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Athletes in the Era of Performance-Enhancing Drugs

In recent years, performance-enhancing drug use in professional sport has received significant legal and media attention, particularly in Major League Baseball (MLB), which came under the scrutiny of US Congress during a two-year investigation that led to the Mitchell Report (2007). Composed of over 300 pages of findings, the report reveals the prevalent use of steroids in professional sport and provides recommendations for their elimination.

Canadian cases of doping usually receive much less media attention, although there are exceptions. One such example is the steroid bust in the University of Waterloo football program. Following the arrest of a player for steroid trafficking and possession, the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport (CCES) took an unprecedented step by testing every athlete on the Waterloo football team for illicit performance-enhancing drugs. When the results showed
that nine players tested positive for banned substances, the university suspended the entire team and placed the coaching staff on administrative leave for one year, cancelling their football season (McElroy, 2010).

The CCES’s actions at the University of Waterloo marked the first occasion in Canadian football history where an entire team has been tested for performance-enhancing drugs. Typically in a Canadian season, one to five players will be tested within a football team. This limited sampling means that the number of athletes using steroids in Canadian football is largely unknown. By turning to players’ accounts, I can shed some light on this mysterious black hole in our knowledge of steroid use. In addition, these accounts offer insight into players’ experiences and perceptions of drug use.

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF PERFORMANCE-ENHANCING DRUG USE

Among the players I interviewed for this book, there was no shared, general definition of performance-enhancing drugs. The majority of players across all levels stated that only steroids and human growth hormone variants were considered performance-enhancing drugs, while many substances commonly put in the same category outside of sports, such as stimulants and painkillers, were not. Some players indicated that steroids could increase muscle mass, speed, intensity, recovery time, and overall strength, while others argued that they are not even performance-enhancing drugs because the adverse effects actually interfere with the body’s normal functioning. As
one junior defensive lineman explained, “steroids cause so much damage to the body and injuries from pushing the body past its natural limits that they end up limiting performance, not enhancing it.”

Several players noted a wider range of substances that they considered performance-enhancing drugs; the two most common were the legal supplements creatine and protein powder. Players reported that using these allowed them to recover faster from workouts, providing gains in lean muscle mass and increased strength. While most players reported using such supplements, many did not consider them to be performance-enhancing drugs. One university wide receiver noted, “Creatine is a performance-enhancer, but it’s not a performance-enhancing drug.” A number of players made a similar distinction between supplements, which are legal, and all the drugs they presumed to be illegal. Likewise, several players noted the prevalent use of caffeine pills, especially at the junior level, as a performance enhancer. Others, however, argued that caffeine pills could not be classified as a drug.

The players’ reports varied widely on the prevalence of performance enhancers in Canadian football, particularly at the professional level. However, the majority of athletes at all levels indicated that they currently used or had previously used some form of legal supplement to enhance their performance on the field. For example, a university offensive lineman noted, “on the legal side I think that 100 percent of our team has used some sort of supplement. Mostly just protein powder, but some guys will go a bit more intense.” The most common supplements mentioned by Canadian football players included creatine, protein powders, and caffeine pills. Many other
players reported using products known as “weight gainers” in the bodybuilding industry; these are typically a blend of creatine, protein, and complex carbohydrate powders athletes use to create a high-calorie meal replacement bar or drink. In Canada, most of these supplements are legal, though largely unregulated, and can be purchased off the shelves of many grocery and health food stores.

Players’ reports on the prevalence of illegal steroid use varied. None of the 59 players I interviewed admitted to ever using steroids; however, every participant indicated that he knew at least one other football player who had.¹ At the junior level, the majority of players reported that while some in the league used steroids, most do not. A CJFL wide receiver affirmed, “I would probably guess less than a quarter of the league does them.” Likewise, a junior offensive lineman explained, “there are guys out there who will use them, but most guys just think they are dumb because of the negative health effects and because it’s cheating.”

