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Sport drugs and semantics

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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If you picked up your newspaper one morning or tuned into SportsCenter and you were greeted by the headline, "Tiger Tests Positive," how would you react? Would it be total disbelief? Would you simply dismiss the announcement from the World Anti-Doping Agency as some mistake, or the result of fanatical WADA leadership seeking to make headlines? Would any of you immediately presume Tiger was guilty, and rejoice that he had finally been caught?

My point here is twofold. First, the way in which we react to announcements of drug use in sport is preset by our perception of the athlete or athletes accused. Second, it is possible that someday the overzealous and headline hunting WADA leadership might falsely accuse someone for their own purposes, or that someone in the testing community, or with access to it, will intentionally sabotage an athlete.

If you think this all is fanciful speculation, I invite you to explore the world of drug accusation and reaction in the past few months.

In June, just before the Tour de France began, a number of riders were disqualified for drug use. No one doubted this, as the Tour has earned an international reputation in this area. When the race ended and Floyd Landis was tested positive no one, at least outside the United States, doubted the tests. The positive tests from Marion Jones and Justin Gatlin elicited no great surprise. In fact Jones, who had never tested positive, was assumed immediately to be guilty even though her "B" sample had not yet been tested.

Going further back, of course, we have the undying case of Lance Armstrong, who has never tested positive but who is assumed by WADA Director Dick Pound to be guilty. In that assessment Pound is in line with several million Frenchmen who are certain Armstrong could not have performed as he did without some artificial assistance. Most Americans assume that Armstrong is clean because he is a national hero and several million people are wearing his bracelets in the fight against cancer.

When the story broke concerning juiced baseball players, there was much weeping and gnashing of teeth by the President,

congressmen, sportswriters, sportscasters, and the overwhelming majority of people who call sports talk radio shows. There seemed to be a feeling in the air that civilization, as we know it, was coming to an end. The talk of the decline and fall, the betrayal of trust, and the besmirching of little children was continuous and at a very high decibel level. The Commissioner of Baseball and the head of the Player's Association were dragged before Congress and dragooned into toughening drug testing in the sport. And as everyone seems to know, Barry Bonds "is without question guilty, guilty, guilty."

As for the National Football League, its Commissioner simply stated that the NFL had extremely tough drug testing policies and therefore there was no drug problem in the sport. The League was clean and would stay so. Strangely a gullible public and its political representatives believed this without hesitation or question.

So it was with considerable interest that I read the Charlotte Observer's report on steroid use by the Carolina Panthers during their 2004 run to the Super Bowl. In medical records within the court documents Dr. Gary Wadler, a steroid expert, reported: "Several of them were using disturbing, particularly alarmingly high amounts with high dosages for long durations -- some in combinations. . . .This wasn't just a passing flirtation with these prohibited substances."

Shortly before leaving for the Super Bowl in Houston two players "were given prescriptions for a combined five NFL-banned substances, including two forms of testosteronePanther players were commonly given testosterone prescriptions allowing five refills." Several players were also using HGH.

In other words, the Panthers were awash in banned substances and when some of these players moved on to other teams the usage did not end. So how was it that they did not test positive under the regime of the toughest testing program in American sport? Perhaps the new Commissioner will unravel that puzzle someday.

What the newspaper report shows is that there is still a widespread steroid and drug culture in the NFL, and that even the tough testing standards of the league have had little impact. Is anyone surprised by this? More to the point is anyone upset about this? Where are the Congressional investigations? Where are the sportswriters who denounce baseball at every turn and rant on and on about Barry Bonds? Where are all those

righteous fans vowing to never go to another NFL game or watch it on TV because "all those players are cheats"?

Finally let us review the events of recent days at the U.S. Open Tennis Championships where Andre Agassi was anointed by most everyone as a saint in the modern pantheon of tennis. Andre has a bad back. At times, especially following a match, Andre could not walk, but Andre is brave and dedicated. He is heroic. He took the needle several times in the last week to stay on his feet and get out on the court to play tennis.

The needles have been described in some detail. The medications and their impact were discussed at some length. The drugs and steroids used, we were assured, were not illegal. There was some minimal debate as to how safe it was for Agassi to be taking all these drugs in such high doses and in such quick succession. Years ago I took injections of steroids in order to keep walking and deal with lower back pain, and it worked for a short while. I was warned, however, about the long-term dangers of putting steroids into my body and was told that to take them repeatedly was very risky.

There was little or no discussion of any problem with this kind of therapy at the U.S. Open. Andre taking the needle was an act of heroism. It was praised. It was admired. He was a warrior. And it enabled a performance on the court of memorable magnitude.

No one seems to want to equate performance enhancement and performance enabling drugs. I must say I see no appreciable difference other than the semantic one.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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