

THE SPRINGFIELD REPUBLICAN

Sunday, April 24, 2011

BONDS AND RAMIREZ JUST TIP OF SPORTS DRUGS ICEBERG

By Robert Weiner

The conviction of Barry Bonds last week and the “retirement” of Manny Ramirez are only the latest chapter of drugs in sport—it’s a sordid history, now being corrected with a long, long way to go.

From Ben Johnson to the convicted Marion Jones to the hundreds of major league baseball players who tested positive over the last decade but are protected by confidentiality of testing, to Olympic champion skiers, weight lifters, and world champion athletes in all sports, drugs have run rampant.

1988 Olympic 100 meter “winner” Ben Johnson was the most famous early convicted doper. As he and Carl Lewis powered down the straightaway, Johnson looked superhuman, a pile of ripped muscular bulges undulating down the track, yellow laser focused eyes. He didn’t look like any normal person. Sure enough, he flunked the drug test for steroids. Then he blamed it on an American conspiracy.

Olympic surveys taken at the 2000 and 2004 Games show that a majority of athletes would rather get an Olympic Gold medal than be alive in five years, according to Runners World.

“Therapeutic use exemptions” let your doctor, your national sports authority, and even the Olympics give you an excuse for anything if you claim the drug is necessary with a straight face. Dick Pound, the first President of the World Anti-Doping Agency and IOC member, said it’s amazing that the strongest and fittest people on earth are six times as sick as the general population.

With the 2012 summer Olympics coming on us, it’s time to prepare for an onslaught of illegal drug use during the Games.

Recent busts are happening fast and furious. In July 2009, five Beijing Olympians were banned and lost medals after two tests confirmed use of the blood-boosting drug Cera, including the 1,500-meter track champion. In January 2010, a Russian skier was dropped from the Olympic team after she tested positive for EPO. In March, a Polish skier’s EPO use was confirmed. A Chinese judo performer tested positive for the muscle-building drug Clenbuterol in May, as did a Chinese swimmer and a British hurdler.

In October last year, American sprinter LaShawn Merritt was banned from competing for 21 months. He blamed his positive test on over-the-counter Extenze. Enlarging body parts notwithstanding, Merritt is now slated to miss the London Olympics.

Drug busts do not mean the Olympics are dirty — they mean the Games are being kept clean. Frank Shorter, the Olympic Marathon Champion who headed up the US Anti-Doping Agency, told me that the big three drugs that athletes need to be tested for are steroids, EPO, and HGH. The Olympics also say “or related substances” -- a catch-all that makes busted athletes unhappy who want to say their drug “wasn’t on the list”.

The \$200 to \$400 a test are pennies to the billions-of dollars Olympics, major professional sports, and even major college sports. Cost aside, there is NO practical test yet for HGH, even though the labs are close. Under Olympic rules, samples can be saved for two Olympiads (8 years)—largely thanks to former U.S. Drug Czar Barry McCaffrey’s insistence on retroactivity. This allows punishment for past cheating if the science improves. But why not save samples for as long as the substance holds, given how law enforcement now uses DNA from decades ago in solving crimes?

Bonds was not alone in obstructing evidence—he followed the party line. Only 68 of 500 players that baseball’s Mitchell wanted to interview were willing to talk. Kate Malliarakis, former United States Delegate to WADA, told me last week, “The testing system in most major league franchises is a sham. The unions are aiding and abetting drug use.” The NBA, NFL, MLB, NHL, and Soccer players’ unions block every attempt to test and verify.

Between 500,000 and a million youth use steroids annually. When home run king Mark McGwire admitted using androstenedione, youth use of it QUINTUPLED. When McGwire stopped using, his home run capacity plummeted from 70 to 30, and he dropped out of baseball. On steroids, kids have committed murders, other violent crimes, become schizophrenic, and committed suicide, as testified to Congress by parents.

At the White House last year, I asked Apolo Anton Ohno, eight-time Olympic medalist, 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.” While honor works for many, it’s not enough for the rest. The only way to prevent doping is effective testing with severe consequences.

Because WADA and USADA decided over the past few years to allow evidentiary facts, including witnesses, to ban cheaters, and not just test results, and because they decided to seek law enforcement assistance, instead of

keeping it all inside the shop and covering up abuses, there is far more hope that progress will continue.

However, because of HGH, TUE's, new designer steroids, masking agents, and especially because of the still remaining culture of protection, we have a lot of work to do, in the Olympics and professional sports, to make sports clean and keep our youth safe.

Weiner is former spokesman for the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy for six years and a former spokesman for the World Anti-Doping Agency at the Olympics. He received his M.A. in History from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and gave the Ken Feinberg Distinguished History Lecture Wednesday at UMass.