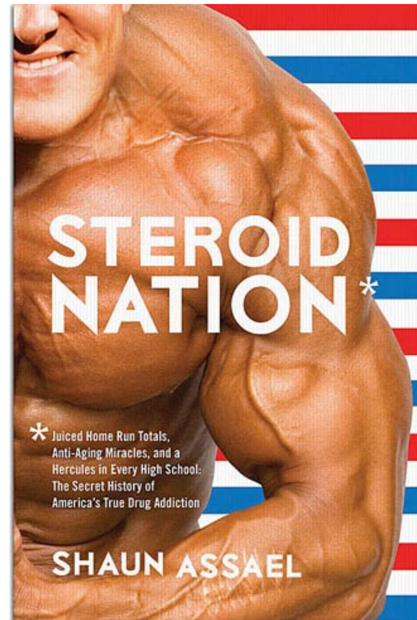
SportsLetter Interviews

December 2007 Volume 18, No. 6

Shaun Assael

With the recent release of the Mitchell Report, the story of steroids in Major League Baseball has dominated sports coverage. The report states, "Everyone involved in baseball over the past two decades — Commissioners, club officials, the Players Association, and the players — shares to some extent in the responsibility for the steroids era. There was a collective failure to recognize the problem as it emerged and deal with it early on."



For all the hand-wringing about Major League Baseball's mea culpa, the use of anabolic steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs has been sports' dirty little not-so-secret for decades. In his book, "Steroid Nation: Juiced Home Run Totals, Anti-aging Miracles, and a Hercules in Every High School: The Secret History of America's True Drug Addiction" (ESPN Books), ESPN staff writer Shaun Assael traces the culture of steroids in sports. The tale is about as long as the sub-title of the book, and Assael chronicles the many twists of this complex story. He writes about the long-forgotten "visionaries" (like Dan Duchaine, author of the "Underground Steroid Handbook"), the athletes who became caught in cycles of steroid abuse (NFL star Lyle Alzado) and the research scientists charged to nab them (UCLA's Dr. Don Catlin).

The result is a panoramic view of steroids in America — a view that echoes the Mitchell Report in placing responsibility for the spread of performance-enhancing drugs on just about everyone including the media

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and the fans. Writes Assael: “From Gold’s Gym in Venice Beach to the BALCO lab in San Francisco, from a high school in Colleyville, Texas, to teenagers in Hanover, New Jersey. . . . Today, steroids are everywhere in America. And Steroid Nation is rapidly becoming part of a larger Steroid World: Mexico, India, Greece, Thailand, Spain, China. Dr. Jekyll can prescribe in any language.”

On the day after the Mitchell Report was released, SportsLetter spoke to Assael from his office on the East Coast.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: How did you get interested in the issue of steroids and how long have you been writing about the topic?

Shaun Assael: In the mid-1990s, Vince McMahon went on trial in New York for steroid distribution. I followed that story — and did a lot of research about steroids and wrestlers and wrestlers’ deaths — and that led to my second book [“Sex, Lies, and Headlocks: The Real Story of Vince McMahon and World Wrestling Entertainment,” co-authored by Mike Mooneyham]. Doing the research for that book, I came across something called “The Underground Steroid Handbook,” which was like the Bible for the stuff.

When the BALCO scandal hit and I started covering that for ESPN, I kept looking for the larger picture of the steroid story. I kept coming back to the “Underground Steroid Handbook.” That took me back to the gyms of Venice Beach in the mid to late 1970s. That’s where the idea for “Steroid Nation” was born — to start there and look at how steroids spread across the country and became a cultural force.

SL: This book is a sweeping overview of steroids in sports, from baseball to cycling, from the Olympic Games to pro wrestling. Did you ever feel overwhelmed by the sheer breadth of this topic?

