

Cheating in Sports

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“We’ve come to think of deceit as part of the competitive spirit, so that if you’re not cheating, you’re not trying.” – Phil Taylor, CNNSI.com

The more I read about cheating in sports and the use of performance enhancing drugs, the more I’m convinced that the entire subject smells of “snake oil” or something worst. I’m confused about the lack of commitment to fair play. It’s not that I don’t understand why people cheat. It’s obvious that if you can’t win at a fair competition, then cheat. Others cheat because everybody is cheating. At least, that is what they say. The reality is that the pressure of failing is too much to deal with. No one wants to be a failure. How in the world could a person be happy if he or she isn’t winning? Forget fair competition. Get with the program, or so I’m told. Good guys are losers!

Much of what I learned from my father centered on accountability. Each person is responsible for giving his or her best and accepting the consequences. You don’t cheat. Or, if you do, don’t try to rationalize it because others are doing the same. My father was always a supporter of athletics. He believed that athletes learned important lessons about life. I can still remember my father saying: “Tommy, you can do what you set your mind to do.” I believed him then, and I still do. Athletics was (and still is) special to me. And, yet I don’t follow professional or even university athletics. I’ve written two gymnastics books [1,2] and co-authored a book about numerous sports [3]. To me, athletics was always about what the athlete learned about him- or herself.

I can remember years ago releasing the parallel bars at exactly the wrong time in an NAIA National Competition. After getting back on the bars and completing the routine, I never really thought much about it. I think I know now why it happened. Later in the competition, I did a high bar routine that (at the time) was good enough for second team All-American. To this day, I still value interacting with the athletes and coaches. Thank God, not one coach in football, track, baseball, or gymnastics ever spoke of using supplements or drugs to be a better athlete. Some people probably think my feelings lack reality.

However, I learned some reality from my father's stories about himself and his friends that he grew up with. He was born in 1892. To give you some perspective, I was the first of five children in his third marriage. He was 52 when I was born. By age 10 or so, I used to sit and listen to what seemed to be endless storytelling. Sometimes, the stories got a bit much. But, in retrospect, I now realize the value of those stories. I remember my father telling me that he was a principal of a high school at the age of 16. I even have a picture of him standing among his students and faculty. His stories and the messages in them are special to me. He was my coach about life, and he knew a lot of stuff. After my father graduated from Louisiana State University with three academic degrees, he practiced law and later became a state senator, only to continue practicing law until he was 84 years old. Talk about passion for work, fair play, and ethical thinking, he lived each one.

He taught me a lot of things about growing up. Perhaps, the most important was his occasional talk about "being yourself" and "being true to your ideas". My father taught me to be an independent thinker and a person who believes in John 3:16 [4]. Faith in Jesus Christ was an integral part of my life as an athlete, and it still is today. My parents (and Dr. Gary Adams) are responsible for "The Power Within" book [5] that is written to help people to integrate faith and purposeful self-care. The book is about staying the course when it is easier to give in and quit. It is doing what it takes to get one's life back on track when otherwise life is driven by "short cuts" to get the rewards (such as a promotion, a pay increase, or an athletic medal). Athletes could learn something from the book [<http://www.thepowerwithin.org/>].

When I was growing up, I was told that it is important that you believed in yourself. Of course, it still is. Now, though, there are many substitutes for hard work and discipline. Now, it is anybody's game. If you have a lot of money, you are not just popular but an important person, too, regardless of your moral fortitude. If you can "show people the money" – you can just about do what you please (even break the law). Just don't get caught, which reminds me of my father's stories about the snake oil salesmen. He would tell me to sit down in the chair by his desk, and he would begin a story. It was his way of sharing a message with anyone who would listen. He loved to examine you afterwards to see if you "understood" the story and, of course, most of the time I had no idea what he was talking about.

Somehow, what he said stayed with me. I haven't always been aware of it. Nonetheless, my father is responsible, in part, for what is in this article. He talked about businessmen who stole from their clients. As a lawyer, he did what he could do to right the wrong. So, it doesn't come as a surprise to me that all across the United States, there are CEOs stealing the retirement money of their employees. Stealing is a form of cheating. If you will steal something, you will cheat as well. Both come from the same type of thinking in which a person does

whatever to get an edge. We do it literally almost without hesitation because we have justified it long before we did it. For example, everybody is doing it. So, it is okay to take sports supplements or drugs to enhance physical performance. Or, at least, that is what we have convinced ourselves is the truth. Similarly, when we cheat at work, in marriage, on our taxes, in our friendships, and as an athlete, it is stealing a vital part of ourselves. We are less because of it and, therefore, we need to think about it more than we have.

