

Conte Volunteers To Catch Cheaters If He Can

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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Victor Conte might not bear much of a resemblance to Leonardo DiCaprio, but the controversial founder and president of the Bay Area Laboratory Co-operative, better known to the public as BALCO, is eager to play the sort of reformed bad-guy role undertaken by the strikingly handsome leading man in a 2002 film, *Catch Me if You Can*.

If you recall, DiCaprio was cast as an actual person, Frank Abagnale Jr., who joined the FBI to aid law enforcement in its apprehension of the most clever perpetrators of bank fraud. It's a familiar storyline; in an old television series (*It Takes a Thief*) and a new one (*White Collar*), suave and mostly contrite confidence men are enlisted from prison by government agencies for their potential to help nail non-reformed evil-doers.

Conte fits the ex-convict part of the profile well enough, having served four months after pleading guilty in 2005 to conspiracy to distribute steroids and money-laundering. With a client list that included disgraced Olympian Marion Jones, champion boxer Shane Mosley and baseball slugger Barry Bonds, he of the literally swollen head and cartoonishly inflated biceps, Conte was and is widely viewed as the serpent who enticed world-class athletes with an apple enriched with anabolic steroids, human growth hormone, erythropoietin (EPO) and designer drugs that came to be known as "the clear" and "the cream."

Now Conte says he wants to make his expertise available to every anti-doping organization in ridding sports of performance-enhancing drugs. If the FBI was willing to swallow its pride and take on Frank Abagnale Jr., he reasons, why wouldn't, say, the Nevada State Athletic Association reach out to the one man whose knowledge of PEDs might exceed all others?

"I will never, ever do anything involving illegal performance-enhancing substances again," Conte says. "I would never again subject my family members to what they went through. That is a past life for me.

"There needs to be a change in where the spotlight is, and it needs to be put upon Olympic governing body officials, the owners of the teams and the players' union executives who have had the full knowledge of the rampant use of performance-enhancing drugs for 50 years."

But if the testing procedures for the Olympics, the NFL and Major League Baseball are flawed to the point of being "inept," according to Conte, he saves his most scornful rebukes for boxing, which he describes as the "wild, wild West" of PEDs.

"Most fighters open training camp about eight weeks before a fight," Conte says. "They only way to ensure they're really clean is to have some type of random, unannounced testing, and both blood- and urine-testing."

If that sounds like a semi-accusatory finger being pointed at Manny Pacquiao, whose March 13 megafight with Floyd Mayweather Jr. fell apart because of Pac-Man's incensed refusal to

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participate in a higher level of drug-testing than ever has been implemented in boxing, so be it.

“Is it suspicious the way (Pacquiao) has gained so much lean muscle mass while retaining and even seemingly improving his power and speed? Yes,” Conte says. “It is highly suspicious. But it’s difficult to make any type of allegations against him because he’s never tested positive for illegal drugs. The problem is that he has been subjected, as is the case with all boxers, to the standard urine testing that, in my opinion, is worthless.

“It’s announced testing. Any time an athlete knows when he or she is going to be tested, they or someone advising them knows the clearance time of these performance-enhancing drugs. If you know urine tests are only going to be administered immediately before and after a fight, all you have to do is taper off an adequate number of days and you’re going to test negative.”

To buttress his argument that most sports’ drug-testing is as best inadequate and at worst useless, Conte points out that Marion Jones tested negative for PEDs 160 consecutive times. She only admitted to using them, he contends, to avoid more substantial jail time while testifying under oath before a grand jury.

Conte’s insistence that he has seen the light and has crossed over to the side of good and virtue have for, the most part, been viewed with skepticism by those agencies to which he has made overtures.

Keith Kizer, executive director of the Nevada State Athletic Commission (the scuttled Pacquiao-Mayweather bout was to have taken place at Las Vegas’ MGM Grand), said Conte’s very public crusade to become a latter-day Frank Abagnale Jr. is akin to the fox requesting to guard the hen house.

“I hope you’ll forgive me if I don’t put a lot of stock into what Victor Conte has to say,” Kizer says. “I’m amazed at how much press he’s getting these days.

“But that said, the NSAC is known not just for drug-testing, but in being very pro-active in all aspects of regulation. We change and update our rules as need be. Almost two years ago we instituted out-of-competition drug-testing, to be even better at detecting. Keep in mind, our ultimate goal is not to catch people; it’s to keep people from using in the first place.

“We were also the first (state boxing commission) to put in testing for steroids. We did that in 2001, I believe. We also expanded around that time our testing for stimulants.”

So Conte’s claims that boxing’s testing procedures are mostly for show are groundless?

“I’m very pleased with our policy,” Kizer said. “We actually had some experts from the U.S. Olympic Committee and USADA (the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency) come here eight or nine months ago to talk about our drug-testing. They didn’t have a problem with it at all. Definitely nothing about blood (testing) came up.”

Conte said the problem – well, one of them, anyway – is that many of the so-called “experts”

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giving their stamp of approval to agencies like the NSAC are anything but.

“Mosley has sued me two times in federal court in California, and there’s still an ongoing suit in the New York State Supreme Court where he’s suing me for defamation,” Conte notes. “Before his fight with (Miguel) Cotto in 2007, he came out and said I misled him. He said I gave him vitamins when I was instead giving him performance-enhancing drugs. That is simply not true.

“He testified before a grand jury and admitted that he knowingly used EPO. We have a videotape of his deposition in New York in October 2009 where he admits again that he knowingly used EPO, that I told him what it was and what the benefits and side effects were.

“He’s asked, ‘So you injected the drug before any attempt was made by anyone from the Nevada commission whether the drug was legal or not? Is that true? And he said yes.

