

Steroids yield unfair, dangerous advantage

When a dozen U.S. athletes left the Pan American Games this past summer, America signalled its entry in the anabolic steroid era. Surprised by more thorough testing and threats of year-long suspensions, the athletes decided to head home rather than risk the tests.

For years, the United States had accused Eastern Europeans, particularly women, of ingesting such an unfair advantage. Now it is impossible to deny that we too have found steroids a worthwhile risk to better our performances.

Last August in Caracas, for instance, 21-year-old weightlifter Jeff Michels of Chicago won all three gold medals in 242-pound class. Michels was charged by meet officials of using "illegal drugs" and was immediately suspended for a year. The United States, then, will be without perhaps its best weightlifter for the Olympics this summer.

Steroids' effects are temporary and must be in the system to be of use; once they are out of the system, much of the strength gained is lost. Even if an athlete increases his training once he goes off steroids, he will lose strength. Also, an athlete tends to ingest greater quantities over longer periods of time. Thus, an athlete will depend more on steroids and notice greater withdrawal effects.



Dr. John B. Ziegler

Results, but became horrified when he began to notice changes other than muscle growth in the weightlifters. Among the results he reported was a shrinking of the testes and increased aggression, A Dr. Frankenstein scenario ensued.

Ziegler quickly withdrew from the study while his subjects, delighted with their rapidly improved performances, took more and more pills. Ziegler, to his credit, became an ardent opponent to anabolic steroids, though his protests mostly fell on deaf ears.

Terry Todd of Sports Illustrated spoke to Ziegler not long ago. "I honestly believe," Ziegler told him, "that if I'd told people back then that rat manure would make them strong they'd have eaten rat manure. What I failed to realize until it was too late was that most lifters had obsessive personalities. To them, if two tablets were good, four tablets would be better."

Over the years, drug manufacturers have changed the molecular structure of the hormone to minimize such properties. But clear-cut dangers persist. The first solid reports on steroids are coming in and the news isn't pretty. Those who have used steroids for a prolonged period have been subject to testicular atrophy, enlargement of the prostate, liver problems and a decrease in sperm count. For women, the problem can be even more severe.

Taking a male hormone, not surprisingly, tends to increase masculine characteristics in a person. A woman with more masculine traits would have a distinct edge over a normal woman in sports where bulk produced an advantage. They would come nearer to a man's potential in sport. But as a margarine commercial once insisted, "it's not nice to fool mother nature."

Such was the case of Renato Neufeld, who recently described how her native country, East Germany, prepared its athletes. Neufeld, then 20-years-old, said that while training for the 1980 Olympics, she had been told to take drugs supplied by her coaches.

Neufeld discovered almost immediately that these drugs had painful side effects; her legs grew, her muscles hardened painfully

and she couldn't walk without a severe limp. She often lost her voice and found an increased growth of hair on her face, arms and legs. Neufeld fled to West Germany soon after where Professor Manfred Donk identified the drugs she had been taking as anabolic steroids.

In a now well-known study on female rhesus monkeys given male hormones early in their pregnancies, larger problems come to light: The monkeys delivered offspring that were dramatically abnormal.

Some athletes, clearly, think that the risk of anabolic steroids on themselves and their future children is a worthwhile trade for athletic excellence. Many athletes, however, would rather compete of the strengths of their own bodies. In order to survive in sports, the latter might be forced to take steroids merely to remain in the race. Anabolic steroids are banned for some very sound medical reasons. But more importantly, what is left in competitive sports if fair competition goes?

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Todd Benoit is a senior majoring in English and a sports columnist for The Daily Collegian.

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