

Opinion: Dealing with steroid fatigue syndrome

By Phil Taylor, Sports Illustrated

For years my buddy Russ has been advocating an all-steroids Olympics—no substances off limits, no lab-coat police, may the best chemist win. Let the athletes eat, drink or inject anything that will make them run faster, jump higher or grow stronger. Allow them to rub testosterone gel all over themselves like sunscreen or binge on HGH if they prefer. Imagine the results if we allowed athletes to soup up their bodies like '68 Mustangs and see what those babies could do. Sprinters would finish the 100 meters so quickly, it would feel as if your eyes were on fast-forward. High jumpers would have longer hang times than a 60-yard punt. Weightlifters would clean-and-jerk midsized sedans.

To me, the idea of allowing athletes to freely use performance-enhancing drugs borders on absurdity. I don't want to see competitions decided according to which athlete is most willing to take chemical risks with his or her body. But my resolve weakens with each convoluted case of suspected PED use. Maybe we really should turn athletes loose in all sports. That would at least eliminate the tedious, drawn-out investigations and prosecutions of suspected drug cheats that all too often come to no definitive conclusion—like the case of Ryan Braun, the Brewers' slugger whose 50-game suspension for testing positive for synthetic testosterone was overturned by arbitrator Shyam Das last week. Braun triumphantly declared that his innocence had been proved, but of course that's not true. In these high-profile steroid cases little is ever really proved.

Braun argued that the test was invalid because the sample wasn't shipped to the lab the day it was collected. But he has

not disputed that the sample tested positive, nor has he offered a plausible explanation for why it showed a testosterone ratio more than 20 times higher than normal. (At his press conference last Friday, he referred vaguely to possible tampering with the sample, but in making his case to the arbitrator, he reportedly never suggested that as the cause, and there is no evidence that the sample was doctored.)

The most logical explanation for the positive result is that Braun did, intentionally or not, use testosterone from an outside source. The suspicion lingers that he took a performance-enhancing drug but escaped on a technicality, leaving him in that familiar PED limbo along with other well-known athletes who have been acquitted but not exonerated, or convicted of only a tangential offense, or freed from investigation but forever suspected.

Is it worth the time and money spent on these probes when so many come to such an unsatisfactory conclusion that we can't remember how—or even if—they ended? Quick: Where does Roger Clemens's prosecution stand? If you answered correctly (without going to Google) that his first court action ended in a mistrial last July and the retrial is set for April 17, you get a free copy of the thousands of pages of legal documents his case has generated in the four years since he was accused of lying under oath about steroid use. The storm of controversy that once surrounded Barry Bonds tapered off to a light drizzle by the time he was convicted of one count of obstruction of justice in December, five years after he was indicted. Bonds was sentenced to 30 days of home confinement—not very harsh when your home is a Beverly Hills mansion.

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