

DOORING IN TENNIS

EXPLORING THE DEBATE ON PERFORMANCE-ENHANCING DRUGS

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SPORTS FANS HAVE TO FACE THE FACTS: performance-enhancing drugs have played a role in some of history's most celebrated athletic achievements. Just as pharmaceutical companies have made strides in lifestyle drugs to treat conditions like impotence and balding, people seeking to improve athletic performance have likewise developed substances that allow athletes to perform beyond their natural means. If fans have become increasingly jaded about extraordinary athletic accomplishments, a large part of their cynicism can be blamed on the proliferation of high-profile cases of banned substance use in baseball, cycling, and track and field.

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Hingis chose to retire rather than contest the charges, but Gasquet fought his suspension and won. The Court of Arbitration for Sport believed Gasquet's story that he unwittingly ingested the drug after kissing a girl in a nightclub. He was allowed to return to competition because the amount of cocaine in his system was “about the size of a grain of salt.”

Besides those two cases, the most talked about infraction in tennis in recent years is that of US player Wayne Odesnik. A journeyman who has never been ranked higher than No.77, Odesnik raised concern about the presence of drugs in tennis when customs officials caught him transporting HGH into Australia in 2010.

Although the American claimed never to have used the drug, the ITF ruled his possession of HGH a violation of the Tennis Anti-Doping Programme and banned him for two years. One year into his suspension, the ITF announced he could return to the tour “on account of ongoing Substantial Assistance provided by Mr. Odesnik in relation to the enforcement of professional rules of conduct.”

Rumors that other players have escaped detection occasionally surface. Belgian Christophe Rochus fired the most scathing accusation when he retired in 2010, telling the newspaper *La Derniere Heure* that doping unquestionably exists in tennis. “There is a lot of cheating. Simply, nobody likes to talk [about it].”

The Belgian even suggested that the use of PEDs should be legalized. “I would not be against it. Anyway, it exists,” he told the newspaper. “People who take these kind of products know very well that they play with their health. But they take it with full knowledge of the facts because it can enable them to make a living for their entire family.”

Pros and Cons

Rochus raised a point that is rarely discussed: why not let athletes use whatever means available to improve their games, if they are willing to accept the risks? Testing and enforcement are expensive, and many athletes have admitted to doping despite never failing a drug test (think Marion Jones and Antonio Pettigrew).



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The non-profit research organization ProCon.org conducted an in-depth examination of the pros and cons of performance-enhancing drugs in sports. The resulting website, Sports and Drugs ProCon.org, showed that there are cogent arguments on both sides of the debate.

For example, one common argument for enforcing a ban on certain substances is the desire to protect the health of athletes. The counterargument asks whether it is fair to restrict people's freedom to make choices about what they put in their own bodies.

Another assertion is that the use of PEDs violates the spirit of sport, described by WADA as an “intrinsic value” that celebrates “the human spirit, body and mind.” But purely from the standpoint of the spirit of sport, some argue, drugs may not be so different from other performance-enhancing methods and equipment. Technological improvements in tennis racquets – size, weight, strings – have impacted the way the game is played. Other sports have benefited from advancements in golf shafts, running shoes and swimsuits.

Anyone who peruses the sports page might be tempted to think PEDs are a modern issue, but athletes have actually sought to gain an edge as far back as the original Olympic Games in 776 BC. “The origin of the word ‘doping’ is attributed to the Dutch word ‘doop,’ which is a viscous opium juice, the drug of choice of the ancient Greeks,” says Dr. Larry Bowers, Chief Science Officer of the United States Anti-Doping Agency.

As chemists continue to create new drugs, the anti-doping agencies race to develop tests to detect them. Enforcing the rules is a sport in itself. ①