“I read shortly thereafter an article in the New York Daily News that indicated the WBC was conducting an investigation of Shane Mosley. The WBC attorney’s name is Robert Lenhardt. I called him and said, ‘Look, I would be willing to assist you in this investigation.’ I sent him emails and documents. All I got back from him was an acknowledgment, ‘We’re in receipt of this information. Thanks.’ He didn’t seem to have any interest in following up.”

I spoke to Lenhardt and he said he was limited in what he and the WBC could do at this time because Mosley’s lawsuit against Conte was in litigation.

“The WBC believes it is one of the early leaders in all of sports in putting in anti-doping regulations,” Lenhardt said. “Now, did Mr. Conte send information to the WBC? I can confirm that he did. But the WBC recognizes that these matters (Mosley’s defamation suit against Conte) are currently being litigated in the U.S. court system, so there has been no determination (of their validity) in advance of the outcome.”

Conte has received similar rejections from other organizations and agencies whose message to him basically is “thanks, but no thanks.”

“I met with officials of USADA face-to-face,” Conte says. “I reached out and wrote an open letter to WADA. I flew to New York and met with Dick Pound, who is the founder of WADA and was then its chairman.

“On each occasion I’ve offered my advice. But the new regime at WADA, headed by Australia’s John Fahey, doesn’t want to listen to me because I’m a bad guy. Fahey said he’d rather get his information from medical doctors than from a convicted felon.”

To hear Conte’s detractors tell it, he is a slimy guy who hopes to cleanse himself by smearing others, a ploy often used by certain politicians and used-car salesmen. Conte counters that those who vilify him, while paying lip service to the concept of purifying sports of PEDs, are not willing to go the distance because they know that sports fans aren’t really as interested in having all-natural heroes as they profess to be.

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As proof of the existence of a double standard, Conte points out that Mark McGwire, obliged to confess his steroid-injected past as a condition to returning to baseball as the new hitting coach of his former club, the St. Louis Cardinals, was cheered by 2,500 red-clad fans of the team in a packed hotel ballroom. Those same fans so willing to forgive one of their own presumably have less tolerance toward, say, Bonds, Manny Ramirez and Roger Clemens.

More evidence comes in the form of a poll of track and field fans in Europe, where the sport is much bigger, at least between Olympics, than it is in America. Asked whether they'd rather see a certifiably clean 100-meter sprinter clocked in 10.2 seconds, or a steroid-fueled one break the world record (the current men's mark is 9.58 seconds), a majority of respondents gritted their teeth, 'fessed up and admitted they'd rather see the faster guy on PEDs.

Conte said Mayweather's demand of random blood testing of himself and Pacquiao, up to five days before the fight, although unprecedented in boxing, should be instituted as the industry standard.

"Pacquiao said he had agreed initially to testing 30 days out, then he agreed to cut that to 24 days out in the final phases of the negotiations," Conte says. "The Mayweather sided held firm at 14 days, so the big story supposedly was that they were 10 days apart.

"Well, let's look at what could be done with a 24-day window. I don't believe so-called 'designer' steroids are being used much anymore, like the THG (the "clear") that was at the heart of the BALCO scandal.

"All anabolic steroids are similar to testosterone. If you test often enough over a sufficiently long period, you can see where the perks are. What athletes are doing now is using low-dose testosterone. The gels and the creams will clear in a day. Oral testosterone will clear in about four days. Water-based injectable testosterone will clean in about 10 days.

"With intense training and a two-week program of anabolic steroids or low-dose testosterone, you can get a significant advantage in terms of strength and power."

And users need not look like Arnold Schwarzenegger during his Mr. Universe incarnation, either.

"Steroids make you tight and pumped-up. You lose speed," Conte says. "It's great during the training process because you're going to build explosive strength, but thereafter you go back to a normal fluid balance so that you no longer have that tightness. Your flexibility comes back. You're going to lose some speed. But if you taper off, you're much faster 10 days to two weeks out than you are while you're still on the stuff.

"Now, the drug EPO increases your percentage of red blood cells. If you start out at 40 percent, in a two-week time frame or less, you could increase that to 50 percent. That's a 25 percent increase in the percentage of red blood cells. Oxygen molecules attach themselves to the hemoglobin, and that means 25 percent more oxygen is being delivered to the muscle tissue. It also means the metabolic waste byproducts, like carbon dioxide, ammonia and lactic acid, are

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transported out 25 percent faster. That gives you a huge edge in training and especially in the later rounds of a fight.”

Not that all fighters should be regarded with a raised eyebrow if they resist blood-testing. Even big, strong guys have been known to faint at the sight of needles. Others are queasy if taken to a high place. Hey, it happens.

“I think you could do blood testing up to five days of a fight with no physical detriment to a participant,” Conte says. “A compromise of 10 days would be all right. But as soon as you go 14 days or more, that’s enough time to use EPO and build up your red blood cell count. At 24 days, there’s all sorts of things that can be done with thyroid medication, fast-acting forms of insulin, EPO, testosterone.

“Now, for psychological reasons, some athletes are going to complain if blood-testing becomes mandatory. Manny Pacquiao isn’t the only one. Asafa Powell, the Jamaican Olympic sprinter, is terrified of having blood drawn. A lot of people are. But to take a very small blood sample would have an extremely minimal or no effect physically. Once someone got accustomed to it, it’d be much easier to accept.”

For now, though, the biggest fight of this century – and maybe the highest-grossing one of all time – remains on the drawing board because of an impasse neither side appears willing to take steps to resolve. And if you’re waiting for boxing officials to step forward to work out the kinks, don’t hold your breath.

“I believe there’s a rampant use of performance-enhancing drugs in boxing, and there has been for decades,” Conte says. “It’s certainly not anything new.”