



WHY IS THE USE OF STEROIDS TABOO FOR PROFESSIONAL SPORTS?

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When actors and actresses in the highly competitive fields of performing arts use botox, silicones and various forms of surgery to enhance and lengthen the usable life of their features and bodies, nobody accuses them of “cheating” for failure to depend on their god-given, natural, physiques. On the contrary, they are expected to use these aids to satisfy the expectations of their public.

However, when professional athletes use anabolic steroids to bulk up their muscles in order to improve their competitive performance, they are denounced for ‘unfairly’ claiming records and not living up to their obligations as “role models”. Why this double standard?

The problem with athletes on steroids seems to transcend the simple issue of safety. If safety alone were the problem, one would expect unions of athletes to deal with steroids as unions of miners deal with explosives: not by banning them, but by hedging their use with stringent measures to ensure the union members’ safety.

Non-comparability of records appears an insurmountable problem, but it isn’t as though professional sports like baseball haven’t faced it before. Rarely are records all set under uniform conditions. To cite only a few examples, the

banning of spitballs, changes in the designated hitter rule, mandatory use of helmets, changes in the liveliness or elasticity of baseballs, all yielded conditions for setting records different from those previous to the change. By noting the difference, evaluations can be made of the comparability of the records.

But what about professional athletes' obligation to serve as "role models" for their fans, or more exactly the children of their fans? The difficulty here isn't so much that they inevitably become role models for children who fantasize emulating their achievements. Rather the kind of role model that the children's parents expect athletes to be is the problem

Stars in the performing arts also become role models for their adoring fans and their children, but no parent expects a performing artist to act as a model citizen. Their function as role models is entirely different. The performing artist is expected to provide a model of glamorized escape from the humdrum conventions of model citizenry.

Unfortunately for them, professional athletes are stuck with the expectation that they also serve as models of moral citizenry. Why this should be so is difficult to understand? It may derive from the mystique of athletics, wherein athletes are supposed to practice "clean living" to "stay in shape". Nevertheless it seems reasonable to expect professional athletes simply to be outstanding exemplars of their specialties and to reserve the expectation of modeling social virtue to those whose business it is to preach it.

The fact that this is not the case sets up for professional athletes a classic case of what the sociologist Robert K. Merton called social structure and anomie—or in English a contradiction between goals and the socially approved means of achieving them.

Baseball fans love to watch power hitting, and the reward structure for professional ball players is set up to satisfy them. Heavy hitters get the big bucks. For some reason however, a proven effective way to improve one's heavy hitting—i.e. by using anabolic steroids—fans consider totally unacceptable,

and team owners and legislators oblige them by making steroid use illegal for professional athletes.

The social structure of baseball thus provides a major incentive for ballplayers to evade the law by using steroids. The fans who love heavy hitters are ultimately responsible for driving ballplayers to fail their role model responsibilities.

So we return to the original question: why is the use by professional athletes of anabolic steroids taboo? After all, the short history of human evolution is one of individuals continuously striving to meet or exceed social expectations. Given that strength is a prized asset for species males, one would expect that any efficacious means to develop strength would be eagerly accepted. There is no taboo against the use of sidanfil to enhance erections. Why the taboo against anabolic steroids?

