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NCAA institutionally based drug testing: do our athletes know the rules of *this* game?

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ABSTRACT

ALBRECHT, R. R., W. A. ANDERSON, C. A. MCGREW, D. B. MCKEAG, and D. O. HOUGH. NCAA institutionally based drug testing: do our athletes know the rules of *this* game? *Med. Sci. Sports Exerc.*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 242-246, 1992. One aspect of the current drug-testing controversy that has gone relatively unexamined concerns the extent to which student-athletes are fully informed of the testing procedures employed by their institution. College athletes ($N = 2,282$) participating at 11 NCAA-affiliated institutions nationwide were surveyed as to their awareness of their school's drug-testing program. Results indicate athletes have numerous misconceptions regarding the drug testing to which they may be subjected. Over one-third of the athletes attending "testing" institutions were oblivious to the fact their school was engaged in drug-testing, and more than 70% were unable to correctly identify their school's drug-testing protocol. Implications of such ignorance are discussed.

COLLEGE ATHLETES, INFORMED CONSENT, DRUG-TESTING, SURVEY

Decisions regarding whether or not an athletic association or educational institution should involve itself in testing athletes for ergogenic and/or social drug use are among the most controversial and complex issues facing today's sporting community. The magnitude of this controversy can be gauged, in part, by the emotion with which the wide array of ethical, legal, medical, technological, and practical considerations surrounding such testing are being debated in public forums ranging from neighborhood watering holes and barber shops to the hallowed halls of the United States Congress and the Supreme Court. (See Wadler and Hainline (11) for an overview of many of these issues).

In the February 1, 1984, issue of the *NCAA News*, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) published its first set of guidelines to member institu-

tions contemplating a drug-screening program (9). Two years later, with the passage of Proposal 30 at its January 1986 Convention, the NCAA initiated its own drug-testing program at championships and certified post-season football (bowl) contests (8). Although, as part of this proposal, the NCAA compiled an extensive list of banned substances (including both performance enhancing and social/recreational drugs) and again set forth specific "guidelines for drug-testing of student-athletes by member institutions during the regular season," the ultimate decision regarding whether to implement institutionally based drug-testing programs was left to the discretion of individual member colleges. Unlike the formal drug-testing procedures authorized by the NCAA Executive Committee, which may (after proper appeal) restrict future athletic eligibility, few NCAA sanctions can be brought to bear on athletes testing positive on institutionally based drug tests. Because such drug testing is voluntary, the NCAA only requires its member institutions to "follow institutional procedures dealing with drug abuse" when they "have knowledge of the use by a student-athlete of a substance on the list of banned drugs" (8). Despite the absence of formal NCAA directives to do so, however, the number of colleges and universities conducting their own drug-testing programs increased 30-fold during the 3-yr period from 1985 to 1988 (4).

In the 1988-89 guidelines to its member institutions contemplating drug testing, the NCAA offered the following suggestion: "A specific written policy on drug testing should be developed, distributed, and published." The NCAA then parenthetically added: "It is *advisable* [italics added] that a copy of such a policy statement be given to all student-athletes entering the institution's intercollegiate athletic program and that they confirm in writing that they have received and

read the policy" (8). Several arguments—aside from the obvious issues involving the fair and ethical treatment of student-athletes—can be made supporting the contention that apprising student-athletes of the drug-testing policy in effect at their institution is more than merely "advisable."

First, the granting of informed consent is necessarily contingent upon an individual being fully aware of the procedures to which he or she will be (or may be) subjected. Simply put, by following the NCAA's advice to confirm, in writing, that their athletes have received and read the school's policy, institutions may be securing their athletes' *legal* consent to be tested for drug use (the athlete's signature on a formal consent document), but there is no assurance that this action secures the athletes' *informed* consent (7,10). This inability to obtain the athlete's informed consent may, in turn, provide a basis for future legal challenges to the institution's drug-testing program (3).

Second, an argument frequently invoked by those advocating the testing of athletes for drug use is that these testing programs generally serve as an effective deterrent to future drug use. Regardless of whether this contention can be supported by the evidence, it is obvious that such a position presupposes athletes possess—at the absolute minimum—the understanding that such drug testing exists!

Finally, lacking a complete awareness of their institution's drug-testing protocol undoubtedly increases the likelihood athletes will test positive for ergogenic and/or social drug use and thereby force the institution to initiate potentially embarrassing and costly (both to the athlete and the institution) disciplinary proceedings. These issues, in conjunction with the recent proliferation of institutionally based drug-testing programs among NCAA member colleges and universities, served as the impetus for the current investigation. Specifically, the purpose of the present article is to examine, via a written questionnaire administered to a nationwide sample of NCAA student-athletes, the degree to which college athletes are aware of the drug-testing programs currently being conducted at their institutions.

