

Professional and Youth Sports: A Story of Drugs and Values

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Major league baseball was rocked by the long anticipated release last month of the Mitchell Report, a document detailing the use of steroids and human growth hormones by players during the past decade. Many prominent names appeared on the list. As I write this article some athletes have acknowledged the use of illegal drugs to improve performance or ostensibly to recover more rapidly from injuries. Others have offered firm denials. This situation is not unique to baseball. Other sports such as football, bicycling, tennis, and track and field have witnessed similar accusations against high profile athletes across the world. In some instances, initial denials were followed by admissions of guilt.

The Mitchell Report has received extensive media attention. I heard one person decry the amount of time devoted to this story given all else that is transpiring in the world. However, while one may argue that sports are “just a game” in contrast with “real-life” issues such as war, poverty, racism, genocide, and the environment, the reality is that in most countries sports hold great interest and seem to be more than just a game. Star players are often afforded the status of heroes.

The intense publicity accompanying professional athletes, not only on the sports pages but on so-called gossip or celebrity pages, attests to society’s preoccupation with the personal and professional lives of these sports figures. Super Bowl Sunday has reached the status of a national holiday in millions of homes in the United States. Younger fans may not realize that the first Super Bowl in 1967, which was played at Memorial Coliseum in Los Angeles, fell far short of a sellout. The fervor for sports is heightened when a team represents an entire nation such as during the Olympics or the World Cup in soccer. This passion has frequently been a two-edged sword, serving to bring people together as reportedly occurred when the different factions of the Iraqi people temporarily halted their hostilities to cheer their national soccer team, or prompting fights and riots when fans from two countries confront each other at the stadium.

As many of my readers know, I enjoy following sporting events and I am a big fan of the New England teams. I have written a number of website articles about sports, including a couple that examined the significant role that sports can play in a child or adolescent’s life. It was interesting to note that in Senator Mitchell’s initial press conference, he emphasized his concern

that many youth desiring to gain a competitive edge would resort to the same tactics as well-known athletes and fall victim to steroid use, not appreciating the effects steroids and other drugs can have on one's physical and emotional development and well-being. Relatedly, several commentators of the Mitchell Report said it was their hope that a goal emerging from the report would be to lessen for young people the attraction of drugs as a performance enhancer.

Sadly, although this goal is of paramount importance, there are many obstacles to its achievement. Having coached my sons in a basketball league for a number of years and having attended many of their Little League and soccer games, I am well aware of the actions of some coaches and parents who subtly or not-so-subtly convey a win-at-all-costs attitude (please see my February and March, 2002 website articles for a more in-depth discussion of this topic). Their actions may have a long-term negative effect. At my workshops and in my clinical practice, I have heard stories from adults who painfully recount their distress at having disappointed their parents or coaches years earlier. One man ruefully reported, "When I played Little League, the first thing my father would discuss with me after a game was what I had done wrong. I felt I could never please him." There are many accounts of sports prodigies who burned out by their late teens or early adult lives, unable to handle the pressure of constantly striving to be number one.

I recall, when I was coaching, a father who attended every practice I conducted (he was the only parent to do so); during games he would scream comments and advice at his 11-year-old son. This boy, who was a good athlete, became unnerved by his father's exhortations and did not play very effectively. I waited until the second game to see if this father's behavior would change, but, not surprisingly, it did not. After the game I spoke with him privately and shared my concern that his son was glancing more at him in the stands than concentrating on the game and the opposing players. I said that during practices or the games only the coach should be providing instructions. I emphasized that I thought it was important for his son to enjoy playing and that, in fact, if he were more relaxed, his performance would improve. I attempted to offer these comments in a tone that I hoped would minimize the father feeling I was criticizing him and consequently, becoming defensive.

The father displayed a modicum of defensiveness, arguing that he was just trying to help his son, but he did refrain from shouting comments from the stands. However, I had no control

over the messages expressed at home. I sensed that this boy desperately desired to gain his father's approval, as testified by his ongoing habit of looking at his father during games. When this thirst for acceptance and approval dominates the culture of youth sporting events, youngsters are more vulnerable to seeking illicit drugs. A need for approval is a powerful motivator to do whatever it takes to be accepted and loved by one's parents or other significant adults.

