



Copyright 2007 The Baltimore Sun Company
All Rights Reserved
The Baltimore Sun

AN UNHEALTHY OBSESSION

By Jonathan Zimmerman

NEW YORK -- The release of the Mitchell Report this month confirmed an ugly truth: America's got a big drug problem.

I'm not talking about steroids; I'm talking about athletics themselves.

Americans are addicted to competitive sports in ways that are profoundly unhealthy. And until we confront that problem, head-on, steroids will continue to plague us.

Consider: Although every shred of evidence shows that adolescents do not learn well before 9 a.m., U.S. high schools start the day around 7:30 a.m. Why? To make room for afternoon sports practice, of course. And consider that the time allotted to athletic practice - often two or three hours - is much longer than any academic class period.

Most high schools allot two-thirds to three-quarters of their extracurricular budgets to sports. In his best-selling book *Friday Night Lights*, since adapted into a movie and television series, H. G. Bissinger reported that a Texas high school spent more on football game film than it did on teaching materials for the English department. The team's coach earned 50 percent more than a regular classroom teacher with 20 years' experience.

In the great college admissions sweepstakes, recruited high school athletes get twice the advantage that racial minorities receive. But while many Americans squeal about affirmative action for African-Americans or Hispanics, nobody blinks an eye at special passes for the quarterback or power forward.

Ah, you might say, but these athletes are overwhelmingly minorities themselves. False. As every study has shown, the vast majority of recruited athletes are white teens from well-to-do families. And these families use their privilege to buy services - coaches, trainers and summer camps - to ensure that they get a leg up. So much for the level playing field.

But sports help our kids stay fit and healthy, right? Sure. But competitive athletics can harm young bodies, too. Think of girls' gymnastics, which has witnessed a spate of eating disorders. In 1976, America's Olympic gymnasts averaged 106 pounds each; by 1992, their average weight was down to 83 pounds.

The most dangerous sport is football, of course. During the past decade, at least 50 high school or junior high school players have been killed or have sustained serious head injuries on the field. Some of these deaths could have been prevented if we took the risk more seriously.

But we don't. According to Alan Schwartz, writing in The New York Times, although athletic trainers report that 5 percent of high school football players have a concussion each season, anonymous player questionnaires bring the number up to 15 percent. And when the word "concussion" is omitted and a list of symptoms is provided instead, nearly half of all players report that they have sustained a concussion. So why don't they tell their coaches? We all know the answer: They want to play. And they want to win.

That's the same reason many young athletes take steroids, even in the face of drug tests.

A new two-year study of 11 Oregon high schools - based, again, on questionnaires of the players - showed that random drug testing did nothing to deter steroid use.

And yet we continue to ratchet up the drug tests, instead of ratcheting down our addiction to sports.

The governor of Texas, Rick Perry, recently signed a bill allowing the testing of all high school athletes, setting aside \$3 million per year for the tests. But every dollar will go to waste as long as we teach our kids that we value athletics - and victory - above everything else.

I play sports. I watch sports. I love sports. Like most things, however, sports are harmful in excess. And that's the case at every level of athletics in America.

A century ago, high school athletics was organized and managed by the students themselves. Then the adults took over.

Schools hired coaches, provided uniforms, built new gymnasiums, and so on. And they made the athletes - especially the boys - into the unofficial kings of the institution.

It's easy to condemn Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens and the others named in the Mitchell Report for possibly cheating their way into the record books. But part of that condemnation ought to be directed at ourselves, too, because many of us would have done the same thing - if we knew we could get away with it.

When the whole culture tells you that sports rule, nobody will follow the rules around sports.

Jonathan Zimmerman teaches history and education at New York University. A version of this article originally appeared in The Christian Science Monitor.