

GROWING, GROWING, GONE
Steroid Abuse in America

by
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They're a bodybuilder's best friend, a linebacker's fuel and a wrestler's wonder drug. In the locker room, they're called Roids. Androgenic anabolic steroids, or AAS's, is what doctors call them: synthetic male hormones that can pump you up beyond your wildest dreams. Or mess you up beyond your worst nightmare.

In this decade of ice and crack, it's hard to think of a drug that's available by prescription at the corner pharmacy--or over-the-counter, just across the border--as a problem drug. It's even harder to think of those buffed out men and women with the drop dead bodies as drug abusers. Canadian runner Ben Johnson, superstars Arnold Schwarzenegger, and a thousand other guys like them are living testimonials that steroids work. And you'd think that if steroids were bad for you, the National Football League wouldn't give its richest rookie contract to a guy who tested positive for the drugs.

So if we think of steroids at all, it's usually with a nod of admiration to the wonders they perform.

It's time to think again.

It's time to think of wrestling superstar Billy Graham lying in a hospital bed because his bones are crumbling after years of steroid abuse.¹ It's time to think about former Raider defensive end Lyle Alzado, who died from a steroid-induced brain tumor.

It's time to think about the hundreds of thousands of young men and women who are popping these powerful pills as if they were M&M's.

Steroids can be found in workout rooms and classrooms, in colleges, high school, and even in grade schools across the country. Once the subject of medical journals and law reviews, steroid abuse has become so common, U.S. News & World Report could feature it in a cover story. Steroids have finally come out of the closet. The question is, how did they manage to stay in the closet for so long?

The male hormone testosterone was first isolated in crystal form in 1935. During World War II, German soldiers used the drug to increase their strength and aggressiveness, and in 1954 the drug made its debut on the sporting scene with reports that Russian superjocks were doping themselves up. Steroids became a permanent part of the sporting scene, spreading quickly from weightlifters to football players to runners and swimmers. According to the Food and Drug Administration, of the 1 million Americans who are misusing steroids,² three-quarters of them are male, and two-thirds of them are athletes.³

The extent of steroid abuse among adult athletes is staggering. In 1983, 7 Olympic athletes were disqualified when they tested positive for steroids, and many others voluntarily withdrew before being tested.⁴ In 1988 Ben Johnson lost his Olympic medal because of steroid use. There is anecdotal evidence that 80-100% of competitors in certain events use anabolic steroids.⁵ As one weight lifter told me, "If you're looking to go professional, there's no way on earth you can get that winning look without shooting up." Of course, coaches and team owners downplay the extent of steroid abuse in athletics, but critics wonder if their denials are anything more than a whitewash. In

testimony before a 1989 Senate Judiciary hearing, coaches and team owners claimed that, based on testing, only 6 percent of the players used. Current and former players testified that use among football linemen was "rampant."⁶ One high school football player told me that, while his coach didn't tell him to use steroids, once he found out, he didn't tell him to stop using them, either.

As disturbing as the rampant use of steroids may be among professional male athletes, it's the growing use among non-professional teens and preteens that has a lot of people worried. Are we in the midst of a steroid epidemic? Probably not. But with as many as 10 percent of boys and 2.5 percent of girls in grades 7 to 12, steroid abuse is hardly negligible.⁷ The Department of Health and Human Services estimates that 262,000 students nationwide are using steroids.⁸ And with two-thirds of male users starting by age 16--and some as young as 11--there are justifiable fears that hundreds of thousands of teens are doing severe and permanent damage to their young bodies.⁹

With so many users, steroids, like sports itself, is big business, about \$500 million big.¹⁰ Eighty percent of that money is spent on the black market, the rest goes to what one survey called "health professionals," which could mean anything from a country town's storefront veterinarian to a Park Avenue Dr. Lookgood.¹¹

Like other addictive drugs--amphetamines, morphine and Valium--steroids are a controlled substance, but can you actually get hooked on them? Ask different doctors and you get different answers, from a cautious maybe to a definite yes. In one study, between 15 and 60 percent of steroid users meet the criteria for steroid dependence: they took more of the drug than they intended; they continued popping them even when they know they were causing problems; and they suffered withdrawal symptoms--

depression, fatigue, agitation--when they tried to quit. In one survey of 49 weight lifters, virtually all of them admitted to one or more symptoms of dependence; more than half had three or more symptoms.¹²

Do the users themselves feel they're hooked? Again, it depends whom you ask and how you ask. In a Cleveland Clinic study, where scientists collected data in face-to-face interviews, a 15 percent of steroid users were hooked. But in a Michigan study, where researchers used anonymous questionnaires, nearly 60 percent of the weight lifters surveyed were addicted to their pills, taking, on average, 10 to 100 times the "standard therapeutic dosages."¹³

What makes drugs like crack and nicotine addictive is the immediate rush they give, or the immediate relief from withdrawal. Steroids don't seem to do that, but there is evidence that for some abusers the mind-altering nature of the steroids are an important, maybe the main, reason for addiction. In one study, one-third of steroid abusers reported feeling "high" when they took their dose.¹⁴ And, no matter what scientific evidence suggests, some steroid users definitely have the illusion of instant gratification. Wrestler Billy Graham put it this way, "I could actually feel myself growing on steroids. I've laid in bed on heavy dosages of testosterone and literally felt my body stretching."