Look at it from Hanson's [6, p. 1] view: "College bound students cheat on the SAT tests. Teachers cheat by giving their students the answers to standardized tests so the teachers qualify for bonuses. Athletes cheat by using performance-enhancing drugs." He says we are a nation of cheaters. From corporate executives manipulating markets, to students copying homework, to adults falsifying resumes, cheating is part of what we do. Hanson may have hit the nail on the head when he said: "...we have to ask whether cheating has become the new national norm." If that is the case, then he is right. We have lost our commitment to integrity and fair play." Many individuals believe cheating is wrong. And, when society pats winners on the back or gives them huge rewards when they are unjustified, they, too, are cheaters. This is what my father taught me. Every person (regardless of the pressure to get the job done, regardless of the likelihood of failure, and regardless of the ability of someone else) must not get ahead on the backs of others. Winning is important, but it is not everything. Winning has no importance or value when realized through cheating. There are no shortcuts. Some of us will win and some of us will not win. That is life. Athletes must learn this lesson. They cannot be allowed to cheat, and they must not be encouraged to cheat. Coaches, athletic trainers, and sports nutritionists must enforce standards against cheating.

In athletics, it seems there are not any standards written in stone. Anyone can do anything to win. Maybe that's where many of us are today. The worlds of education and athletics are competitive. Some members of each believe they can get away with cheating. And, that is exactly what they are doing to win. But, when they get caught, their worlds get turned upside down (at least for a while). Take Mark McGwire and his 1998 home run record, as an example. After it "...was discovered that he was using androstenedione, a supplement that's legal in baseball but banned in other sports, the question became: Who else uses it? Can we trust any of these guys to play it straight?" [7, p. 3] The short answer is "no". Athletics is no longer about fair play. Perhaps it was always about cheating. So, why should anyone be impressed when athletes win by cheating? Their use of banned stimulants, narcotics, anabolic agents, diuretics, and hormones undermines everything my father taught me about sports. Really, can anyone place value on the performance of athletes who admit to stuffing "...a condom filled with 'clean urine' up their anus with a rubber tube hidden by pubic hair to provide an untainted, body temperature urine sample..." or using "...concentrated forms of caffeine administered as a suppository just before a race..." [8, p. 1]

Like athletes, the carrot dangling before some exercise physiologists for more research money is too much for them to not support the use of sports “dietary” supplements. Cheating takes on many different forms. The important thing for many is to keep their edge. There is no turning back for many. At some point, the tradeoff between ethical thinking [9] and supplement research will have real human costs. It seems to me that exercise physiologists, who are advocates of exercise as medicine [10], should be among the first, if not the first, professionals to consider constraints on supplement research. If athletics is to have any meaning in the not too distant future, it must be free from performance enhancing supplements, drugs, and agents that have far-reaching consequences. What ethical considerations should exercise physiologists consider to clean up the cheating in sports? How can the American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP) create a public awareness of clean sports in the way other professional societies have done on behalf of their clients (and overall, for the public good)?

This issue of cheating goes deeper than most would think. It has both ethical and legal implications. Like our parents who helped us understand the right and wrong of our actions, university teachers have a special responsibility (if not an obligation) to promote the common good. It is right for me therefore to ask the question: “What effect would the belief by exercise physiologists that the use of performance-enhancing supplements and drugs is okay have on the character of athletes? For example, does this kind of thinking encourage an attitude of fair play or does it promote the notion that cheating is okay because everyone else is doing it? University teachers ought to be upholding the notion that the benefits of fair play must outweigh the harm that results from cheating. Teachers, especially in this case exercise physiology teachers, cannot knowingly protect their interests in sports nutrition and overlook the ethical implications of fair play. The ethical foundation and reason for sports in our culture must take priority over the pluralistic views of the researchers.

The bottom line: Cheating is a problem in sports. And even if I were to write one hundred articles on the subject, its not going to change the minds of many. There will always be questions of right behavior, whether its in our government, institutions, or athletics. To violate the “fair play” principle of another player to ensure a better chance of winning is another person’s freedom to do and think as he or she pleases. Right? Many from different professions that are linked to sports support the notion that they have the right to adopt and promote views of “winning at all costs”. Our culture views athletics and winning as one when, in fact, they are not. Athletics is about winning and losing. You can’t have one without the other. Our cultural traditions value winning, and why not since it is part of the reason sports exist. What we fail to teach our children, students, athletes, and society in general is that the pursuit of sports is the act of winning. Or, stated somewhat differently, the honest pursuit of any objective (race driving, developing a business, getting married) carries with it the responsibility to do it right.