Another factor that increases the probability of adolescents taking performance-enhancing drugs is that for some their self-esteem is tied almost exclusively to their athletic prowess and success. They have few, if any, other accomplishments on which to build a sturdier foundation for self-dignity and resilience. Articles have been written about high school athletes who were admired, even idealized, by their peers, only to fade into anonymity as young adults. They painfully discovered that they lacked the talent to play sports at a professional level and former admirers quickly lost interest in these one-dimensional high school stars.

Unfortunately, the intoxication of being admired and placed on a pedestal by peers may lead many kids to seek drugs to gain an advantage and remain in a seemingly exalted position, a position that turns out to be illusory and tenuous at best. They eschew looking for different avenues by which to achieve a true sense of confidence and self-worth, instead restricting themselves to one roadway that all-too-often ends with barriers that close off the possibility of future success in areas other than sports. Some will resort to questionable measures, including those that may prove self-destructive, to by-pass these roadblocks.

One commentator of the drug scene in sports wondered if the disgrace, loss of income, relinquishment of medals, and the harm to one's physical and emotional health experienced by some professional athletes would lessen the likelihood of youth taking performance-enhancing drugs. Perhaps, but even with the implementation of stronger consequences imposed on athletes for drug use, it appears that some professional athletes continue to try to outwit drug tests, while some adolescents believe they will not be caught or that the quest for fame is worth the risks accompanying drug use.

Recent reports indicate that a success-at-all-costs attitude has pervaded the mindset of many youth. For instance, stealing and cheating on tests are very prevalent; ethical values are cast aside to obtain unearned higher grades. Educators have told me about parents who contribute to this erosion of ethical standards. These parents ask teachers to change the grades of

their teenage children, not because an error has been made in determining the scores, but because a higher grade will help their kids obtain admission to what they consider to be a prestigious college or university. What message is being conveyed to children when parents seek to give them a competitive edge that is predicated on lies and distortions of ethical values? One message is, "I don't think you have the ability to achieve on your own and thus, I have to bend the rules to help you to succeed." Is that what we want to teach our children? We must remember that true self-esteem arises when children taste the joy of realistic accomplishments--accomplishments that they recognize are based on their own efforts and talents.

Self-esteem is also nurtured when children experience unconditional love, which requires parents to make certain that they do not attempt to live their lives through their children. I have worked with many parents who place extraordinary importance on the achievement of their children as a way of validating their own parenting skills. Children in such homes sense that they must succeed lest they disappoint their parents. This is a burden that children should not be forced to carry. It not only deprives them of the joy in activities that should be fun, but it leaves them feeling anxious and resentful and more receptive to using drugs that they believe will enhance their abilities and accomplishments.

A young teenager I saw in therapy captured the consequence of the burden of pleasing one's parents when he stated with unusual insight, "When I get good grades or play well in sports, it makes my parents feel like they're good parents. They brag about what I've done with their friends. When I don't do well I know they feel I've let them down and that they haven't done such a good job as parents. I actually feel I have let them down." Interestingly, during the course of my work with this boy's parents, they came to the same conclusion as their son, recognizing that their evaluation of themselves as parents was rooted in their son's accomplishments. When children experience this kind of pressure, it is not surprising that some will cheat, some will use drugs, while others may give up or rebel.

My hope is that the Mitchell Report will serve as a catalyst for parents and coaches to discuss important values with youngsters. When a child's identity and sense of purpose are rooted in being number one, it is a fragile identity, similar to a tower constructed of playing cards that can easily come tumbling down the taller it becomes. Given the media coverage of the drug scandal in sports, parents have opportunities to initiate a dialogue with their children and teens

addressing such important themes as: learning how to win and lose with dignity; using unfair, illegal techniques to gain an advantage will result in a hollow, joyless victory; taking performance enhancing drugs is dangerous; being loved is not based on whether one is a star athlete or an A or a C student. The dialogue should be ongoing with the goal of developing such vital attributes in our children as self-discipline, self-dignity, responsibility, empathy, and effective decision-making skills.

I believe that the Mitchell Report represents more than an expose and indictment of the steroid era in sports. It is a document about values, choices, and behavior. It is a wake-up call for parents and other adults to reflect upon their own values and lives and to assist children to develop a moral compass that will not only lessen a win-at-all-cost mentality but also challenge any attempt to rationalize inappropriate and illegal behaviors, including the consumption of drugs to enhance performance.

We must teach our children that short-cuts to success rarely, if ever, lead to the desired results. We must convey and model the message that accomplishments based on our own efforts and perseverance are more likely to be sustained and more likely to contribute to a sense of self-esteem, confidence, and resilience.

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