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## "Flo Jo" and Performance-Enhancing Drugs

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE  
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The death of Florence Griffith Joyner has been on my mind now for almost two weeks as I consider what I might say about it, if anything. Having commented on drugs and sport in connection with the Tour de France in July and advocating an opening of sport to the use of all drugs, Flo Jo's death brought me back to those comments for further consideration.

Let me first say that I assume that Flo Jo used steroids, not because she was a bad person and not to condemn her as a public liar or a hypocrite. I assume this because the circumstantial evidence seems overwhelming. The ethos of world-class track and field requires the use of steroids or other performance enhancements for competition at the top of the field. I take drug enhanced performance at this level as a given, the norm, a requirement.

I also take as a given the hypocrisy that sportsworld requires, indeed demands, for a denial of use. The international governing bodies driven by IOC image-acolytes insist that their sports are pure, and they cling desperately to what little remains of the long discredited amateur ideal.

I take as a given that the endless battle of the technologies of detection and masking has been won by the maskers. This allows everyone to continue to go his or her hypocritical way. My own view is that the authorities secretly hope that detection will never catch up with masking for fear of what that would reveal.

I found it more than an interesting coincidence that Ben Johnson's appeal of his lifetime ban was denied on the same day as the news of Flo Jo's death swept across the sports pages of the world. Johnson was one of those few who were caught. His case allowed the sports authorities to display their vigilance and their toughness on drugs. Indeed there are those who are convinced that Ben Johnson was the victim of a setup, believing that his knowledge of masking technologies would never have allowed detection of any illegal substance in his system.

One of the most startling things in the aftermath of Florence Griffith Joyner's death was seeing the pictures of her from the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics laid side-by-side with those from Seoul in 1998. I don't remember ever having seen these in sharp contrast. Visually the pictures reveal two different people, with the Flo Jo at Seoul having that chiseled look of the

sculpted steroid user. Her performance at Seoul was a vast improvement on the previous games and her previous times also indicative of drug enhanced performance. The glory of Seoul was preceded by a long layoff and followed shortly by retirement. These circumstances reinforce the overwhelming view that Flo Jo had bowed to the pharmacological requirements of world class competition.

Taking Flo Jo's steroid use then as a given, that brings me back to the issue which I raised a couple of months ago about drugs and training technologies and the willingness of human beings to sacrifice some portion of their future health, or even life, to the cash and glory. This is a real phenomenon and I suspect that if Flo Jo could be interviewed beyond the grave, she would say that what she accomplished on the track and what that brought her in life, was worth the price she paid.

The statistics on longevity of career athletes compared to the general adult population would indicate that for most athletes there is a price to pay. It may be a shortened life, an inability to walk normally, a life of considerable pain, a higher risk of such things as stroke, heart disease, and personality disorders. Those who have experienced some of these results, and who have been asked, seem to be of the opinion that it was all worth it. I suspect that if we could interview the dead they would concur.

I suspect too that someone like Mark McGwire who is using a suspect drug to do whatever he thinks it does is not unaware of the risks, but in this season of seasons he could only conclude that the risks have been more than worth taking.

Bruce Catton once observed that people in the scientific and industrial age are governed by a basic rule: What we CAN do, we MUST do. When both the risks and the rewards are high, and because the rewards are more immediate and the risks more distant, this rule governs the uses of science and technology in sport as well.

Whether we like it or not gifted athletes seeking cash and glory will do whatever needs to be done to reach the top of their field. This makes them no different than many others across the spectrum of human endeavor. The driven personality is as common in the boardrooms of the corporate world as it is on the winners' podium at the Olympic Games.

This, for me, is what came to mind while contemplating Florence Griffith Joyner's death at an early age. This marvelously talented young woman found the road to the top, took the road with all its risks, and reaped its rewards. What remains for us to contemplate is whether this life exemplifies success or failure, whether what we have seen is triumph or tragedy.

Our answers will help us define what we mean by "Sport" in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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