

Girls, Sports, and Steroids

Alexis Alvarez

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Professor Desai

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Almost daily, headlines and newscasters tell us about athletes' use of performance-enhancing drugs. Indeed, stories of such drug use seem to increase each year, with investigations of possible steroid use by college football players, by major league baseball players, and even by Olympic gold medalists. It is easy to gain the impression that many adult athletes, particularly males, may be using drugs in order to improve their performance and physical appearance. What may be surprising and even shocking to most of us, however, is that these drugs, especially anabolic steroids, are increasingly used by adolescent athletes and that girls are just as likely as boys to be users.

In May 2004, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published its latest figures on self-reported drug use among young people in grades 9 through 12. The CDC study, "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2003," found that 6.1% of its survey participants reported using steroids at least once, up from 2.2% in 1993. The report also showed that use of steroids appears to be increasing among younger girls: While only 3.3% of 12th-grade girls reported using steroids, 7.3% of 9th-grade girls reported using them. Moreover, girls might be starting to use steroids at a higher rate than boys. The CDC study indicated that 9th-grade girls had reported slightly higher rates of steroid use than boys (7.3% and 6.9% respectively), while 10th-, 11th-, and 12th-grade girls all reported lower use than boys. Other studies support the conclusion that steroid use is both widespread and rising quickly among adolescent girls. According to Mundell (2004), experts estimate that as many as a million high school students have used steroids—and that a significant percentage of that group are girls. Moreover, since the late 1990s, studies have shown that steroid use is increasing among adolescent girls. In 1998, *Teacher Magazine* reported that steroid use among high school girls had increased 300% since

1991, from 0.4% of all high school girls to 1.4% (“Girls and steroids,” 1998). And Manning (2002) wrote, “A 1999 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance study by the Centers for Disease Control and the 2001 Monitoring the Future survey both show steady growth in steroid use by 8th- to 12th-graders” (“Kids, steroids don’t mix,” para. 2).

What role are competitive sports playing in this dangerous trend? Why are some girls feeling the need to ingest performance-enhancing drugs? Although competitive sports can provide young female athletes with many benefits, they can also have negative effects, the worst of which is increasing drug use. Let’s look first at the positives.

### **Girls and Sports: The Upside**

Millions of girls are now involved in a variety of sports activities, and girls’ participation in school athletics and community-based programs continues to increase. As the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports (1997) has pointed out, when girls participate in competitive sports, their lives can be affected in a number of positive and interrelated ways. Physical and psychological health, a positive sense of identity, good relationships with friends and family, and improved performance in school all work together to influence a girl’s complete growth and development.

According to the President’s Council (1997), adolescent girls who exercise regularly can lessen their risks for adult-onset coronary disease and certain cancers. Girls’ involvement in sports and exercise also tends to improve immune functioning, posture, strength, flexibility, and heart-lung endurance (President’s Council, 1997; Dudley, 1994).

In addition, competitive athletics can enhance mental health by offering adolescent girls pos-

itive feelings about body image; tangible experiences of competency, control, and success; improved self-esteem and self-confidence; and a way to reduce anxiety (President's Council, 1997). Juan Orozco, who has coached adolescent females in competitive soccer for nine years, confirmed that making a competitive sports team is a privilege that many girls work toward with determination and longing and that being picked to participate encourages these young athletes to believe in themselves and their abilities (personal communication, September 22, 2014).

A final benefit is that sports expand social boundaries and teach many of the personal and social skills girls will need throughout their lives. According to Orozco, through competitive athletics girls learn a crucial lesson in how to interact with, get along with, and depend on athletes from different social and economic groups. In short, they learn to adapt to and enjoy each other's differences. Melissa Alvarez, a 17-year-old athlete who has participated in high school basketball and club soccer, draws a similar conclusion. In an interview, she stated that sports "give you something to work for as an individual and as a team. You learn self-discipline and dedication, which are essential skills to have in life" (personal communication, September 26, 2014). Competitive sports also teach athletes how to cope with failure as well as success. In the best of situations, as Sieghart (2004) noted, athletes are able to assess their achievements realistically, letting neither winning nor losing consume their reality.

### **Girls and Sports: The Downside**

In spite of the many positive effects of competitive athletics, sports can have a negative impact on girls' bodies and minds, and some girls falter under the pressure to succeed. Overtraining, eating disorders, and exercise-induced amenorrhea (which may result in osteoporosis) are some of the most common negative physical side effects that young female athletes experi-

ence; negative psychological and social side effects include increased stress and anxiety and a loss of self-confidence. Let's look at each of these effects.

