This Is Your Nation on Steroids

James Poniewozik

Why does a performance-enhanced society scorn performance-enhanced athletes?

T
URN ON A FOOTBALL GAME, AND YOU'LL SEE CHEERLEADERS
with swoon-popping breast implants, aging sportscenter
critics with suspiciously tenacious hairlines and commercials
for pills that promise Olympic erections. Turn on the
news, and you'll hear about how athletes have got the notion
that it's O.K. to use artificial substances to improve their bod-
ies. Appalling! Where would they get an idea like that?

On its face, the baseball steroid scandal is simple. Athletes
who break the rules to win are cheaters. But ask why we have
the rules in the first place, and you have to confront a basic
irony. We decry performance-enhanced sports. Yet we live
performance-enhanced lives.

We all know about Hollywood celebrities
who get plastic surgery to extend their ca-
reers. (You want to see performance
enhancement in sports, look court-
side at a Lakers game.) But plastic
surgery has become positively dem-
ocratic. Businessmen get tanned
and tucked to win promotions;
other people, just to look hot.
And there are plenty of other
ways that we augment nature,
medically, technologically and
financially. The elderly can ex-
tend their sex lives beyond what
God and their grandchildren
imagined. Kids take expensive
preemptive tests to ace tests that are
supposed to measure inborn apti-
tude. Short but healthy children are
given human growth hormone for
their self-esteem. Adults take Ritalin
to sharpen their senses. Pop singers have their
voices, ahem, "sweetened" with additional recorded tracks.

Yet no one is threatening legislation against Adelle Simpson.

So why are steroids the exception? One obvious answer is
that sports are supposed to be fair in a way that life is not. But
sports are full of institutionalized unfairness—ask anyone who's
ever rooted against the Yankees. Olympic runner wins a gold
medal because of blood doping. Chester? Olympic team wins
dozens of medals because it has tens of millions of dollars for
training. USA! USA! USA! In the steroid debate, what's of-
ten cited is fairness, not to current players but to the records of
retired and dead ones. Yet middling athletes of today routinely
outdo giants of the past thanks to legal advances in everything
from nutrition to sports medicine to biodynamics to equip-
ment. If Roger Bannister had the advantage of competing
today, wouldn't he run better than a mere 3:59:4 mile?

Yes, but steroids are far more dangerous than, say, carb
loading. That justification would be more convincing if there
were any evidence that fans and teams otherwise give
two snorts about athletes' health. But that wouldn't explain
how we tolerate, for example, football linemen swelling up to
heave-straining proportions and players hobbling themselves
for life by "playing through the pain" (i.e., getting taped and
numbed by the team doc). Or jockeys nearly killing them-
selves to drop weight. Or the very existence of boxing.

Of course, tainted Yankee Jason Giambi at least is an adult;
teens, however, have started using the same drugs the
pros do. Again, setting a good example for kids is a

noble argument—but one that society hardly
heeds otherwise. If steroid scold
John McCain were a woman, he
might be pushing laws against
plastic surgery among pop star-
tlets, the better to save girls
from deadly eating disor-
der. President George W.
Bush denounced steroid
use in the State of the
Union. "It sends the wrong
message—that frail are
shortcuts to accomplishment,"
said the Yale legacy kid.

In the end, the steroid con-
troversy may be less about what we
want for athletes or children than
about what we fear for ourselves. The
performance enhancement of society promises to get only more radical, especially
as genetic engineering grows more advanced.

When people of means can buy sharper brains and
stronger bodies for themselves or better genetic profiles for
their kids, juiced-up athletes will be the least of our ethical wor-
ries. If Giants slugger Barry Bonds deserves an asterisk next
to his home-run records, maybe we'll welcome asterisks next to
our salaries, our sexual conquests and our kids' SAT scores.

Our new power to transform ourselves raises the question of
whether we are changing from nature's creature into man's in-
vention. So we ask athletes to maintain an authenticity that we
don't want to—is it a sacrosanct piece of purity. Is that hypo-
critical? Yes, because the fan-athlete relationship is inherently hypo-
critical; fans want sports heroes to be more admirable than
the rest of us. We used to worship athletes for being mightier, faster,
greater than we could imagine. The day may come when we
gather in stadiums—with our bought-and-paid-for brains, bodies
and bladders—and cheer on players for making do with less. 

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