What users like Graham don't feel is what steroids are really doing to their bodies. Breast development, decreased sperm production and testicular atrophy is common among males, as is disturbed menstrual cycles in females. Both sexes suffer clogged arteries, acne, premature balding, yellowing skin and eyes, liver damage, cancer, heart disease and strokes are just some of the side effects.¹⁵ Male users also

suffer from breast development, decreased sperm production and testicular atrophy. And while the majority of steroid users are men, the number of women who use steroids stands at about 25 percent¹⁶ and may be growing faster than the number of males. The effects on women's muscle size are no less astonishing than the effects on men's, and the side-effects are no less serious. A study of nine female weight lifters in the American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology found that these women became aggressive, irritable, broke out in acne, developed deep voices and body hair, suffered menstrual disturbances and increases in blood level of cholesterol.¹⁷

Steroid abuse rots the mind of both sexes. Like amphetamines, steroids increase tension, irritability, rage, paranoia, and a breakdown in reality testing. One 23-year-old woman told me, "On steroids you feel invincible, nothing can stop you, that you can do anything. You don't have common sense anymore. On steroids I would go head on with anyone, even a guy that was 2 or 3 times bigger than me."

What's the answer to ending this generations fascination with steroids? There probably isn't any. Steroid abuse is the dark underside of America's romance with the body powerful. The drug's lure is rooted in our cultural values: if big is good, bigger is better. Muscle magazines that once catered to a few dedicated enthusiasts now reach 7 million people. When a poll asked moviegoers between the ages of 18 and 24 what character they most wanted to be, brawn clearly beat out brains. Men chose Arnold (The Terminator) Schwarzenegger. Women chose Linda (Terminator 2) Hamilton.

As long as winning is all, as long as screen idols like Schwarzenegger and Stallone pin their prowess on their pecs, there will always be some youngsters who get

caught up in muscle mania. These kids will continue to get their steroids from health professionals or on the black market.

Is there a way to stop or curtail the spread of steroid abuse? Some observers see a two-prong approach as the best bet: tougher laws and better education. Other observers have their doubts. The 1990 law making AAS's a controlled substance--a move the American Medical Association opposed--puts greater restrictions on their legal use and will make doctors who have been too free with their prescription pads a little more cautious. Robert C. Bonner, chief of the drug Enforcement Administration, recently declared, "I want to send a loud and clear signal to doctors and pharmacists that it will not be business as usual with steroids. Doctors who prescribe anabolic steroids for other than legitimate purposes will be prosecuted," Bonner says. "Profits made from such sales will be forfeited, and I will revoke their license to prescribe drugs."¹⁸

But will this stop kids from getting the drugs? Is this the answer to America's steroid nightmare? Well, despite some assertions that some doctors have written scripts for up to 10,000 athletes¹⁹, an editorial in the Journal of the American Medical Association is probably correct in saying that physicians account for only a "negligible percentage of these health professionals,"²⁰ At present, 80 percent of all steroids used for nonmedical purposes come from the black market.²¹ Even if every doctor in the country were constrained from prescribing the drugs, there's no doubt that the black market could pick up the slack.

As for education, there's no doubt that the ignorance about the drug among its users is appalling. Half the 10- to 14-year-olds in one large survey said they thought steroids would improve their performance, wouldn't harm the careful user, and had

never had the drug's harmful effects explained to them. But education isn't just a matter of throwing a booklet at someone. One Oregon study found that, two years after educating local high school students about the risks of steroids, interest in them actually increased. Another study found that forty percent of hard-core steroid users wouldn't give them up even if you proved they were lethal. The lesson: scaring students won't work. These kids need to be taught alternatives to steroids, such as nutrition and proper training.²² But can a school system that's seeing an epidemic of alcohol abuse, an increasing rate of amphetamine abuse, and a deteriorating infrastructure really devote precious resources to a problem that most people don't even know exists?²³

In 1982, Susie Orbach wrote, "Success, beauty, wealth, love, sexuality and happiness are promoted [to women] as attached to and depending on slimness. Selling body insecurity to women...is a vicious phenomenon."²⁴ Ten years later we may have to face the possibility that Muscle is a Men's Movement Issue. As long as muscles and sports are equated with physical and psychological well being, as long as both lithe nerd or the puffy doughboy are cultural outsiders, then there will always be some young men who think that being an insider is worth any price. If you have to be a hunk to be hugged, why not take the yellow pill road.

