



PUMP IT UP

WHAT IF **PEDs** HAD BEEN
A-O.K. FROM THE GET-GO?

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THE SOUNDTRACK of modern sports is skepticism. The logo is a raised eyebrow. The language is snark. When a man rides his bicycle up a mountain too quickly or when home runs are piled too high, whatever is left of innocence dies another small death at the altar of disbelief. Too big, too fast, too many. *It has to be the drugs.*

Now remove this factor from the equation. Imagine that modern PEDs, first used in the 1950s, were never banned. They were accepted as part of sports training and recovery, no different from aspirin or ice (or Toradol). The default position was not that all athletes are clean until proven otherwise.

Here a massive disclaimer: Not all athletes are clean today. Says Victor Conte, the deposed BALCO mastermind, “There’s still an overwhelming majority who are using these drugs.” Quibble with his numbers, but accept the concept. Understand that drugs are still being used.

However. If they’d never been banned?

PEDs work. There may be an element of placebo effect, but as a general rule PEDs will affect some degree of performance enhancement, as it says in the name. “Drugs will take your body places you can’t get without them,” says Charles Yesalis, professor emeritus at Penn State and expert in the field of steroid use. They don’t work to the same degree on everyone. “Some people are hyper-responsive, some people require higher doses for longer periods,” says Conte. Women are affected more than men, because men have far more natural testosterone. But they will make almost *everyone* a better physical version of him- or herself. If steroids had never been banned, “the world would certainly look different,” says Conte.

How different? Michael Joyner, a professor of anesthesiology and an expert in human performance at the Mayo Clinic, says, “In the 100 meters I don’t think anybody would have broken nine seconds flat. (Usain Bolt’s world record is 9.58.) But I do think the record would be 9.2 or 9.3. I don’t think Flo-Jo would be the record-holder for women. (Florence Griffith Joyner’s 29-year-old record of 10.49 seconds, probably very wind-aided, at least, has never been seriously challenged). And Bob Hayes (Olympic gold medalist in the 100 meters in 1964) never trained full-time. He ran on dirt tracks.” And he was never suspected of steroid use.

There’s also a less measurable past. “Imagine Jim Brown on steroids,” says Michael Joyner. “Or Deacon Jones.” A list like this is nearly infinite. Take any great from the past, in any sport, and make his greatness just a little larger. Or perhaps, because *everybody* would have been juicing, *everybody* would have been a little



bigger, a little faster, a little stronger. Perhaps the pecking order would have remained in place . . . or perhaps those who respond better to the drugs might have surpassed our heroes of yore. Maybe Barry Bonds’s single-season home run record would be 85 instead of 73—unless you believe Bonds was, in fact, using steroids, which has been widely assumed but never proved. Maybe somebody else also would have hit 73. Perhaps Ben Johnson would still have his gold from the 1988 Seoul Olympics—unless you believe that Carl Lewis-on-roids would have beaten him. (True cynics are laughing at this qualifying clause.) Really, there’s already plenty of evidence of what a virtually unregulated steroid culture looks like: Six still-standing women’s outdoor individual track and field world records were set by Eastern bloc athletes in the 1980s, when state-sponsored doping was rampant. Likewise, pro bodybuilding does not test for PEDs, and the winners have grown bigger and more impressive over time.

The use of PEDs is a science. The athletes who’ve been most successful in the black-market era are the ones who employ the best chemists, and by extension have the best drugs (and the best system for

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... WAYNE GRETZKY HADN'T SKATED OUT WEST?

not getting caught). Those chemists would only be more valuable if PEDs weren't banned. In their support systems, along with personal trainers, strength coaches and massage therapists, agents and business managers, athletes would also have steroid gurus. *I want to thank my mother, the people of Cleveland and my teammates*, one can imagine LeBron James saying after bringing an NBA title back to his hometown. *But most of all, I have to thank my medical staff for putting together the right mix of anabolics and stimulants to keep me strong all season long.* Medicine men would wield massive power, selling themselves on the open market to the highest bidders or affiliating themselves with teams or shoe and apparel companies. (Again, true cynics titter.)

Then there's the issue of the long-term effects on all these oversized bodies. "There does reach a point," says Conte, "where steroid use builds so much muscle mass that connective tissue, tendons and ligaments, cannot handle the stress. Too much can be as bad—or worse than—too little." Long term, the picture gets a little more fuzzy, but, Yesalis clarifies, "there are no drugs without side effects. Are anabolic steroids safe? Of course not. But there's no way I can put them into the same category as amphetamines or cocaine or even tobacco."

And then the question becomes: To what extent would this sports ecosystem police itself? Would we have seen ever larger, faster, more powerful NFL players until we had 400-pounders who lasted only a single season before being tossed aside? Would we have needed bigger baseball stadiums to contain the 700-foot home runs, taller baskets to support the 60-inch vertical leaps of 300-pound power forwards? "I'm not sure there's any limit on the appetite for seeing bigger-than-life humans," says Yesalis. "Eventually it might all have drifted toward rollerball."

Logically, the medical community would have intervened, setting limits in the name of safety, protecting the greedy and driven from themselves. Use the drugs, they would have said, but not so much that you die. There would have been testing labs. Athletes, coaches and doctors would have sought ways to circumvent that system to maximize performance.

Media and fans would have been skeptical of what they saw, wondering if perhaps the athletes had exceeded their limits. Fingers would have been pointed. Denials would have been issued. Uncertainty would have reigned.

THE NHL introduced two teams from the Golden State in 1967. One, the California Seals, remains best known for its white skates. The Seals moved to Cleveland in '76 and merged with the Minnesota North Stars in '78, having never enjoyed a winning season. The other, the L.A. Kings, had some early success, making the playoffs semi-regularly—but this was hardly a top-tier franchise in the '80s. The SoCal fan base, **SPORTS ILLUSTRATED** wrote at the time, put the sport on par with "intramural beanbag tossing."

Then, on Aug. 9, 1988, the Edmonton Oilers traded Wayne Gretzky to L.A. for players, picks and 15 million sorely-needed dollars. The deal (which New Democratic Party leader Nelson Riis equated to trading a beaver from its dam, or off-loading Vanna White for two lose-a-turns and a vowel-to-be-named-later) shocked Canada. But it also made West Coast hockey suddenly relevant. Magic Johnson bought Kings season tickets. California had 4,800 registered amateur hockey players in '90; within five years, that had reached 15,500. Gretzky's success in L.A.—he brought the Kings to the '93 Cup Finals—undeniably fueled the league's move into the Sun Belt. Since '88, the NHL has added seven teams west of the Mississippi, plus five in Southern (sunny) states.

Oilers owner Peter Pocklington has offered conflicting explanations for the move, but what's clear is that Gretzky's high-scoring ways would have guaranteed a steady fan base—

not an alienated one—for years to come. What if, instead of selling the future Great One, Pocklington, who at least once said he needed the cash injection, sold the *team*? (He did so almost a decade later, mired in debt.) Or, really, what if he'd showed a little patience and hung onto his star?

Without Gretzky out West, without the success of an ice-cold game in a warm climate, the NHL would not have expanded so confidently toward the South. The league surely would not have created two *more* California franchises. The Stanley Cup would be etched differently: no 2012 and '14 Kings, no '07 Anaheim Ducks. . . . And pro hockey would remain, for better or worse, as *SI* wrote in 1954, a "great Northern sport." —**JEREMY FUCHS**

> L.A., EH?

No Wayne, no Western boom for the NHL—which would have dampened Showtime for Magic and the Lakers.



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