METHODS

Subjects. Varsity, intercollegiate athletes ($N = 2,282$), participating in any of five men's (baseball, basketball, football, tennis, and track/field) or women's (basketball, softball, swimming/diving, tennis, and track/field) sports at 11 NCAA member institutions nationwide took part in the survey. Subject participation was voluntary, anonymous, and in accordance with all university and federal human subjects guidelines. Written informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from each subject. The study-wide response rate (calculated on the basis of athletes eligible

to participate in the survey) was 70%. Division I athletes comprised 59% of the sample, whereas 28% were enrolled in Division II and 13% in Division III. In terms of academic standing, 36% of the sample were freshmen, 27% sophomores, 23% juniors, and 14% seniors. Regarding racial/ethnic affiliation, 83% of the respondents described themselves as "white or Caucasian," 15% as "black or Afro-American," and the remainder as either: (a) "American Indian," (b) "Mexican American or Chicano," (c) "Puerto Rican or other Latin American," or (d) "Oriental or Asian American."

Student-athlete questionnaire. A slightly modified version of the 1985 NCAA Student-Athlete Questionnaire (1) was used to collect data in the present study. The 58-page survey required approximately 30 min for completion. Although the primary intent of the research project was to replicate and extend a 1985 nationwide investigation into the attitudes, opinions, and experiences collegiate athletes have regarding socially used and perceived ergogenic drugs (see Anderson, Albrecht et al. (2) for a description of the overall research project), the current article focuses solely on three questions regarding NCAA institutionally based drug testing. The first asked: "Does your school have a drug-testing program?" Responses of (a) yes, (b) no, and (c) I don't know, were allowed. The second question asked the athletes "How would you describe the drug-testing program at your school?" Drug-testing descriptors were: (a) mandatory, random testing of all athletes; (b) mandatory, announced testing of all athletes; (c) mandatory, random testing in some sports; (d) mandatory, announced testing in some sports; (e) voluntary, random testing of all athletes; (f) voluntary, random testing in some sports; (g) testing only with reasonable suspicion; and (h) "I'm not aware of any testing at my institution." The third institution drug-testing item asked the athletes to indicate whether they (a) strongly agreed, (b) agreed, (c) disagreed, or (d) strongly disagreed with the following statement: "Drug testing by individual colleges has deterred college athletes from using drugs."

Selection of participating institutions. Consistent with the sampling methods employed in the 1985 study, 11 NCAA-affiliated colleges and universities were selected to participate in the study via a stratified (NCAA division and geographical location) random sampling procedure (1). Six schools were selected from Division I, three from Division II, and two from Division III. Geographically, three schools were located in the East, two in the South, four in the Midwest, and two in the West. The sole criterion for institutional participation was that the school currently sponsor varsity intercollegiate teams in all 10 men's and women's sports to be surveyed. Participation at the institutional level was voluntary, confidential, and in accordance with all university and federal human subjects guidelines.

Data collection procedures. Project staff members administered the Student-Athlete Questionnaire at each participating institution. The surveys were administered during a large-group evening session and again the following morning, on a walk-in basis, to those athletes with evening classes or commitments. Athletic and administrative personnel from the institution were invited to attend the evening sessions so as to lend credibility and decorum to the data collection process, but were excused after the questionnaire booklets had been distributed. Subjects were given a brief overview of the study and reminded of the voluntary and anonymous nature of their participation. To emphasize the absolute necessity for candid responses, subjects were instructed to omit responses to any questions they could not answer with total honesty. When finished, subjects deposited their survey booklets directly into a sealed box for shipment to the authors. The sealed box was used to reinforce the fact that information provided would not be accessible to athletic or administrative personnel at the subjects' institution.

Institutional drug-testing policies. To establish the official drug-testing policy of the participating institutions, the Director of Intercollegiate Athletics (AD) at each school responded to two questions similar to those contained in the Student-Athlete Questionnaire. The ADs first indicated whether there was a drug-testing program currently in effect at their institution. In a follow-up question, the ADs were asked to select the phrase that best described their school's testing program. Drug-testing descriptors were the same as those provided the athletes with the exception that the alternative "I'm not aware of any testing at my institution" was changed to more appropriately read "There is no drug testing at my institution." All ADs indicated the drug-testing program at their institution could be accurately classified by the descriptors provided. It was assumed, for the purposes of this investigation, an AD's classification was an accurate reflection of the institution's official drug-testing policy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Athletic Directors at seven of the 11 participating institutions indicated their school policies allowed them to engage in some form of athlete drug testing. To examine the extent to which NCAA student-athletes were familiar with their institution's general position regarding the testing of athletes for drug use, subjects were asked: "Does your school have a drug-testing program?". Responses to this question are presented in Table 1. Approximately 7% of the athletes attending "nontesting" institutions incorrectly believed they were subject to some form of institutionally based drug testing. An additional 47% admitted they didn't know whether their school had a testing program. Although