SA: Overwhelmed? No. I’m proud of the research I did and how I molded it into a book. Hopefully, the reader will appreciate that it took a lot of work

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to boil it down into a readable timeline. This isn't a textbook; it's a story, and I tell stories of the people involved.

SL: The story of steroids in America begins in the late 1950s, when Dr. John Ziegler developed a synthetic testosterone called Dianabol. Did Ziegler ever regret unleashing steroids?

SA: I think he did. He invented Dianabol out of a spirit of optimism and patriotism during the Cold War. I think he felt that this was something that was going to help the U.S. compete with the Russians. What he didn't expect was that steroids would make a migration to the West Coast in the mid-1960s and become part of the West Coast gym culture, and that bodybuilders would take them in megadoses. He was a doctor, and those megadoses both frightened and angered him. Ultimately, he became embittered.

SL: You write a lot about Dan Duchaine, the co-author of the "Underground Steroid Handbook," who believed that he "could unlock human potential through chemistry." Where did Duchaine's vision go so wrong?

SA: One of the things I write about in the book is that steroids are drugs that meet at the crossroad of optimism and avarice. In the early '80s, I think Duchaine saw them as a drug of optimism. The Olympics were coming to Los Angeles, and he believed steroids could turn men into supermen. AIDS was making its migration down the Pacific Coast, and he believed steroids could heal the sick. As I write in the book, he saw steroids as a drug without a constituency.

Where I think he went wrong was in not understanding that steroids are like a smoldering fire: they're very hard to control. And, Duchaine couldn't control his appetite. When he decided to go to Mexico and start smuggling this stuff, that was a pretty good sign that he had decided to break with mainstream society. So, while his co-writer, Mike Zumpano, decided to join conventional society, Duchaine went further and further and further outside of the mainstream. At the end of the book, one of the things I think you see is that, while he put on a brave front, he came to regret it. That's why he is such a cautionary tale.

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I think Duchaine is one part of the story of steroids that opens the eyes of people who don't know a lot about the culture. I think he brings the reader into the culture in much the same way that Timothy Leary brought his followers into the drug culture.

SL: In the book, you write that Dr. Don Catlin has charged that at the 1984 Los Angeles and the 1996 Atlanta Olympics Games the names of several athletes who tested positive were never revealed. Will we ever learn who those athletes were?

SA: No, not unless somebody wants to come out and give us a tell-all account. The one thing about steroids is that a lot of secrets just stay that way.

SL: Were those incidents a case of sport burying its head in the sand?

SA: It was very much a case of self-interest. Just like baseball thought they could derive the rewards of steroids and never have to pay a price for their use, so, too, did the U.S. in the Olympics.

SL: In 1988, Ben Johnson tested positive at the Seoul Olympic Games. How did that incident change the perception of steroids in sports?

SA: The first thing is that it produced legitimate shock, as opposed to now, which is bored shock. The second thing is that this is a seminal moment in terms of stitching together the story of steroids. This leads to hearings in Canada, in which Johnson's coach [Charlie Francis] comes out and bares all the dirty laundry. That then leads to Congressional hearings in America, which leads to the drugs being criminalized here. And, that leads to an era of prohibition, which, as I write in the book, becomes the time when real money could be made.

SL: In 1990, via the Anabolic Steroids Control Act, steroids became classified as a controlled substance. What did that change mean? How about the change in governance from the Food and Drug Administration to the Drug Enforcement Administration?

SA: Whereas before steroids were being prescribed openly by doctors,

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with a wink-wink, nudge-nudge attitude, now they were being pushed further underground. That was one unintended side effect.

The other was that, at the time, the FDA had a passionate investigator [Dennis Degan] with a massive database who, albeit single-handedly, was really going after steroids and finding local U.S. Attorneys who were willing to build cases. He could have alone seized the day. Instead, in the bureaucratic shift to the DEA, steroids became less important because, relative to heroin or class III controlled substances, the DEA kind of yawned about steroids. It wasn't a priority for the DEA, and steroids got lost in the shuffle. So, this bill, which was trying to crack down on steroid use, paradoxically expanded their use.

