

Boxing and Steroids

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.
Saturday, 19 March 2005 19:00

Baseball's dirty little secret has turned our National Pastime into a national embarrassment. The specter of steroids has cast a shadow of doubt over some of baseball's most prestigious records. Congressional hearings in Washington, DC last week probed into the matter.

Boxing once endured its own set of hearings when Sen. Estes Kefauver sought to rid the sport of Organized Crime in the early 1960s. It's unlikely there will be a Kefauver II, at least not for steroids. But in an era where celebrity is as cheap as the next reality show and making fast money is preferred to earning money, one can never be certain that a fighter – or any athlete – is above using performance enhancing drugs to achieve riches or glory. In boxing, most of the major state athletic commissions already test for steroids, and to date there has only been one high-profile positive test – Fernando Vargas after his loss to Oscar De La Hoya.

It does not seem that boxing has a steroid problem, but that doesn't mean the issue should be ignored.

I spoke with Marc Ratner, chairman of the Nevada State Athletic Commission, and he said: "I don't think it's a widespread problem but we have to be vigilant. Of the hundreds of tests we've administered, we've only had a couple of positives. But the most important thing is that we maintain a level playing field."

Nevada, New Jersey, New York, California and Pennsylvania are some of the major state athletic commissions that administer tests for steroids. Some states – such as New York and California – test only after world title bouts. Nevada has been conducting random tests for more than a decade and mandatory tests after championship fights for the last five years. The New Jersey commission tests for controlled substances after every fight, and steroids, along with marijuana and narcotics, fall into that category

Larry Hazzard, commissioner of the New Jersey Athletic Control Board, agrees with Ratner and points to the numbers as proof. "With all the years that this has been a problem in other sports, and it has been much more of a problem in other sports, we haven't seen a lot of it," he said. "We've had a few positive tests, but it's been a very small percentage. There hasn't been a high profile fighter who has tested positive in New Jersey."

Lonnie Bradley, the comebacking former WBO middleweight champion from New York, has been around boxing since 1990 and has never witnessed a fighter using steroids, nor has he been offered them. "I think most fighters are clean," he said. "I think fighters want to keep things fair. There are so many fighters who aren't using it, that no one is opposed to testing."

Nonetheless, with huge purses at stake, there will always be those who risk their health to gain financial security.

"Could I see why someone would take steroids? Yes, I think so," said Yuri Foreman, the

Boxing and Steroids

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.
Saturday, 19 March 2005 19:00

unbeaten junior middleweight prospect who trains at Duva's gym in New Jersey. "To me, no, it would never be worth it. I personally think anything in sports that is considered cheating should be illegal."

Those who govern boxing have adopted a proceed-with-caution attitude - particularly when it comes to the success athletes in other sports have had in masking performance-enhancing drugs during testing. One quandary boxing may face in this area is diuretics, which are often used to lose weight, but which are also known as a masking agent.

"We use very sophisticated technology," said Ron Scott Stevens, boxing commissioner in New York, where they haven't had a positive test in the two years they've been testing. "But I believe that they are very sophisticated in masking it so you can't detect it. As the technology for testing grows more sophisticated, we'll avail ourselves to that."

Added Hazzard: "There are a lot of ways to hide the substance once you've used it. So there is the possibility that athletes are using it and we don't know about it. If that were the case, there may be a need to take the testing to another level."

There is a general belief that steroids may not necessarily help a fighter. "Technically, I think steroids wouldn't help much in boxing," said Foreman. "You might have more strength, but it's not going to help your reflexes and make your chin stronger."

While it certainly won't help your chin, there are, according to Dr. Margaret Goodman of the Nevada State Athletic Commission, some important benefits.

"People tend to think of steroids as something that will benefit the big, heavy-weighted fighter," said Dr. Goodman. "But that's not the case. This benefits athletes who want to train harder and recover quickly. If a fighter wants to have heavy sparring sessions all week, he's going to benefit by steroids, because, by the next day his body won't be feeling sore or tired. It enables them to work on their skills longer."

That is the magic of chemistry and perhaps the most alluring feature of steroids in the modern athlete. Muscle mass or increased strength help, but the opportunity to train at an extremely high level, day in and day out, without breaking down your body, has been appealing to those inclined to cheat. Even before steroids were exploited by football players to acquire size and strength, it was distance athletes, most notably cyclists, who experimented with steroids. Of the fighters linked to alleged steroid use – Roy Jones Jr. and Shane Mosley, who was subpoenaed during the BALCO investigation that has plagued baseball – are those who have climbed multiple weight classes.

(For the record, Mosley has denied that he knowingly used steroids. He submitted a polygraph test, which he passed, and a written statement to the Nevada State Athletic commission. Jones, who tested positive after fighting Richard Hall, also has denied that he knowingly took steroids, saying that he used an over-the-counter supplement.)

There are all kinds of steroids. Vargas tested positive for Winstrol, which makes an athlete

Boxing and Steroids

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.
Saturday, 19 March 2005 19:00

more cut, defining his musculature. But one important misconception about steroids, which was floated by admitted user and former baseball slugger Jose Canseco on "60 Minutes," is that steroids are not harmful when used properly.

"That's just not true," insisted Dr. Goodman. "The people who (steroids) has worked for are very lucky. There is no telling what the long-term effects are."

She added that among the many side effects to steroid use are heart, liver and kidney failure. They can also make a male athlete sterile and predispose the user to strokes.

Boxers risk their lives simply by stepping into the ring. Add steroids to the mix and the dangers increase.

"The main problem with steroids in a boxer is that it predisposes you to bleeding in the brain," said Dr. Goodman. "It can affect your liver, which affects your ability to clot blood."

There are no more feared words in the sport of boxing than "subdural hematoma," which usually means a death sentence. A subdural hematoma is basically bleeding on the brain and is at the root of many ring fatalities. It is scary enough that punches can cause such a tragedy, but every boxer should be aware that steroids may increase the chances.

For once, at the moment at least, boxing can look down its bashed nose at other sports. The fight game has long been mired in one controversy or another. Now it is baseball whose image has suffered.

"They have had some very high profile players involved in the steroid scandal," Hazzard said. "And honestly, if it's all true, that is very disappointing."

Lonnie Bradley grew up in Harlem, New York as a longtime Yankees fan. You can actually see the "House That Ruth Built" from his backyard. It hasn't been lost on him that two of the Yankees' premier sluggers - Jason Giambi and Gary Sheffield - have been linked to steroids as a result of the BALCO investigation.

"I think they had their skill level and talent before they started using steroids," he said "Sheff had one of the fastest bats in baseball for a long time. Do I think it helps them hit a 90 mph fastball? No. Just like I don't think it can help my chin or my jab. But baseball has suffered a lot because of the negative publicity. To some baseball players, I guess they just thought it was worth it and didn't think about what might happen if they were caught."

That same sentiment is likely to be true in every sport. And that reality upsets Hazzard: "I really don't think they give a damn and that angers me. There is enough information out there about the dangers of steroids. To me, the lasting image of steroid abuse is Lyle Alzado. Was it worth it? But I think if you ask that question to a young fighter, a young athlete, some of them will say it was worth it. Today, they are more interested in becoming superstars and that is troubling."

The steroid story continues.

Boxing and Steroids

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.
Saturday, 19 March 2005 19:00

Read Robert Cassidy Jr.'s article on the James Toney steroid scandal.