Nevertheless, at the university level, players indicated a higher prevalence of steroid use. One university linebacker said that he knew of at least 15 CIS football players who were currently using illegal steroids, and a quarterback noted that there are “a lot of young steroid freaks playing university football in Canada.” Others indicated only a few players on their own team used any illegal performance-enhancing drugs. Most players did, however, note suspicions that other teams had multiple

¹ Given the legal and moral implications of steroids, it is not likely that players who currently use steroids, or have used them in the past, would willingly disclose this information.
players who were currently using steroids or had done so recently.

Similarly, reports from professional football players varied widely on the prevalence of steroid use. At one end of the spectrum, a CFL offensive lineman noted, “you are not really sure most of the time. You always have your guesses of who is on what. I would say that a couple of guys that I have played with or against have used them.” At the other end, a linebacker estimated that 10 to 20 percent of the professional league’s players had recently used some form of illegal steroid.

Most CFL players reported that they were not able to give an estimate because of the secrecy surrounding illegal drug use. For example, a quarterback noted, “I don’t think that it’s very prevalent, but I’m not naïve enough to think that it’s not there. I don’t know if I could put a percentage on it, or anything like that.” Another professional player made a more alarming admission:

It is running rampant. People need to realize that it’s not two guys over here doing it, but it’s more like if you take one hundred professional football players, you’ll probably find that eighty-five have used some form of illegal supplement.

A third athlete who came to Canada after playing in an American league alleged, “steroid use in the CFL is more prevalent than anywhere else I have seen.”

Reports on illegal steroid use in the CFL thus vary anywhere from 1 to 85 percent. Even with the huge range in reported rates, these numbers indicate that steroids are being used in junior, university, and professional football in Canada. This prevalence does not, however, appear
to be as high as it once was in US professional football where, according to Dave Meggyesy:

The violent and brutal player that television viewers marvel over on Saturdays and Sundays is often a synthetic product. . . . I saw players taking not only steroids, but also amphetamines and barbiturates at an astonishing rate. . . . Trainers do more dealing in these drugs than the average junky. (Meggyesy, 1971, p. 73)

He goes on to say, “some pro teams dispense amphetamines and barbiturates like they were penny candy” (p. 91). The reports of football players I interviewed in the course of my research provide little evidence that illegal performance-enhancing drug use is anywhere near this prevalent in contemporary Canadian football. It is clear, however, that steroids are being used by some in junior, university, and professional football in Canada.

Players report a number of reasons for using steroids: to gain weight, to go pro, to get better at their jobs, to keep their jobs, and to make up for lost time and wages. The first rationale, weight gain, was the most common one reported by players. One CFL offensive lineman who weighs close to 300 pounds remarked, “usually the biggest issue for me is that I am always small at my position, so it has always been a battle to gain weight.” Likewise, a 165-pound university cornerback exclaimed, “Look at me. If anyone has a justification to use steroids, it would be me. I know I need to pack on some weight.”

Most players I interviewed at the junior or university playing levels said that if they did use steroids, it would not be simply to excel at their current playing levels.
Instead, they said they would do it to increase the possibility of being drafted by a Canadian or American professional team. “For a lot of guys, playing junior football is their last shot,” a CJFL running back explained. “A lot of these guys will probably never play university football, and they know that. Steroids become a way to realize their dream.”

Professional players indicated that using illegal steroids could increase their proficiency at their jobs, a form of use that has been termed “vocational” (Courson 1991, p. 141). Others suggested that they faced pressure to use steroids in order to keep their jobs. Many felt that steroids can aid an athlete’s recovery from football-related injuries. Several players also suggested the added size and strength that can come from taking steroids makes players less prone to injuries. Beyond these health-related rationales, some also reported feeling pressure to use steroids to keep up with new players who could take their place on the football field, a common explanation given by older players and those who have experienced a serious injury. A few athletes see steroids as a way of gaining their younger or healthier playing days. Many players also reported experiencing pressure to use steroids in order to keep up with those who were already using them.

One running back suggested that steroid use in the CFL was not prevalent among the star players, but was among those struggling to make teams from year to year. According to this player, steroid use in the CFL is largely a result of the league’s pay structure, which forces many to take jobs during the off-season to earn a reasonable living. While established players make a high enough
salary to train throughout the off-season, those who are finding their place in the league must work other jobs. As a result, they often do not receive the same amount and quality of training as established players. This leads to a growing disparity between players’ physical conditions based primarily on the league’s salary structure. For those who must work full-time during the off-season, steroids become a shortcut to remain competitive with players who earn enough to focus strictly on training.

