

The Charlotte Observer

Tuesday, May 25, 2010

All Athletes Should Face the Same Tough Drug Testing

By Robert S. Weiner and Yusuf M. Hassan

At the White House last month, we asked Apolo Anton Ohno, the eight-time Olympic medalist speed skater designated to speak for the 200 Vancouver Olympians visiting President Obama, if sports like baseball and golf should have the same stringent drug testing as the Olympics and if athletes like Tiger Woods should be tested. Ohno replied that "as athletes, we should all be held to the same standards. It would make sense to have one unified body testing everyone."

The world's most famous golfer missed the cut in Charlotte last month and has struggled since. Regardless of how he plays in the future, Woods' sex scandal coverage has buried another important story. Woods' doctor, Anthony Galea, was arrested by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in October and faces charges including conspiracy to import an unapproved drug, selling an illegal drug (Actovegin), and smuggling banned drugs. In addition, Galea's assistant was caught at the U.S.-Canada border carrying illegal substances in Galea's medical bag, including the sports-banned human growth hormone (HGH) and Actovegin, also a performance aid.

These developments do not link Woods to any performance-enhancing drugs banned by the World Anti-Doping Agency. Woods was recovering from a knee injury, which is legitimate enough, was treated by the doctor, and categorically denies using any performance drugs. But Dr. Gary Gaffney, M.D. at the University of Iowa College Of Medicine, said in December: "Look at Woods' before and after photos. Think of the side effects of testosterone and anabolic steroids. Then consider an athlete who has established ties with a physician who says he pushes HGH and other performance enhancing drug treatments."

These kinds of questions about any star in any sport cannot be answered unless golf as well as baseball and other sports conduct the kind of uniform testing already done by the Olympics and WADA. A strict and reliable testing and enforcement policy would end most speculation.

The PGA Tour banned HGH last year, but testing blood samples is not required. Professional baseball, hockey, basketball, football, soccer, and now golf, do their best to enhance their image of success with athletes' bulk and scores rather than clean sport. While this narrow approach is aimed at protecting dramatic performances and profits, the health risks for the athletes seriously tarnish the image of the sport and impact the behavior of youth. Youth steroid use quintupled after Mark McGwire used androstenedione, and as many as a million teens a year now use steroids.

A model for effectiveness is USA Track & Field - the premier Olympic sport holds nothing back on busts, even outing world champions and record holders like Marion Jones

and Tim Montgomery, the world's "best." Last month, Track busted reigning Olympic 400-meter gold medalist LaShawn Merritt. Track takes pride in staying drug free and enforcing "clean" - and all the athletes know it. Professional sports must set an equally high standard through repeated rigorous and random drug screening programs that require blood, hair, and urine samples as needed, and use witnesses, document records and other credible evidence - that's what track and the Olympics do. That's what Apolo Ohno has called for.

Most athletes wish to be the best. Lenient testing and soft discipline for drug use in professional sports become a factor in the decision to cheat. While "honor" works for many, it's not enough for the rest. The only way to prevent doping is effective testing with severe consequences so that potential abusers are "scared straight." It's time to revamp the drug use policies of golf and other professional sports.

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