

Doping for Seconds

The Shadow of Drugs on American Athletics

With the return of the Summer Olympics, the world of athletics is once again focusing its attention on allegations, investigations, and confessions of drug use—especially in light of doping scandals throughout the sports world over the last year.

In August 2003, track and field fans watched Kelli White become the first American and third woman in history to clinch both the 100- and 200-meter sprints at the world championships in Paris. But not long after she was awarded two gold medals, it was announced that she had tested positive for the stimulant modafinil, used to treat narcolepsy. White admitted to taking modafinil for a sleep disorder, and claimed she hadn't reported it to proper authorities because it was not on the official list of banned substances. But soon after, three other American track and field athletes tested positive for modafinil, and international drug-testing officials suggested they were not the only guilty Americans.

In the fall of 2003, the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency conducted a raid of the Bay Area Laboratory Co-Operative

(BALCO), a company suspected of serving an underground market for steroids and designer drugs. Investigators discovered correspondence between Kelli White and Victor Conte, Jr., founder of BALCO, which linked White to a number of designer drugs—which work by producing the same result as a banned substance, but sneak past drug screeners due to slightly different molecular structures. White was linked to such drugs dating back to 2000. In exchange for her cooperation and confession, White escaped lifetime banishment from her sport—but she will sit out the next two years of track and field competition (including this year's Olympics), and all her placements and medals between 2000 and 2004 were annulled.

The Kelli White drug investigations also implicated several other runners, as well as numerous athletes from other sports. Craig Masback, chief executive of the U.S. Track and Field Team, declared that “the situation in which we find ourselves is not a track and field problem, or even a baseball problem; it is an American problem.” He pointed out that “more than four percent of

American high school seniors” say they have used steroids in the last year.

This figure is backed up by recent studies showing that steroid use decreased slightly among the overall population of U.S. high school students, but usage increased among student athletes. While steroids and supplements are used by young athletes to build muscle, other performance-enhancing drugs—like asthma medications—are increasingly used by young athletes to improve their lung capacity. The studies show that most teenage boys are aware that steroids can lead to impotence, and that the side effects of other performance-enhancing drugs include nausea, diarrhea, and vomiting. Perhaps most alarming is that the number of students who have a moral or ethical problem with the use of steroids is declining—even though drug education and prevention programs are at an all-time high.

At a recent Senate hearing on steroid use by adolescent athletes, one of the witnesses was Don Hooten of Plano, Texas, whose high school son suffered from severe depression due to withdrawal from steroids and eventually killed himself. Thanks to the Internet,

Mr. Hooten said, “all our kids need is a credit card number or a money order and they can have hard-core prescription anabolic steroids delivered right to their doorstep.” An anonymous college football player testified about the “competitive edge” that steroids give athletes trying to keep up with their peers.

Sports doping was deemed important enough by President Bush to earn a mention in his 2004 State of the Union address: “The use of performance-enhancing drugs like steroids in baseball, football, and other sports is dangerous, and it sends the wrong message—that there are shortcuts to accomplishment, and that performance is more important than character.”

Surely Tori Edwards, a sprinter who competed against Kelli White, would agree with this sentiment. Upon hearing that White’s medals were being annulled, she said: “I am disappointed, because she took something from me.... The honor of winning that race, crossing the finish line first, throwing my hands up in the air and having my family seeing me on the podium.... Even if they send me a gold medal in the mail, it’s not going to be the same. It’s a moment I’ll never get back.”