Cheating is everything that ethics is not. People cheat for all kinds of reasons. Their goal is the same, however. They want to get something that doesn't belong to them. It violates the standards of right and wrong. That is, cheating is about doing what we should not be doing. It is wrong. Conversely, ethical standards guide us to what we should do, how we should think about life and all aspects of it, including but not limited to the right of privacy, the right from injury or harm and, as members of a shared community, the right to a just and unpolluted sports program [9].

My father, my football coaches in high school, and coaches thereafter (particularly Fred Martenize, my gymnastics coach) taught me to be a virtuous person. Fairness was expected. Integrity was required. Self-control and prudence were traits consistent with their moral principles. They taught me to do more good than harm, to treat people with dignity and respect, and to be fair and just [10]. Being a gymnast in college was not about recognition or becoming a rock star. At no time did my coaches talk about multi-vitamins or sports supplements. No one ever thought about cheating to win. Deception was not part of my athletic upbringing. Also, violating rules to get the competitive edge was not part of my athletics. Transfusing blood from a fellow gymnast or ingesting anti-inflammatory medications (such as aspirin, ibuprofen, and naproxen) were not discussed or encouraged. My coaches were responsible men. Athletes were expected to learn the skills of the game, work hard to do their best, and learn that the rules of sports are similar to the rules of life.

It is Rushall [11] who wrote recently "it is time to draw a line in the sand". I agree. Cheating is wrong. It has always been wrong. As a baseball player years ago, I can still remember the player who was older than he should have been to be in my league. Everybody was uptight and upset. Faking a player's age is not acceptable [12]. Wolff [12] points out that cheating is "...undertaken by overzealous-and sadly misguided-coaches or parents..." who want to give their team an edge to win. He also said: "It's a shameful business, and no matter how you view it, everybody loses." Everybody loses when coaches and others encourage supplement use, too. Athletes learn to think that it is O.K. to cheat to win. As a result, Barr [13] is absolutely correct when he said: "Gone are the days of believing the outcome of every game, every competition is on the up and up...It's rotten and it stinks...Fairness in sports is...destroyed by greed and a moral competitive compass gone haywire."

The promotion of sports supplements has come to seem like business as usual among exercise physiologists. As such, it isn't a good thing that we have failed to evaluate our motives and/or research interests. Hence, in my opinion, the culture of dishonesty, where the philosophy is that research justifies cheating, has encouraged "...deceit as part of the competitive spirit..." [14] The deceit is endless. It has a life of its own, especially since it encourages exploitation. As an example, sports nutrition stores can be found in just about every community.

We hear all the time that athletes do not eat a varied diet with sufficient calories to meet their energy needs. The answer is simple. Buy a supplement from any number of different sources. This is the wrong answer for obvious reasons. The right answer is: "If you want to be an athlete, then eat a varied diet with an adequate number of calories to meet the physical demands of your sport." Athletes ought to be hearing the simplicity of this message from exercise physiology professionals. Every effort therefore must be made to ensure that athletes get the message that "...not all dietary supplements can be regarded as safe, even when the label or promotional material says they are." [15] This is a major problem as is the use of supplements to gain an advantage.

A person who uses dietary supplements and/or drugs is not an athlete. He or she is a cheat. It is really that simple. No one can convince me otherwise. Like you, I grew up playing sports and understanding that different sports had different rules to govern the players. Rules are necessary to play sports. Athletes must accept the rules and adhere to them. To argue "everyone is doing supplements and drugs" is no argument at all to justify the practice. It breaks or bends the rules of fair play. It goes against the very notion of why parents encourage their children to play sports. Parents expect fairness across the board, and they expect the coaches to be ethical mentors and leaders in athletics. They expect their children's coaches to not lose sight of the purpose of athletics. And many parents are fed up with the "winning at all cost mentality". They want the high school and college coaches to get beyond the corruption of athletics by teaching that the use of supplements and drugs is wrong. Ironically, some exercise physiologists don't seem to get the message. Unless we do, I believe it is just a matter of time before the professional development of exercise physiologists will be questioned. We should help coaches come to terms with cheating in athletics. After all, athletics is exercise, and we are "exercise" physiologists.