Steroid addiction is one more ugly leer behind the seemingly benign mask of physical fitness. In order to achieve the look of maximum health, the first thing to be sacrificed is health itself. Like a generation of women who have been sold the notion that thinner is better, that self-starvation is a small price to pay for being svelte, that any plain Jane can become a Jane Fonda, we are now witnessing a generation of young men being initiated into the mad, mad world of body image distortions. Harrison G.

Pope of the Harvard Medical School found that nearly 15 percent of 49 steroid users he interviewed suffered from "bigerexia nervosa," a condition characterized by a self-perception of being smaller and weaker than one actually is.²⁵ Like anorectics who never feel skinny enough, these hulks never feel muscular enough. Like thousands--hundred of thousands--of other males, these men have been convinced that their muscles are their masculinity, a connection that may be filling some very, very big graves for years to come.

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SIDEBAR MATERIAL

INTERVIEW WITH DIONE

Dione is a 30-year-old recovering steroid abuser. This is her story.

I started taking steroids when I was 23. I had never used any drugs before that. I started because I wanted to be competitive as a bodybuilder and there was no way to do that naturally. The steroids were out there in the gym. I was working with the hardcore people so they were easy to get, they were very available. It had never occurred to me to take steroids until I saw the results on other women. They never told me about side effects because basically it's a very closed subject. The people who are using recommend you don't use them, but you can't get into their circle until you start using, then they'll tell you how to cycle. People on top all use steroids, and there's no way to know how much to take except through other users, who tell you how to cycle and what drugs to take. A cycle is where you'll do steroids for up to three months and after that you try to take a rest period of at least 60 to 90 days. But the average person doesn't last that long without cycling again, because you're afraid to lose you size, your edge.

I started with pills and then went to injections. I cycled with both, combining different types. I noticed a difference almost immediately, within the first 2 or 3 weeks. And that's what got me hooked. I went from normal where everyone else was, to above

and beyond. I weighed 135 pounds and I was squatting 365 pounds. I was leg pressing up to 800 pounds. I was doing arm presses with hundred pound weights.

I got a hard muscle density and oilier skin. To make sure I didn't get puffy like lot of people get, I smuggled thyroid medication to speed up my metabolism and burn off fat. I took diuretics also.

I got the drugs in Mexico, where they're legal, and I started smuggling them for other weightlifters. I took orders ahead of time.

While I was using I got real irritable. Usually my personality is very sweet but I was really raging at people and snapping at them and threatening them. I knew it was the steroids. That scared me, not being in control of my own emotions anymore.

I used them for about three years. I got suicidal and that's what stopped me taking steroids. I hit rock bottom. I couldn't stand who I was, who I had become. I just couldn't hang on. I went into an hospital program, but I was still smuggling steroids into treatment, because I was afraid of losing the edge. When I did get clean I got real depressed.

Even being clean, steroids are still attractive to a part of my head. I miss the attention, the power, the strength, the feeling I could do what an average person can't do. It's very seductive.

Mostly I did the lighter, water-based steroids. Still, I have long-term damage. My cholesterol level has reversed: my good cholesterol is low, and my bad is real high. Physically I have male fat patterns. I just got Xrayed, and because of the steroids my wrists tendons are brittle and they hurt. Chances are when I get older I'm going to have lots of pain. This is only after 3 years and I'm only finding out about it after being clean

for 4 years. No one knows the long-term effects. You hear it's dangerous, but you never think it's going to be you. My liver is borderline. I know people who have cancer in their arms from shooting up. I know young people who already have bad hearts. Still, you're willing to live with these things because you see it as a sacrifices you're making for the glory.

Dependent users tended to take larger doses; they were also more aggressive and more dissatisfied with their body size. But even more interesting is the connection between steroids and other drugs. Dependent users were not more likely to drink alcohol, smoke tobacco, or use stimulants and other drugs. Alcohol and illicit drug users who start at an early age are more likely to become dependent; that was not true of these steroid users.²⁶

scles, an association that is "a product of our cultures obsession with muscularity and athletic success for males," according to Penn State University researcher Charles E. Yesalis.²⁷

"I used them for about three years," one former user told me, "until I hit bottom. Finally, I couldn't stand who I was, who I had become. I lost control of my emotions and couldn't hang on."

Steroid abuse is common, and growing. In 1970, 15 percent of college athletes said they used them; by 1984 that number had grown to 20 percent.²⁸ A 1984 study found that 9 percent of NCAA football players used them.

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