Despite these explanations for why players use steroids or feel the pressure to use them, the athletes I interviewed also discussed several reasons not to. One common reason was that, because steroids are illegal, players who use them could get league suspensions. They also noted that steroids are difficult to obtain without risk of legal sanctions. Others felt that taking steroids was a form of “cheating.” Several players were of the opinion that steroids are not as useful as some people report them to be, and thought they could achieve greater results through proper training and nutrition. For others still, the illegal drugs were simply too expensive. According to one CFL player, a single steroid cycle can cost thousands of dollars, which most Canadian athletes cannot afford. Furthermore, the increase in pay that they could potentially receive by using steroids is not considered significant enough to make it worth the various health risks associated with using the drugs.

From players’ accounts, an interesting paradox related to using performance-enhancing drugs in Canadian football emerged: the drugs are known to lessen and heighten the risk of injury. On one hand, players believed that steroids make them bigger, stronger, and faster,
protecting them from strains, sprains, and fractures common in the sport. On the other, they thought that steroids carry multiple health risks and could heighten the chance of injuries. One CFL offensive lineman noted, “the human body has limits. If you push past those limits, things are going to start breaking down.” According to this player, the risk of injury from steroid use is caused by muscles that grow in size and strength too quickly, so that other parts of the body, such as tendons and ligaments, cannot keep up. Players using steroids then face a greater risk of tearing tendons and ligaments, which can be career-ending injuries. However, several players reported concerns about being smaller and weaker than those using steroids, which exposes them to injury resulting from size and strength differentials. According to the majority of players across all the playing levels, if no one was using steroids, then these kinds of injuries would be much less pervasive. However, as long as players are using steroids, then this paradox continues to exist.

DRAWING THE LINE OF CONSENT

Players reported a number of criteria to define the consensual limits of performance-enhancing drug use in Canadian football. As with the lines marking the limits of consent for on-field violence and hazing, there was not a definitive set of criteria defining consent to performance-enhancing drug use expressed by all players; however, many were overlapping and interrelated. Most suggested that for performance-enhancing drug use to be consensual, players must be aware that they are taking a banned
substance. One university running back asked, “If you
don’t know you’re taking it, how can you be at fault?”

Many players also indicated that performance-
enhancing drug use is non-consensual if the athlete took
a drug suggested and/or provided by a teammate, coach,
or trainer, but had not been informed that it was banned
in their sport, or illegal. A professional offensive line-
man explained, “guys on the team are usually the best
resource on what to take and what not to. You trust that
they know what they’re talking about and won’t give you
something illegal that could get you into trouble.”

For drug use to be consensual, others noted that
the player must be completely informed about the pos-
sible negative side effects and health consequences of
ingesting a particular substance. If a teammate, coach, or
trainer misinforms the player about the possible adverse
effects, then most consider the use of the substance non-
consensual. A few players also suggested that perfor-
ance-enhancing drug use is non-consensual if the coach
required a player to take a banned substance in order to
make a team or remain on one.

In total, the players I interviewed listed four criteria
for establishing consensual performance-enhancing drug
use: players must (1) know they are ingesting a substance;
(2) be informed about whether the substance is banned
in their sport or illegal if it is provided by a teammate,
coach, or trainer; (3) be informed of the negative health
consequences or side effects of the drug if it is provided
by a teammate, coach, or trainer; and (4) not be forced to
take a banned substance by a team coach.

Players also listed specific circumstances where per-
formance-enhancing drug use would not be consensual.
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Some of the examples were:

- a coach or trainer providing what he calls a “painkiller” to a player that is actually an illegal steroid or banned substance;
- an individual “spiking” the team Gatorade container with a banned performance-enhancer;
- a player passing pills around the locker room without adequately informing his teammates about their legal status or possible side effects;
- a coach telling a player he will remain on special teams until he takes a banned substance to bulk up;
- a coach telling players to use an illegal substance in the off-season in order to make his team or another in the following year.

**DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON PERFORMANCE-ENHANCING DRUG USE**

Drug testing policies and procedures in Canadian football are both ineffective and insufficient. According to the majority of players I spoke to at the junior and university levels, the random tests conducted by the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport do little to curb performance-enhancing drug use. On teams with over sixty players, only four to six are typically tested each year, and often none are selected at all. The small likelihood that players taking steroids will be selected for a test is well understood, and as a result drastically reduces the tests’ capacity to curb drug use.
In response to the inadequacies of the current system, some players suggested testing everyone who participates in the playoffs. As one put it:

This would ensure that those teams that are succeeding aren’t using any forms of steroids or anabolic agents. And limiting to playoff teams would cut costs, but also deter the whole league from using. If you can’t win a Vanier Cup by cheating, then what would be the point? It’s also in playoffs where most players get their CFL exposure.

The limitation of this approach, however, is that players could use steroids earlier in the season and then make sure they are clean by the playoffs to avoid testing positive.

At the junior level, players expressed a similar concern over the lack of testing in their league. One junior defensive tackle agreed. “Considering in two seasons I’ve never seen a member of our team take a test, I’m not sure they are effective.” A junior wide receiver remarked, “not only do they not test enough, but I have heard of guys failing the test and still getting to play.”

Shortly after I conducted the interviews for this book, the CFL introduced a newly developed drug policy. Since the new drug testing procedures mirror those of the CJFL and CIS, although testing for fewer substances and imposing lighter penalties, it is likely that many of the same difficulties already discussed about this method will arise in the coming years. Every player whom I interviewed

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2 The Vanier Cup is presented to the winner of the CIS championship.  
3 No junior administrators interviewed were aware of any incident to confirm this statement.
for this book indicated that the CFL should implement some form of drug testing in the near future. One professional offensive lineman argued, “it is an embarrassment to the league and its players that there is no testing.” A wide receiver reported that in surveys conducted by the Canadian Football League Players’ Association every year, a “vast majority . . . almost all players agree that testing should be done.” Several administrators asserted that while they also felt that drug testing should be done, other matters were currently of greater concern, such as player marketing and injury compensation. According to one administrator, “the CFL doesn’t have drug testing like many other major sports leagues, but it also doesn’t generate the same income those leagues do. . . . We are not talking about a multi-billion dollar league here.”

Beyond the issues related to the limited number of players selected for drug tests each year, players also described how easy it is to cheat on random drug tests. A common concern reported by about half of the players was that the development of new drugs and cleansing agents allowed athletes to use steroids without testing positive. According to one junior centre, “the drug testers will just never be able to keep up to the drug takers. . . . They are always just one step behind.” Other players noted inherent problems with the predictability of the drug tests. A university quarterback suggested that since players know their team will only be tested once during the year, they can just wait until that’s done, and then start taking steroids for the remainder of the season. Likewise, a university coach remarked, “if guys are going to cheat, they are probably smart enough to mask it and not get caught.” Whether players actually engage
in such behaviour is not clear from the interviews, as no one reported engaging in drug test manipulation for themselves or a teammate. The effectiveness of league drug testing rests not only on conducting an adequate number of tests but also on making sure that they are effectively detecting those who are using illegal steroids. Insufficient testing combined with testing practices that do not work means that little is being done to effectively limit steroid use in Canadian football.

Most players interviewed reported that players should face criminal penalties for any acts deemed criminal, regardless of their relation to football. However, the majority of players indicated that testing positive for steroid use should not result in automatic criminal sanction, unless a thorough investigation deems it warranted. According to one junior linebacker, “if a player is suspended from the league for using, then that should be enough.” Other players noted that a league suspension for steroid use would be a much harsher penalty for most players than a small legal one.

While players did not think that testing positive for steroid use should usually result in criminal sanction, they indicated a number of instances where individuals should be held criminally liable for actions related to performance-enhancing drug use in Canadian football. The majority of players reported that those handing out steroids to their teammates should be held legally liable for distribution, especially if they are not informing players about the illegal nature and health consequences of the drugs. Likewise, several players reported that team trainers and coaches who promote the use of illegal steroids should face legal sanctions, particularly
if they place any conditions on a player, such as requiring him to take steroids in order to make the team or earn a first-team position.