### **Negative Physical Side Effects**

Overtraining occurs when your body can no longer adapt to increasing workloads—instead of building up, it breaks down. When a young girl overtrains, her body's balance between training and recovery is lost. Because the athlete's body can't recover, her performance stays flat and she cannot improve. Overtraining also makes a young female athlete prone to a variety of physical and psychological ills, such as unusual fatigue, irritability, feelings of apathy, and menstrual irregularities (Graham, 1999).

Another negative effect is amenorrhea, which refers to an atypical inability to menstruate. Graham (1999) pointed out, "in some sports as many as 50% of the athletes who are competitive may suffer from what's known as exercise-induced or athletic amenorrhea" (p. 26). Furthermore, research has shown that when a woman does not menstruate regularly, she loses bone density and becomes more prone to stress fractures (cracks in bones, especially hands and feet) and osteoporosis later in life. Amenorrhea can be caused by inadequate nutrition as well as by overtraining, both of which cause the athlete to burn more calories than she eats. As a result, her body shuts down its reproductive function to conserve energy (Graham, 1999).

The tendency to develop an eating disorder, such as anorexia or bulimia, is a third possible effect. Although young women may develop eating disorders for a variety of reasons, Graham (1999) noted, "Disordered eating is high among female athletes competing in sports where leanness and/or a specific weight are considered important for either performance or appearance"

(p. 74). Being slim and trim may be the goal of many adolescent female athletes, but when they seek that goal by means of an eating disorder, they hinder their athletic performance. A calorie deficit actually decreases immune function, reduces aerobic capacity, decreases muscle mass and strength, and causes low energy and fatigue (Graham, 1999).

### **Negative Psychological and Social Effects**

Just as a girl's body and mind often benefit from sports, so too are body and mind linked when it comes to those aspects of sports that are not positive. Often, negative physical effects occur because female athletes feel the need to win at any cost and the pressure to attain an unrealistic ideal. They may resort to extremes such as overtraining in order to have the "ideal" body or be the "best of the best." When they can't meet these expectations, some girl athletes lose self-confidence and become overly stressed and anxious. In fact, they may see their failures as a serious threat to their self-esteem (Davies & Armstrong, 1989).

Pressures at home, at school, among friends, and from coaches can be daunting as well because young athletes tend to worry about the actions and reactions of the people who make up their social circles (Brown & Branta, 1988). In addition, learning to balance the demands of sports, school, family, and fun can be incredibly fatiguing. Juan Orozco recalled that some of the girls he coached were involved in three sports at a time and still had to keep their grades up in order to participate (personal communication, September 22, 2014). Add to these demands the pressure from parents, and real problems can occur. Gary Anderson, a girls' basketball coach for more than two decades, has seen it all: parents who are overly dramatic, teams that serve primarily as stages for a few superstar athletes, and girls who seem "factory-installed with a sense of entitlement simply because they know their way around a ball and a pair of high-tops" (Dex-

heimer, 2004, para. 15). All of these situations and pressures affect young female athletes and can result in their making some regrettable, if not devastating, choices.

### **Girls' Reactions: Burnout and Steroids**

What happens when these young women decide the pressure is too much? What measures will they take to lighten their load? Some of these athletes simply burn out. They stop participating in competitive athletics because the pressure and anxiety make them physically ill. They no longer enjoy competitive sports, but consider them a torment to be endured. In fact, according to Davies and Armstrong (1989), it is not unusual for promising 12-year-olds to abandon the game entirely by the age of 16 and move on to less distressing pastimes. Melissa Alvarez had one such experience while playing high school basketball. The coach put so much pressure on her that her stomach began to ache during games and during practice. The more the coach yelled, the worse she played, but when the coach was absent, her performance improved dramatically and her stomach problems disappeared. Eventually, Melissa quit the basketball team because the game had become a burden instead of something she enjoyed (M. Alvarez, personal communication, September 26, 2014).

An alternative much more dangerous than burnout, however, is the use of performance-enhancing drugs such as anabolic steroids. A 2003 article in *Drug Week* stated that girls who participate in sports more than eight hours a week are at considerable risk for taking many illicit drugs: The higher the level at which athletes compete, the higher their risk for substance abuse (“Sporting Activities”).