SL: Related to that, what were the implications — short-term and long-term — of the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994 for the supplements industry?

SA: That was a boon for the supplement industry and a disaster for the sports end of that business. The California supplements industry and the Utah herbalists were active in pushing for this, and it was a perfect storm. So, this bill came out that perhaps had good intentions: let's let vitamin stores offer people the chance to have good old-fashioned herbal remedies. The idea was supposed to be, Americans should be able to take control of their lives, and that the FDA was being too draconian about home remedies.

What nobody realized was that there was this little, little loophole that would change the sports world. The language basically allowed anything that was found in nature to be put into a pill legally, and that the FDA wouldn't be able to regulate his. And so, Stan Antosh gets this idea to make something called Andro. He has a chemist help him, and Andro changes the face of the sports world. Again, in the stitching together of the book's storylines, you see that his assistant becomes the person who makes the drug that fuels the BALCO scandal. Again, follow the bouncing pill.

SL: In retrospect, there were so many highly publicized blows to steroid use — laws and regulations against it, the perception that steroids caused

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Lyle Alzado's death — and yet the arm's race continued. Why didn't these many cautionary tales about steroids in sports resonate?

SA: I think that, basically, because steroids work. That was one of the great failures of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s — that the medical establishment tried to warn everyone that steroids don't work. Perhaps they are dangerous without medical care, but they darn well do work. Again, it comes back to that single theme about optimism and avarice: steroids are hard to control. That's why, at the end of the day, the reason baseball had the problems it did is that the players got too greedy.

SL: When the International Olympic Committee developed the World Anti-Doping Agency, that brought widespread testing to sports. Has the testing/ penalty model that has been used to police steroids in sport worked? If not, what needs to be done?

SA: I'd like to think that the testing model has deterred, to a certain extent, a significant percentage of potential users. Count me naïve, but I'd like to think that people who are on the fence about this really do think twice. Why? Because the testing at the Olympic level has gotten better. You have some tests now for EPO that are pretty good, and they're trying to close the gap on HGH. Carbon isotope testing for steroids can be pretty good. And so, while anybody can potentially beat the test, to do so they're going to need some kind of boutique chemistry, and I don't know that that's for everybody. Of course, the difference between [testing at] the Olympics and pro sports is so vast that you just can't look at pro sports and feel like there's any major deterrents.

My big problem with USADA [the United States Anti-Doping Agency] was that, early on, while they talked a noble mission, a lot of their early busts were just pimply kids. Their first case was a 16-year-old fencer who took her sister's attention-deficit medicine. Is that really what they're in business to deal with? Increasingly, USADA has been smart and moved away from that and toward partnerships with law enforcement. They're going with non-analytical positives, which means a whole category of cases that are based not on drug-testing, but on investigative and documentary evidence. I think that's a significant shift, and I think that's because they recognize that the testing model is subject to such criticism

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and flaws.

SL: Can you measure the impact of steroids among high school students in America?

SA: The White House this week released stats that suggest drug use among youth is down . . . Last year, among high-school seniors, the answer to the question, “Have you tried steroids once in the last month, year, or ever?” was 2.5 percent. This year, that’s down to 1.5 percent.

Let’s say, for the sake of argument, that the trend-line is going down. I think that’s because peer pressure works and deterrence works and the headlines work to discourage kids. At the same time, the motivation for some to get a college scholarship is such a specific equation that they will use. When they see the ability to save $10,000 or $20,000 on a college education — there, you have a financial motive.

SL: Is there a place for steroid testing in high schools?

SA: That’s happening in New Jersey, Florida and Texas. Texas is going to be the biggest. New Jersey is spending $100,000; Texas is spending $3 million. So, is there a place for it? I’m a little torn about this. I think that, if the idea is to keep sports clean, then maybe it’s worth the investment of about $170 a test. If the idea is teenage health, maybe the better idea is to invest it in seat belt laws, because car crashes kill more kids.