these results are somewhat disconcerting because they indicate the majority of athletes attending nontesting institutions are ignorant of their school's formal drug-testing policy, this type of "false-positive" is relatively innocuous in the sense that no athlete will be directly harmed as a result of his or her ignorance. In contrast, it is considerably more disturbing to discover that over one-third (36.6%) of the athletes enrolled at institutions where drug-testing programs were in effect indicated they: (a) were ignorant of the testing taking place at their institution (21%); or (b) erroneously believed that testing did *not* exist, in any form, at their school (15.6%).

To further examine the extent to which college athletes fully understand the drug testing to which they can be subjected, athletes attending institutions with policies allowing some form of drug testing were asked to select the phrase that best described their school's testing protocol. An indication of the agreement between athletes' perceptions of the drug testing to which they may be subjected and the actual testing policy in effect at their institution is depicted in Table 2. The

TABLE 1. Percent of student-athletes responding to the question: "Does your school have a drug-testing program?"

| Response | Athletes Attending "Nontesting" Institutions ^a | Athletes Attending "Testing" Institutions ^b |
|--------------|---|--|
| Yes | 7.1 | 63.3 |
| No | 45.9 | 15.6 |
| I don't know | 46.9 | 21.0 |

^a *n* = 784.

^b *n* = 1465.

TABLE 2. Athletes' awareness of drug-testing protocols at institutions with formal drug-testing policies (by NCAA division level and type of testing).

| Division and Type of Testing | Percent of Athletes | | | |
|--|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------|
| | Correctly Identifying Protocol | Incorrectly Identifying Protocol | Unaware of Any Testing Protocol | No Response |
| <i>NCAA Division</i> | | | | |
| I (<i>n</i> = 1154) | 32.6 | 43.1 | 20.6 | 3.7 |
| II (<i>n</i> = 196) | 15.3 | 27.6 | 54.1 | 3.1 |
| III (<i>n</i> = 132) | 4.5 | 7.6 | 78.0 | 9.8 |
| <i>Type of institutional testing</i> | | | | |
| Mandatory, random testing of all athletes (<i>n</i> = 189) | 65.1 | 25.9 | 6.3 | 2.6 |
| Mandatory, announced testing of all athletes (<i>n</i> = 436) | 29.1 | 62.4 | 6.7 | 1.8 |
| Voluntary, random testing of all athletes (<i>n</i> = 258) | 40.3 | 54.7 | 4.3 | 0.8 |
| Testing only with reasonable suspicion (<i>n</i> = 599) | 9.7 | 16.4 | 66.1 | 7.8 |
| All athletes attending testing institutions (<i>N</i> = 1482) | 27.8 | 37.8 | 30.2 | 4.2 |

degree to which athletes attending the seven testing institutions were aware of the drug testing at their school was examined on the basis of two institutional-specific variables—the relative size of the athletic department (as indicated by NCAA division classification) and the type of drug testing. Only four different protocols were selected by the ADs as reflecting the type of drug testing at their institutions: (a) mandatory, random testing of all athletes; (b) mandatory, announced testing of all athletes; (c) voluntary, random testing of all athletes; and (d) testing only with reasonable suspicion. Inspection of the table reveals substantial disagreement between the drug-testing to which athletes believe they are subjected and that to which they can be exposed. Overall, approximately 70% of 1,482 athletes attending testing institutions were unable to correctly identify their school's drug-testing protocol.

Although any conclusions drawn from these data must be tempered by the fact that only one Division II and one Division III school are included in the analyses, it is apparent that Division I athletes are, in general, more aware of their institution's drug-testing policies relative to their counterparts attending Division II and Division III schools. While more than three quarters (75.7%) of the Division I athletes attending testing institutions were aware that their school had some form of drug-testing protocol, only 42.9% of Division II and 12.1% of Division III athletes were aware of the fact their school had an official policy that allowed them to be tested for drug use.

A second interesting feature in Table 2 concerns the extent to which an athlete's awareness of drug-testing procedures appears to be, in part, a function of the type of drug-testing policy in effect at his or her institution. Although over 90% of all athletes attending institutions with random or announced drug-testing policies were aware of the fact that their school was involved in some type of drug testing, only about one of every four athletes (26.1%) attending an institution that tested "only with reasonable suspicion" believed themselves to be susceptible to institutionally based drug testing. It should also be pointed out that there also exists the possibility of a "division level" by "type of testing" interaction due to the fact that both non-Division I schools tested only with reasonable suspicion.