Teenage girls take steroids for some of the same reasons that professional athletes do—to increase stamina and strength and to acquire a lean, muscular body. However, girls also take steroids to compete for athletic scholarships (“Girls and Steroids,” 1998). According to Charles

Yesalis, a professor of sports science and senior author of a Penn State report, a lot of young women see steroid use as an investment in their future; athletes can take the hormones for a few months in high school, qualify for a college scholarship, and then stop taking the drugs before sophisticated lab tests can spot them (Faigenbaum, Zaichkowsky, Gardner, & Micheli, 1998). What teenagers don't realize, though, is that even a few months of steroid use can permanently damage the heart, trigger liver failure, stunt physical growth, and put a woman's childbearing ability at risk. Steroids cause muscles to outgrow and injure the tendons and ligaments that attach them to the bone (Faigenbaum et al., 1998). As Farnaz Khadem, spokeswoman for the World Anti-Doping Agency has emphasized, "A lot of these young people have no idea of what this is doing to their bodies. This is a real health danger" (DeNoon, 2004).

Although health is the most important concern in the issue of steroid use, it is not the only one. Possessing or selling steroids without a prescription is a crime, so those who are involved in such activities may also endure criminal penalties (Gorman, 1998). Young women who use steroids are resorting to illegal actions and may eventually be labeled as "criminals," a label that will follow them for the rest of their lives. Doors to coaching jobs, teaching careers, and many other occupations may be shut permanently if one has a criminal past.

### **How Girl Athletes Can Avoid Steroid Use**

What can we do to help adolescent female athletes avoid illicit drug use? How can we help them avoid the pitfalls of competitive athletics? Parents, coaches, and the athletes themselves all play a crucial role in averting bad choices. First, parents and coaches need to be aware that performance-enhancing drugs are a problem. Some adults believe that steroid use is either minimal or nonexistent among teenagers, but one study concluded that "over half the teens who use steroids



start before age 16, sometimes with the encouragement of their parents. . . . Seven percent said they first took ‘juice’ by age ten” (Dudley, 1994, p. 235).

Parents need to take the time to know their children and know what their children are doing. Coaches must know their players well enough to be able to identify a child in trouble. When asked what parents and coaches could do to help girl athletes remain healthy and not use drugs or overwork themselves, Juan Orozco offered the following advice:

An athlete should be happy in her activity of choice, and her parents should encourage her desires to do well. Parents should be involved in her life and let her know that her efforts are valued highly, but they also need to be on the lookout for danger signs—such as unusual weight loss or moodiness. As a coach, I need to know the personalities of my players and get them to trust me, not only as their coach but as their friend—someone they can talk to if they have a problem. (personal communication, September 22, 2014)

It is also important for parents and coaches to teach the athletes how to develop a healthy lifestyle and not focus only on winning. If an athlete seems to take her sport too seriously, parents might negotiate with her, encouraging her to balance sports with other endeavors. Some parents and coaches push kids too hard, teaching them to win at any cost. In fact, a number of researchers believe that some parents and coaches are actually purchasing expensive black-market steroids for their young athletes (Costello). As University of Massachusetts researcher Avery Faigenbaum has put it, “I don’t know a lot of ten-year-olds who have a couple of hundred dollars—to spend on drugs or anything else” (Costello, “Too late?,” para. 4).

Athletes, too, must take responsibility for their own lives. Adolescent girls should try to resist undue pressures imposed by parents, coaches, and society. They must learn about the damage steroids can cause and understand that pursuing an “ideal” body type is not only

unrealistic but also unhealthy (Yiannakis & Melnick, 2001). Most of all, young female athletes need to know that they are more important than the competition. No scholarship or medal is worth liver failure or losing the ability to bear children.

The vast majority of excellent athletes do not overtrain, become bulimic, or wind up using steroids. Clearly, they have learned to avoid the pitfalls of competitive athletics. They believe in themselves and their abilities and know how to balance sports and other activities. They have learned how to sacrifice and work hard, but not at the expense of their integrity or health. In short, these athletes have not lost sight of the true objective of participating in sports—they know that their success is due to their efforts and not to the effects of a performance-enhancing drug. When asked what she would say to athletes considering steroid use, Melissa Alvarez said:

If you are training and doing your best, you should not have to use steroids. At the end of the day, it is just a game. You should never put your health at risk for anything, or anyone. It should be your top priority. (personal communication, September 26, 2014)

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