

Performance Enhancing Supplements & the Threats to Student Athlete Wellness & Safety

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Sadly, in today's sports world it is almost becoming commonplace to hear stories of athletes engaging in questionable, controversial – and sometimes illegal - efforts to improve on-field athletic performance. While two substances (anabolic steroids and human growth hormone) are being more closely scrutinized and stiffer penalties are being put in place, we are still left with potentially hundreds of other performance enhancing supplements. These substances are unregulated by the FDA and are legal to purchase and use – but the big question remains: While these products are *legal*, are they *healthy and safe*? The fact of the matter is that the performance enhancement industry is booming, yet few of these substances have been tested long enough to detect what future health problems they may cause. Additionally, stories about athletes enduring terrible physical consequences while using these “legal” supplements – sometimes even death – continue to make headline news across the country on a regular basis.

Since the performance enhancement supplement business is probably not going to end anytime soon, what should you do when your student athletes begin to contemplate what options are available to them in order to increase their speed, strength, and endurance? The following is a list of tips, insights, and strategies to help you crystallize your coaching philosophy when it comes to performance enhancing supplements:

- One concern around performance supplements has to do with the fact that they are *legal*, leaving many people to assume they are also *safe*. Keep in mind that cigarettes are *legal*, too – but most people acknowledge that they are hardly safe! Sadly, it may not be until many years from now that more data will be collected and we will finally know both the efficacy and safety of these supplements.
- Another concern is the mindset that “everybody is doing it” which many student athletes, coaches, and even parents are ascribing to these days (contributing to a casual, unconcerned attitude when it comes to the safety of supplements). This thinking is potentially very dangerous, and there is even greater concern about who is ultimately responsible for the actions of young student athletes today. Should the coach have policies in place? Should parents know exactly what is going into their child's body? Or should the student athlete be responsible enough to know better? Unfortunately, this diffusion of responsibility often results in *nobody doing anything!*
- Perhaps the biggest problem with performance supplement usage for kids is that their bodies are still growing and developing – and without proper

medical supervision the use of performance supplements may have serious risks. Furthermore, many kids have been known to “double up” their dosage when they see the impact a smaller amount has on their physical development. This is an even more risky proposition, especially without medical oversight and guidance. Making things even more complicated is the fact that so many teenagers today are on various anti-depressant, anti-anxiety, or Attention Deficit medications. Adding an untested performance supplement to this regimen is likely to further complicate safe physical and emotional development.

- Another big question is whether or not they actually “work.” Since the vast majority of kids begin to work out much harder once they begin using supplements, it is virtually impossible to discern whether the supplement is responsible for the change or, rather, the placebo effect is in play (this means that they *believe* the supplement is helping them, when in actuality it is really just their extra effort and motivation). For many kids, and even some coaches, when extra strength or speed is gained, the immediate assumption is that the supplement is responsible for the change, rather than the extra hard work.
- Pay attention to the marketing of supplements and how attractive they are to your hungry audience of student athletes. Who wouldn’t want to get stronger and faster – and possibly do it in half the time?! Supplement companies know this, and often the packaging and marketing hits a bulls eye with fancy, bold packaging and athlete testimonials (paid, of course). Try to find ways to communicate with your student athletes about these concerns so that they do not get caught up in all the hype and make an emotional, illogical, and potentially unsafe decision.
- When having a pre-season meeting with parents and student athletes, be sure to discuss these issues and talk about your personal philosophy and team policies. Also, try to speak with a physician or trainer who might be able to provide you with the latest medical information about various supplements on the market. If you don’t know where you stand on this issue, at minimum you should advise parents of these two things: 1) Parents are ultimately responsible for what their child is using to improve performance. They should never assume you, the coach, can be aware of everything a student athlete is doing. 2) If a child is using a supplement, with the approval of his or her parents, the minimum safety measure that should be taken is regular checkups with the family physician.
- Always emphasize the value of hard work when coaching kids! You must be clear and consistent about the value of hard work and determination – kids who hear this message are far less likely to use supplements!

- Check with your school's Athletic Director to see what, if any, policies are in place for supplement usage. If there are none, discuss the potential of developing new policies to ensure kids are safe when competing in interscholastic sports.
- You as the coach must think of safety over winning at all times, including the potential negative impact of performance enhancing supplements. Think about this point now before you are close to post-season and getting ready for the playoffs, when emotions are high and coaches are at more risk to “look the other way” when it comes to issues around integrity. Even the best coaches can be challenged when it comes to safety and good decision making when their team is winning, as winning and the positive attention that comes with it can be very intoxicating for any human being.

The reality is that performance enhancing supplements are a very tricky subject for coaches to deal with for several reasons. First, supplements are legal, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to prohibit them from being purchased (unlike anabolic steroids). Second, there is the question of responsibility: Should parents or coaches be held responsible for student athletes choosing to use supplements? Often each assumes the other is providing appropriate oversight, when in fact neither ends up paying close attention. And finally, without much empirical data to draw on at this time (since many supplements are very new on the market), it is impossible to truly know what potentially dangerous long-term and side-effects of performance supplements may exist.

Speak with your Athletic Director and other school administrators and develop strategies to address the growing concerns around performance enhancement usage by kids today. Additionally, communicate early and often with parents to ensure they are paying attention to what their kids may be doing to improve athletic performance. Finally, talk to the kids you coach and emphasize the importance of hard work, determination, and living a clean life – and how these qualities, not supplements, will enable them to reach their full athletic potential!

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