

Anabolic Steroids - The Gremlins of Sport

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This study traced the growing use by athletes over the past several decades of various forms of anabolic steroids, a synthetic form of the male hormone, testosterone. The use of supposedly ergogenic substances by athletes is not new, of course, having begun at least 2500 years ago, but anabolic steroids - which were first developed in the 1930s - are substantially different from their predecessors in that they can alter an athlete both physically and psychologically for a period of weeks or months, in some cases permanently, rather than for a single, isolated athletic event.

Concerned by the use of these powerful drugs, the International Olympic Committee added them to their list of banned substances and began testing procedures in 1972 at the Munich Olympiad; but they failed to also add testosterone itself, and this failure allowed athletes to switch from anabolic steroids to the "parent" drug and thus avoid either testing positive or suffering a significant strength loss. In 1982, however, testosterone was added to the list of banned substances, therefore rendering competition both fairer and safer.

It does seem clear that many athletes are unmoved by the potential dangers of these and other such drugs as two studies involving competitive athletes have suggested that more than 50% of those responding said they would take a drug that would make them world or Olympic champion even if the drug would kill them a year later. Such responses argue that educating athletes about the dangers of drug use is, at best, only a partial solution to the problem.

For the past 25 years, most of the steroids used by athletes have been purchased on the black market, and estimates suggest that over 1,000,000 people in the United States now use these drugs to enhance their strength and muscle size. Within the past two years, however, various state and federal agencies have begun to use existing laws in an attempt to reverse the spread of these drugs. In addition, states such as California, Florida, Ohio and Alabama have recently enacted legislation with a similar intent and sports federations such as the NCAA and the USOC have begun, after considerable public pressure, to address the problem.