

Baseball star risks health in pursuit of home run record

Professional sports, drugs and profits

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The controversy over baseball star Mark McGwire's use of two performance-enhancing drugs has been largely swept aside by the American media after the National League and McGwire's St. Louis Cardinals declared that the substances were legal, over-the-counter diet supplements whose use did not violate league rules.

But the main issue is not the legality of the drugs, creatine and androstenedione, or whether they gave McGwire an unfair advantage, but the long-term health risks which the home run hitter is taking as he pursues the record of 61 home runs set by Roger Maris in 1961.

The Association of Professional Team Physicians, whose members work as team doctors in baseball and several other US sports, has recommended that androstenedione be taken off the over-the-counter market and banned from all professional sports. A statement from the group notes that androstenedione is chemically a steroid, and that its longterm complications include acne, breast enlargement, personality disorders, and liver and heart problems.

Under the profit system, however, such risks are dwarfed by the enormous financial windfall which the owners and media bosses are reaping from the record-breaking home run pace set by McGwire, Sammy Sosa and Ken Griffey Jr. McGwire has played before sold-out crowds in every stadium around the league, bringing in hundreds of millions of dollars in additional revenues.

A columnist for McGwire's hometown daily, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, wrote: 'If side effects from Andro cause him harm later in life, then he'll have to deal with the repercussions. But I don't think we're entitled to tell Mark McGwire what he should, or shouldn't, do with his body as long as he stays within the rules. It's his body, his business, and there's certainly nothing

artificial about his home runs.'

In other words, the health consequences be damned when there's money to be made. From the standpoint of capitalism, McGwire is nothing more than a highly paid gladiator to be sacrificed in the interests of profit.

It is true that the use of creatine and androstenedione does not detract from McGwire's achievement this year. Neither substance has anything to do with the hand-eye coordination which is essential to hitting a baseball, and McGwire was a phenomenal power hitter--with 49 home runs in his 1987 rookie season--long before he began taking the supplements.

It is not the home run record that is tarnished, but the entire sport, since McGwire's use of such drugs is not unusual. A majority of the league-leading New York Yankees use creatine, while a Los Angeles sports columnist reported estimates that half of all non-pitchers in the major leagues do so. Sammy Sosa, the Chicago Cubs outfielder who is neck-and-neck with McGwire in the home run race, uses creatine but not androstenedione.

Creatine is an amino-acid powder, while androstenedione is a muscle-building supplement which produces higher levels of testosterone. Both substances are used to help players increase their muscle mass and endurance, as well as recover more quickly from injuries.

McGwire began taking creatine in 1994, after suffering a series of injuries to his back, heel and neck which caused him to miss nearly two whole seasons. Other injuries limited his playing time in 1995, but he has played nearly full seasons the past three years, topping the 50-homer mark each time.

The baseball star began taking androstenedione last year to help him improve the effectiveness and increase the frequency of the strenuous workouts for which he is

famous. Although most authorities recommend that weightlifting be limited to three or four sessions a week, allowing a day off after each day of exercise so that stretched muscles can heal, use of the supplement allowed McGwire to exercise six days a week.

Androstenedione is not itself an anabolic steroid, but it returns a positive result in most drug tests for anabolic steroids. That is one reason why it is banned by the International Olympic Committee, the National Football League and the National Collegiate Athletic Association. The Olympic shot put champion, Randy Barnes, was notified recently that he faces a lifetime ban from competition as the result of charges that he has used androstenedione.

The IOC ban followed widespread abuse of the drug by the East German Olympic team in the 1970s and 1980s. East German team doctors developed a nasal spray that would deliver a powerful burst of the steroid just before competitions. The nasal spray dissipated quickly and it was nearly undetectable in drug tests, but there was never any proof that it actually improved athletic performance.

Since the Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act of 1994 removed such substances from regulation by the Food and Drug Administration, there are effectively no restrictions on their use or promotion. Food products are subject to truth-in-labeling laws, while drugs are subject to testing and approval by the FDA, but food supplements are subject to neither.

The manufacturers are not required to prove the efficacy of their products, nor are there any controls to insure the purity and safety of the tablets or caplets in which they are usually sold. These supplements are heavily promoted as bodybuilding aids in an industry whose total commercial activity is now approaching \$12 billion.

In sports, as in other areas of social life, the profit system distorts and degrades what would otherwise be praiseworthy and enjoyable activity. In the service of owners who are either large corporations or wealthy businessmen cashing in on the talent of others, athletes like Mark McGwire are driven to take actions which may well be life-threatening.

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