: “You caught us, we panicked, how dare you.”]

Playing the role of hysteric himself, McMahon tried to curb speculation that “ ‘roid rage” played a role.

“This is not an act of rage,” McMahon said. “This is an act of deliberation. This is a horrific tragedy.” He said he knew Benoit as “a mild-mannered individual. There was no way of telling this man was a monster.”

Now, any competent physician can tell you prescribing anabolic steroids is a dicey proposition even when it is done out of utter medical necessity. The side effects can be too dangerous, too unpredictable and too violent. Add in other pressures Benoit faced - he was an aging “alpha” personality in an impossibly competitive environment dealing with the unanticipated challenge of raising a son who suffered from the crippling effects of Fragile X Syndrome - and you can just about hear the time bomb ticking.

How could anyone be shocked by this plausible, even predictable, tragedy? We should not be stunned, shocked or surprised by the consequences of the mix: we should be appalled that as a society we nurture it.

Indeed, think of the shorthand we use for steroids and other banned supplements that riddle the sports world, the same shorthand I have used in this column: Performance enhancing drugs. PEDs peddled to PED-ophiles.

The reality is these substances were created in medical laboratories, financed by hopes to save lives. It is not medicine that creates monsters, but its misuse.

You can hear and read endless commentary about the abuse of drugs in sports, but you seldom hear any true discussion of why this is abuse, the damage it does or why we should not tolerate it. Instead you hear apologists and purists picking sides and flinging barbs. Talk about ‘roid rage....

We should ask ourselves three questions.

- Does the drug enhance athletic performance or give an athletic advantage?
- Is the drug necessary for medical treatment?
- Does use of this drug pose a risk to the user or others?

The side issues get pretty complicated, but it always boils down to those points. And that is where anyone with special health conditions gets (potentially and metaphorically) screwed.

Mainstream sports organizations are primarily concerned about public perceptions and the ability to maintain the reality or the façade of a “level playing field” in which no athlete succeeds because of chemical assistance. But consider the athlete whose life has been impacted by HIV or some other condition that requires prescription of banned substances such as beta blockers or testosterone.

Therapeutic Use Exemptions (TUEs) exist, but they are a recent phenomenon, they are not fully developed, and there is little economic incentive to pay for them. Many fear applying for them can risk exposure of personal medical information.

There is a real hope that organizations such as the Federation of Gay Games, which has worked to create its own testing policies to allow the participation of all athletes, regardless of

special medical needs, to compete and thereby benefit from all that sports has to offer for physical and psychological health, can spur others to take up the cause.

Former Sports Officer Gene Dermody of San Francisco was one of the FGG committee members spent hours considering debate balancing competitive aspirations with medical necessities to come up with a "best compromise" testing policy for Gay Games VII.

"The correlation of male hormonal replacement therapies (MHRT) with the management of HIV+ wasting syndrome is now widely accepted as necessary and effective in the medical community," Dermody told the *Bay Area Reporter*. "Separate from HIV is the more recent research showing the effectiveness of MHRT in successfully treating various forms of clinical depression that did not respond to the myriad psycho-tropics and ubiquitous Prozac and Paxils. There should no longer be the automatic revulsion at the mention of the words 'steroid' or 'testosterone' use, as MHRTs are very effective mainstream treatments that are becoming more popular.

"But LGBT concern should be the same as the mainstream's when we come the question of whether we should be concerned about the abuse of MHRTs in the general public for the wrong reasons.

"Abuse of MHRTs has been a booming business, and technologies to catch cheaters become the opportunistic partner business. Like all drug abuse/enforcement programs, the relationship is a co-dependent one with out-of-control expenses and ineffectual resolutions usually too little too late.

"However, the public loves the new bodies. Male beefcake always sells. Even my 80-year-old mother puts on her glasses and marvels at the physiques of the various Yankees hitters. We now watch baseball games together having the same heroes!"

So, cheer for whom you will, but consider what you are cheering.

The Olympic motto "*citius, altius, fortius*" is Latin for "*faster, higher, and stronger*." Everyone has the right to strive for excellence and empowerment. But *Fastest, Highest, Strongest* is a doomed drive for unsustainable glory that burns everything in its excess. The Greeks, rather than the Romans, had the perfect word for it.

Hubris.