SL: The Mitchell Report was released yesterday. What most surprised you about the report? What do you think the impact of the report will be on MLB? What do you make of his recommendations?

SA: I think it was an honest effort, and I applaud the honest effort. I thought that the strangest thing was that George Mitchell did this credible report, but if not for the cooperation of Brian McNamee and Kirk Radomski, it would have been about three-and-a-half pages.

What I also didn’t understand was that, after he had done all of this, he had this touchy-feely, Alan Alda moment where he basically said, “Well, we’ve all made mistakes. I don’t want to see these guys punished.” I didn’t

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really understand that. I don't know that the players did anything to earn that reward. If they had come forward and addressed the issue — if they had said, "This is what I did and why" — and if the union didn't have this obstructionist stance and if there was a real cleansing, I could see that. I mean, I'm in favor of a general amnesty, but only as a reward for clearing the air.

SL: What about the legacy of this era: Should we throw out the records? Should players like Barry Bonds be in the Hall of Fame?

SA: I really don't know how to answer the record question. It's too ambiguous. What I can say is that what hurt baseball is that the players got greedy. They took these megadoses and turned themselves into freakazoid record breakers.

With the Hall of Fame, that's where morality comes in. That's where we have a chance as a nation to talk about our morality. Does the Hall vote go simply by skill? In which case, perhaps Barry Bonds and some of these guys get in, provided they can demonstrate they had skills warranting it before they used. Is character an issue? If character is an issue, I think that it weighs more heavily.

SL: How much blame should the media take for not reporting about steroids in baseball earlier?

SA: I think there are a lot of beat writers now that are wringing their hands and feel generally bad about it. But it's hard to be a beat writer. You have to show up at the ballpark day in and day out, for season after season. And, if they didn't see the needle going in the butt, I'm not sure what exactly they were supposed to report. I'm not trying to be an apologist for my friends in the media, but I do understand how difficult the job is.

I think that there're some people who probably could have tried harder. But I also think that it's an issue that demands outside investigative reporting, with people who don't have to show up in the clubhouse every day. The one thing that was paradigmatic about the San Francisco Chronicle's coverage was that you had the marriage of the sports and the news side. I think that newspapers can benefit from that more.

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Having said that, we shouldn't ignore some significant reporting that was being done. Buster Olney did fairly groundbreaking work in the Times as early as 2002. At ESPN, Jeff Bradley did some significant work.

SL: Several journalists including Mark Fainaru-Wada and Lance Williams and Howard Bryant have written excellent books on the topic of steroids. Which books would you recommend about this issue?

SA: I don't want to single anybody's book out because I'll forget somebody, but there've been some good steroid books. I think if you read my selected bibliography in "Steroid Nation," you'll see the sources that I used. I think that readers can look at this and then make their own decision about how they want to do further reading.

SL: Looking into your crystal ball, where do we go from here in sports? What's the future look like?

SA: I don't think, in pro sports, that you're really ever going to get to an Olympic-level testing model. The NFL does the best, and largely they do the best because they're the savviest about knowing how far to go to appear credible and still allow enough wiggle-room that those who want to use can evade. Baseball has a stronger union, and I don't know that they can ever effectively have any credible testing as long as Don Fehr runs the union.

What do I think about the future? I think there should at least be a discussion about whether steroids, in some form, should be legalized in sports. I don't say that we should do it, but I think the discussion would be worthwhile. Look: When steroids were criminalized in 1990, the AMA [the American Medical Association] sent a representative to testify before the Senate who said that steroids can be healthfully used, under a doctor's supervision and in low doses. And, I think it's possible to suggest that athletes, over a long season, might use low doses in a healthful manner, under a doctor's supervision. But in this era of hysteria that we're in, I'm not sure we can get to that conversation.

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