

The "Aha" Moment

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Another athlete got caught cheating today. Another cyclist at the Tour de France - make that three for 2008's edition and we're barely through the Pyrennes. Is anyone surprised?

Now before anyone starts the diatribe on how cycling is so full of drug users, let's remember that we've seen any number of athletes in any number of pro and collegiate and amateur sports test positive for a plethora of supposed "performance-enhancing" drugs. And let's also keep in mind that as long as athletes strive for greater performances, and as long as a truckload of money is being thrown at them, there are always going to be those that will try their luck with drugs.

Oddly enough, this isn't the part that upsets me most.

The aspect of cheating is bad enough, but there are two issues that I find far more frustrating and annoying. The first is that it is all-too-often forgotten that "performance-enhancing" drugs have huge side effects that are all-too-often counterproductive. For example, adding red blood cells for their aerobic effect makes the blood thicker - which, in turn, makes it harder for the heart to do its job. Not a good thing. Anabolic steroids can end up having a powerful yet overall negative effect on tissue repair and recovery. Also not a good thing. These issues are real, yet often ignored. Of course, if you think you are getting stronger, or faster, then you probably are.

The second issue is a cultural one. Any time someone goes faster ... throws harder ... sustains a higher level of effort over a longer period of time ... invariably someone says "Aha! I knew it had to be because of drugs". It's always "obvious" that the athlete was "on something". It's as if we've already seen the limits of human performance, and anything beyond this is impossible without drugs.

It's that "Aha" moment that bothers me most.

Public service announcement: We're nowhere near what the human body can do naturally. We're nowhere near the limits of human performance.

The unfortunate assumption is that today's performances are driven by the best training - and that, unfortunately, isn't a fair assumption. Today's training is driven by more, more, more - not necessarily more quality, or better recovery, or any of a number of inter-related factors that drive performance. If you assume that what is being done now is as good as it's

ever going to get, then yes, perhaps you would think that there's nothing left but a drug-induced performance. That belief is, unto it's own, a performance limiter - faced by the participant and the spectator.

We're always going to face cheating as a reality of sport ... a reality of life perhaps. It existed long before drugs ever did. But to have succumbed to the belief that any incredible performance nowadays must, by definition, be drug-related ... that is a sad reflection on our culture. And it displays a great deal of ignorance of the sports sciences and what the optimally-trained human anatomy and physiology can truly attain.