

Cultural changes needed to battle performance-enhancing drugs

With the “Mitchell Report” focused brightly on the use of performance-enhancing drugs by Major League Baseball players and the potential impact on student-athletes, some states are rushing to mandate random testing. Rightfully concerned over the influence professional athletes have over high school students, legislators seem eager to rush toward a solution. However, many groups caution that testing alone won’t solve the doping problem.

Sen. George J. Mitchell embarked on a 20-month investigation into the use of steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs at the request of MLB Commissioner Bud Selig. Released in December, the Mitchell Report, as it’s informally known, noted that professional baseball players are role models for young athletes.

Several groups have sprung up in recent years to respond to the use of anabolic steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs among young athletes. Though most don’t take a stand one way or another as to whether random drug testing of student-athletes is a good idea, many contend testing is not the answer.

“We need to address the underlying issues that would cause a student to take steroids,” said David Jacobsen, a spokesman at the Positive Coaching Alliance, a nonprofit group based at Stanford University. The alliance stresses youth sports as a means for character education and life lessons.

“College and professional sports are entertainment. Youth sports are a different animal,” Jacobsen said.

“The underlying drive to ‘win at all costs’ needs to be corrected,” he said. “We all like to win, but winning should not be the only goal of high school sports.”

Jim Thompson, the alliance’s director, recently testified before a congressional panel about the Mitchell Report and the relevance of the issue in youth sports. “There is a lot of concern over performance-enhancing drugs” in schools, he told lawmakers.

“If you look at professional athletes, it’s easier to understand why this happens. It’s their livelihood,” Thompson noted. “But if you are a 14-year-old student, it’s just as important for you to make the team. We need to create a culture where kids don’t feel pressured and feel a need to take drugs to make the team.”

Thompson stressed the importance of what he called the “double goal” coach. This is a coach whose goal is not only to win, but to prepare students for the real world by using sports to teach them things like character, responsibility and sportsmanship.

To do this, Thompson believes there needs to be a change in culture, starting with athletics directors. “It can’t be up to an individual coach to make a change,” he said. “Coaches are like free-range chickens. Athletic directors are of critical importance in this philosophical goal, because they feel that their identity is tied to how well their team does.”

For more information and resources, check out the Powered by ME! educational campaign at St. Joseph’s Medical Center in Towson, Md. Visit www.poweredbymemd.com.

For information about the Positive Coaching Alliance, visit www.positivecoach.org.

The Mitchell Report can be viewed in its entirety at mlb.com/mlb/news/mitchell/index.jsp. ■

Ultimate goal for student athletics? Honorable play

According to Jim Thompson, director of the Positive Coaching Alliance, it is just as important to a high school athlete to make a team as it is for professional athletes to succeed in their careers. Sports is tied to the identity of so many athletes that they need help to compete in an honorable way. However, when professional athletes turn to performance-enhancing drugs to protect their careers, it sets a poor example for students and creates challenges for coaches trying to keep them on the right path.

Thompson shared some key points he believes can change the culture to discourage the use of these drugs:

- It’s not enough for coaches to simply tell students it’s wrong to take performance-enhancing drugs. Further, coaches have to avoid sending mixed signals, such as telling players they need to add weight and muscle to attract college

coaches, then turning a blind eye when a player comes back from summer break with an extra 30 pounds on his frame.

- Schools need to build into their culture the notions of honoring the game and following the rules. Principals and athletics directors can’t leave it up to individual coaches to do the right thing.

- If you want a clean program that honors the game, you need to make sure your coaches understand this mission. You also need to reward them for doing sports the right way.

- Culture is “the way we do things here.” Principals and athletics directors have the ability to create strong, positive cultures, but they can’t just assume it will happen. If they don’t take action to build a positive culture, sooner or later they will get the same win-at-all-cost culture that is dominating much of professional sports. ■