To explore the possible relationship between athletes' awareness of institutional drug testing and its effectiveness as a deterrent of future drug use, analyses were undertaken to examine opinions held by athletes attending testing institutions regarding the deterrent value of institutional drug testing. Of primary interest was whether athletes' perceptions regarding the value of institutional drug testing differed on the basis of whether the athletes were aware of the fact their institution tested for drug use. Table 3 presents the extent to which athletes attending institutions currently en-

TABLE 3. Differences in athletes' perceptions regarding the deterrent value of institutional drug testing based on their awareness of their school's drug-testing program.

| Drug Testing by Individual Colleges Has Deterred College Athletes from Using Drugs | Athletes Aware of Institutional Drug-Testing Policies ^a | Athletes Unaware of Institutional Drug-Testing Policies ^b |
|--|--|--|
| Strongly disagree | 7.0 | 7.0 |
| Disagree | 33.0 | 39.3 |
| Agree | 48.0 | 47.7 |
| Strongly agree | 12.0 | 6.0 |

^a*n* = 920.

^b*n* = 516.

gaged in drug testing agreed or disagreed with the statement: "Drug testing by individual colleges has deterred college athletes from using drugs."

Results indicate that among those athletes participating at colleges and universities with institutionally based drug-testing programs, individuals who are aware of the fact they are susceptible to periodic testing are more inclined to view such procedures as an effective deterrent to drug use ($\chi^2_{(3)} = 15.64$; $P < 0.01$). Although a direct cause-and-effect relationship cannot be assumed on the basis of these data, the results do indicate a significant positive relationship exists between athletes' understanding of the institutional drug testing to which they are exposed and its perceived effectiveness as a deterrent to future drug use.

CONCLUSION

Despite the recent and considerable debate over the relative virtues and vices associated with testing college athletes for ergogenic and/or social drug use, little attention has focused on the degree to which the targets of these elaborate efforts—student-athletes—are adequately informed of the testing procedures to which they may be subjected. This neglect is even more puzzling considering the irreparable damage the results of such testing can have on the reputations of individual athletes, institutions of higher education, and collegiate athletics in general.

The present article examined the extent to which college athletes are aware of the drug-testing programs currently being conducted by their institutions. Results indicate college athletes have a number of misperceptions regarding the drug-testing policies in effect at their institutions. Specifically, over one-third of those athletes subjected to institutionally based drug tests were oblivious to the fact they could be tested and more than 70% of the athletes attending testing institutions were unable to correctly identify their school's drug-testing protocol. Particularly disturbing was that approximately 75% of athletes attending institutions with official policies allowing them to be tested under the rather ambiguous protocol of "with reasonable suspicion"

thought they could not be subjected to any form of institutionally based drug testing.

One possible explanation for this ignorance is that the consent forms used by institutions may be written at a much higher grade level than the typical undergraduate student-athlete is capable of understanding or reading. It is not uncommon, for example, for institutions to use consent forms written at a reading comprehension level commensurate with that of an upper-division undergraduate or graduate student (5,6).

Another possibility is that the formal drug-testing policies espoused by the institution do not accurately reflect actual drug testing procedures. It may, for example, be in an institution's best interest to have a formal drug-testing procedure "on the books" but rarely, if ever, invoke such testing. The athletes surveyed may have based their responses more on "what *does* happen to them" as opposed to "what *can* happen to them."

Although it is frequently suggested that periodic drug-screening serves to deter future drug use, it is inconceivable that effective deterrence can be accomplished when a substantial portion of the prospective subjects have an inaccurate perception of the testing to which they will be held accountable. Conversely, those athletes, in the present study, who understood they could

be subjected to periodic testing were more inclined to view such procedures as being effective deterrents to future drug use.

It is important to note that the findings of the present study should not be construed in such a way as to infer that the NCAA, or its member institutions are purposely setting out to deceive their student-athletes. On the contrary, considering their vested interest in (a) fair and ethical treatment of athletes, (b) increased drug deterrence, (c) reductions in ignorance-related detections, and (d) protection from burdensome legal disputes over athletes' constitutional rights, it is undoubtedly in an institution's best interest to spend the negligible amount of time and money needed to fully articulate—to *its athletes*—the exact nature of its drug-testing program. Only after providing them with complete (and understandable) information can it be assumed athletes are giving their *informed* consent to the school's drug-testing procedures.

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