

RUNNERS WON'T TOLERATE CHEATERS

By DON SIKORSKI
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The recent Barry Bonds indictment shouldn't have been a shock to many. The recently crowned home run king of Major League Baseball is now charged with perjury and obstruction of justice for making false statements to the grand jury in connection with the BALCO steroid scandal. Arguing that he did not know he was taking steroids from personal trainer Greg Anderson, Bonds attributed his recent growth and massive increase in power to an early start date in the off-season gym routine. Many of us do tend to gain pounds as the years go on, but anyone who has ever participated in competitive sports will testify, tremendous improvement after the age of 35 is about as unlikely as Massachusetts electing a Republican. If anything, Barry Bonds should be black-balled from the game for making the rest of us old guys look bad.

Throw fellow big-name baseball players Gary Sheffield and Jason Giambi into the BALCO mix as well. But baseball is not the only sport wrestling with banned substance scandals. The Tour de France has always been scrutinized by drug tests, and has achieved mixed results. Michael Rasmussen, leading this year's event after the 16th Stage, was craft enough to avoid drug tests leading up to the Tour but was sent home by his own team when the law began to catch up with him. Floyd Landis, crowned Tour champion a year prior, was stripped of his title by Tour officials due to positive tests for performance-enhancing drugs. The 31 year-old American cyclist was the first Tour winner in its 105-year history to relinquish his title. And recent testimony by a number of elite cyclists on the inside claims that none of the riders at that level are clean. The Tour, an event where recovery is key, is far too demanding on the body without artificial assistance.

Specifically, a synthetic injection of the hormone EPO assists the body in producing red blood cells, carrying additional oxygen supplies to the muscles. Aiding in the recovery process and difficult to detect, EPO has been to endurance sports what human growth steroids have been to baseball and football. In essence, American sports are no cleaner than cycling; we just offer more lax suspensions. Track and Field may be an exception. Olympic 100-meter champion Justin Gatlin provided the blueprint for Bonds, claiming a massage therapist rubbed a steroid-based testosterone cream onto his legs. He tied a world 100-meter record of 9.77 seconds last year. Gatlin, like Bonds, Sheffield, Giambi, and others, is also tied in with the BALCO scandal. Regina Jacobs, now suspended for four years as a result of a positive THG test, had ducked drug-tested track meets for years, and like Bonds, seemed to excel late in her career, setting her first world record at the age of 39. And Marion Jones has acknowledged using steroids prior to the 2000 Olympic Games. Jones, who won five medals in Sydney, admittedly took the steroid known as "the clear" or "THG". Jones acknowledged how much more effectively she was able to recover from difficult workouts. She was considered to be one of the very best female athletes ever, and she was using banned substances to achieve greatness.

This also begs a question. Do American sports fans really care enough if athletes use performance enhancing drugs? And would we be willing to pour the same amount of money into watching a sport if some of these big name athletes were banned? Baseball enjoyed the lucrative rewards of McGwire and Sosa pounding home runs at a frightening pace. The sports turned its head and looked the other way. Runners seem much less tolerable of cheating. This can be attributed to an understanding of how much sacrifice it takes to excel as a runner. We have no use for those who take shortcuts. If there was a magic pill that would allow me to hit a 95 mile per hour fastball 400 feet, I would purchase it in bulk. It would also make me a millionaire. But if that same pill would only allow me to win races, I'll pass. Our sport isn't lucrative enough to do something so dishonorable, and after all, any runner will tell you that the reward of a great race isn't the race itself but rather knowing that all of the hard work and sacrifices paid dividends.

Waterford's Stephen Herrera is one of the state's best distance runners. Herrera knows the value of those sacrifices and hard work, and drug scandals like these bother him. "I don't like," said Herrera. "It is disheartening. I used to think, perhaps naively, that those world class athletes like the cyclists I am or was a fan of, were just tremendously focused on training and had some great natural ability. Now, I'm not so sure." Herrera also points out the inequities when clean athletes are forced to compete against artificial means. Performance enhancing drugs in sports leads to the disappearance of an equal playing field. And the skill lies in the art not of perfect training but of hiding from the law. "As it is now, I'm wondering if they all haven't been doped up, but just really skilled at hiding it and avoiding detection," says Herrera. "Have all sports come down to a high-tech game of hide and seek?"

Finally, Herrera points out an interesting trend of drug companies sponsoring athletic events and wonders if this is an ethical practice. "I've always believed, as an athlete, that you trained hard, trained smart, recovered and improved through natural means," states Herrera. "Maybe I've had it wrong all this time. I'm still unsure just what to make of the connection between the drug companies and sporting events, but I know I don't like it."

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