The reality is that athletes will not stop using supplements or drugs until their coaches put their foot down. The message that every coach should promote is: "If you cheat, you don't play on my team. If you want to be an athlete for lucrative corporate sponsorships, and you are willing to do anything for the money, then, you don't play on my team. If you don't expect to play by the rules, you don't play on my team. Understand that playing on my team is not about greed or developing star athletes who believe the world revolves around them. Make no mistake: Your behavior and lifestyle will not slip by undetected. As your coach, I am concerned about your total (mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual) development as a human being." A message of this kind is totally different from the expectation of some coaches and athletes who are in the "go position" waiting for "...a whole new class of gene-spliced performance boosters that will make the current crop of drugs seem like aspirin." [16]

"Hello, wake up America" is an expression I've used in class from time to time. With a slight modification, I think it is 100% appropriate in this article, too. "Hello, wake up exercise physiologists." Gene doping is just around the corner, which

causes me to raise the question: If sports supplements are not an ethical issue for athletes and everyone associated with athletics, is the genetically juiced athlete a problem? It is a problem for me, and it should be a problem for all exercise physiologists. Why? Exercise physiology is an evolving healthcare profession. It is not a research forum for select groups of individuals to do research. It is not about jumping higher or running faster, important as they are to athletics. Exercise physiology is more than grant writing or developing research laboratories, although both are very important when kept in perspective. Exercise physiology is not about risking the athlete's health for a gold medal. It is not about finding a legal drug or supplement to boost strength. It is not about supporting misguided thinking that performance enhancing "testing" (such as the IOC or WADA) versus a "no performance enhancing policy for athletes" will win the war against cheating.

No amount of money (\$50 million or a \$100 million) will correct the cheating. It is a far-fetched notion that has gone on too long. Rather than trying to figure out how to detect athletes who genetically modify themselves, why not stop the insanity? Why not restore the original idea that cheating is unacceptable? There is no respect for cheaters. This is a painful statement, but it's the only reality that will save us. There is absolutely no way that we can keep tabs on the epidemic of performance-enhancing agents in sports. Am I the only one who understands this point? Am I the only one who sees a relationship between our failure, as exercise physiologists, to teach that the use of performance-enhancing agents is cheating in sports and, make no mistake about it, is wrong, unethical behavior that needs cleaning up. Exercise physiologists cannot be part of the mentality that associates with the following statement: "Some athletes have said they would take a drug to enhance their performance, even if there was a risk it might kill them." [17] We should not associate ourselves with individuals who are willing to risk death to win or to get huge financial rewards. This is not the image that we need. It raises concern for me as a founder of the American Society of Exercise Physiologists. Surely, it is important to evaluate why research is justified in finding yet another sports supplement. Is it worth creating more cheaters? Is it worth the athlete's health or life? Is there really a safe (although still unethical) alternative to illicit use of performance-enhancing substances? Misner [18] thinks so. But, here again, there are more questions than answers. Consider, for example, Misner's electronic response to the BMJ "News Roundup" regarding athletes risk when using performance enhancers: "...various substances such as Krebs cycle intermediates and cyclic anaerobic substrates are rapidly depleted but slowly replaced. It is well agreed that these depleted substrates may be replaced faster in concentrated dose than through less-concentrated food sources. In repletion dose only, the depleted subject advantages [his] own physical environment for a performance advantage over the subject choosing not to ingest the concentrate source." My point is this: Note that his use of the words "may be" to support the assumed connection between well agreed and a faster replacement of the depleted substrates, which is followed then by a sentence that defines cheating in athletics.

Exercise physiologists should not be impressed with self-deception that, in short, "...is the process or fact of misleading ourselves to accept as true or valid what is false or invalid." [19] We deceive ourselves when we think our future is in athletics per se. We are healthcare professionals. We mislead athletes when we support performance-enhancing substances. We cheat our profession when we give "...full attention to confirmatory data, but [are] unaware of or oblivious to disconfirmatory data." [19] We cannot help athletes without doing what is best for them. If we fail to do that, other healthcare professions will know the truth. We cannot fail Integrity 101, and we do it big time when eighth graders are encouraged to use anabolic steroids because we believe in improving athletic performance more so than improving the character of young people. We must teach that life is not about being buffed at the exclusion of ethical thinking. There are no shortcuts to achieving real success. It comes with hard work, not stacking supplements and drugs.

"Can we, as coaches, parents, athletic administrators, former and current athletes find a high road above the debate, beyond the pressures imposed by a society that says winning is everything. Can we translate this into a meaningful moral message about drug use in athletics? Can we communicate this message to a young generation whose decisions regarding sports, and how they are conducted, will reflect the basic values at the core of their lives?" -- Mark Winitz [20, p. 1]

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