

Use of steroids is increasing among teenagers



ROB GARIBALDI, an All-American outfielder at Petaluma's Casa Grande High School, set his sights on a big league career. But at just 5' 11" and 130 pounds, he was told by coaches,

trainers and pro scouts that he needed to "get bigger."

When nutritional supplements and weight-training failed to produce the desired results, Garibaldi, at age 19, turned to anabolic steroids. He later defended the decision by pointing to his idol, Barry Bonds. Over three years, he added 55 pounds to his slight frame. The results were impressive.

Selected California Junior College All State Player of the Year, Garibaldi was drafted by the New York Yankees in 1999. Instead he took a full scholarship to the University of Southern California where he batted .399 and helped the Trojans to the 2000 College World Series. The following year he was rated by Baseball America as one of the top collegiate prospects in the nation.

But Garibaldi's success came at a price. By the spring of 2001 his steroid use led to uncontrollable rage, short-term memory loss, and delusional thinking. The erratic behavior ended Rob's USC baseball career. Bypassed in the 2002 MLB draft, the 24-year-old, severely depressed, took his life.

Garibaldi's example is extreme. But the use of appearance and performance-enhancing drugs by teens is even more troubling than the use of PEDS by elite athletes in professional baseball, football and track and field. What's worse, adolescent steroid use is growing.

The Taylor Hooton Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to educating

COMMENTARY

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students, parents and coaches about the signs and dangers of steroid use, maintains that in 1993, one in 45 high school students admitted to using anabolic steroids. By 1999, the number increased to one in 27. Today, one in 16 high school students, about 1.5 million, admit to using PEDS. The numbers do not include teens taking nutritional supplements laced with steroids or steroid precursors like creatine and androstenedione.

Adolescents use steroids for the very same reasons the pros do. PEDS build muscle mass, augment quickness and improve recovery time from injury. These assets give the athlete a competitive edge in terms of power, speed and endurance. But the fastest growing population among steroid users are females intent on improving their physical appearance.

At the same time, PEDS taken in megadoses have been linked to tendon and ligament tears, kidney and liver damage, impotence, heart disease and cancer. The adverse effects can be even greater for adolescents.

Unlike pro athletes, teenagers are much more susceptible to the physiological and psychological effects of steroids because of the natural hormonal imbalance associated with adolescence. The effects include irritability, rage, depression and suicidal tendencies. What's more, the psychiatric symptoms associated with steroid withdrawal persist for a year or more after the abuser stops using.

While elite athletes know the side effects of steroid use and can afford to pay the exorbitant cost for the unadulterated product, teens are clueless and purchase

FOR MORE INFO

For further information on the dangers and symptoms of adolescent steroid use contact the Taylor Hooton Foundation at www.taylorhooton.org

less expensive substances that may be contaminated and hence even more dangerous. But they are still willing to take the risk in order to improve their athletic performance, self-confidence and/or attract the opposite sex.

There is a desperate need for greater awareness of the dangers and symptoms of steroid use among adults. Unfortunately, most parents cannot distinguish between those symptoms and the extreme mood swings, severe acne, and physical maturation associated with adolescence. Nor does testing for hallucinogenic or recreational street drugs expose steroid use, making it more difficult for concerned parents to seek help.

Sadly, most adults purposely look the other way. They've been deluded by the "win-at-all costs" attitude embraced by PED-using role models like Bonds; by parents who push their kids in the hope of obtaining a college athletic scholarship; and by coaches who encourage their players to "get bigger" in order to build a championship program.

Regardless, there's no denying that steroids are illegal. Their sale and use without a physician's prescription is a felony. But it hasn't stopped teens from abusing the drug.

It's time for parents, coaches and professional athletes to take greater responsibility on this issue. If we fail, we have nobody to blame but ourselves.

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