While several players indicated that coaches and trainers should be held liable for directly influencing players to use banned substances, this influence must be direct; otherwise these officials should not be held criminally liable. That is, a coach who suggests that a player should gain weight in the off-season is not necessarily indicating he should go on a steroid cycle. Referring to his own coaches, one professional offensive lineman claimed:

They never pressure you to go on steroids or something. They normally say that they want you bigger, faster, stronger [than] usual. Some guys will take that as needing to go to the next level and take steroids, but a guy like me, I will just work harder and take legal stuff because that is what I do.

Others, however, indicate that coaches should be held liable for indirectly suggesting that players use steroids.

Players also indicated that coaches and trainers who are aware of players on their team taking steroids have a responsibility to report this to testing officials. According to a few players, those who do not report this information and allow steroid users to continue playing should face a league disciplinary review. In instances where coaches or trainers deliberately aid in covering up the steroid use of players, a few players indicated that they should face some form of legal penalty.

A junior coach indicated that coaches and league administrators should be reprimanded if they fail to adequately educate their players about the harmful effects of
steroid use and the safer alternatives for achieving similar results, such as a high-protein diet:

There is more education about how to take stuff and get away with it than there is to get the same sort of results or good results from other clean and natural products. That is the problem. These kids don’t realize what they are doing to their bodies. It hurts them. If they were offered a viable alternative, I am sure that most would take it.

In an effort to respond to this concern and avoid liability, the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport now requires all junior and university football players to take an online drug education course. The course materials highlight the dangers of steroid use, list the substances that are banned in Canadian amateur sport, and provide tips for eating and training for maximum results without using steroids.

According to one professional offensive lineman, league administrators, especially at the professional level, should be held liable for performance-enhancing drug use. He argues:

What people have to realize is that the human body, regardless of how well trained, cannot do certain things. If you are six-foot-seven and 330 pounds, there are certain things that you are not going to be able to do. Naturally, you should not be able to run a 4.7 40 and do all of the things that they do. The vast majority of those guys are on performance-enhancers, whether it is steroids or growth hormones or amphetamines, all of that stuff, cocaine use, all of it. The reason why you will never hear owners bitch
and complain is that it is way too big business. All of these fans are used to seeing a certain product on the field, guys are so fast and so strong. If they ever started to test for everything and got it to be a clean sport, guys would not be as fast, guys would not be as big, they would not be as strong. You would not get the same kind of product on the field. People would lose interest.

Players’ perceptions of consensual performance-enhancing drug use are consistent with the way it is handled by the Canadian criminal justice system. As mentioned above, the players I interviewed indicate four criteria for consensual performance-enhancing drug use: players must (1) know they are ingesting a substance; (2) be informed about whether the substance is banned in their sport or illegal if provided by a teammate, coach, or trainer; (3) be informed of the negative health consequences or side effects of the drug if provided by a teammate, coach, or trainer; and (4) not be forced to take a banned substance by a team coach. Based on the legal cases I examined, only the third criterion might not be recognized in Canadian legal courts, if a player were to purchase steroids without being informed of their harmful side effects. The other three are similar to defences that shift blame from the user onto someone else to avoid legal accountability.

Players did, however, suggest that harsher legal penalties should be imposed on individuals who distribute steroids, particularly if they do so without adequately informing the athletes about the illegal nature of the drug and any harmful side effects. From the perspective
of many players, individuals distributing steroids should receive more punitive criminal sanctions than they typically do currently.

**SUMMARY**

The potential legal penalties for performance-enhancing drug use are less severe than those for violence and hazing in Canadian sport. However, league disciplinary procedures are more severe when a player tests positive for steroid use than they are for on-field violence and hazing. Players who test positive for steroid use in Canadian football typically receive a one-year suspension for their offence. In contrast, no administrators whom I interviewed were aware of a single incidence of on-field violence that resulted in a penalty of more than a five-game suspension. Despite the harsher punishments given by league administrators on performance-enhancing drug use, none of the players I spoke to complained about the penalties typically given for positive drug tests. In fact, they argued that more players should be tested to ensure that steroid users were no longer able to play the sport of football.