

Commentary

Test for drugs in all arenas

America is learning an interesting lesson about its newest wonder drug, cocaine. Among many other side effects, a single dose can be fatal.

Two premier athletes, Maryland basketball all-American Len Bias and Cleveland Browns defensive back Don Rogers, paid the extreme price for their mistakes. Both died of cocaine overdoses following late-night celebrations: Bias after being chosen second in the National Basketball Association draft, and Rogers after his bachelor party, a day before he was to be married.

Both tragedies are another slap in the face to the sports world, and it is apparent these two cases may be indicative of society.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse recently released some startling statistics on cocaine consumption in the United States. The study reported 700 cocaine-intoxication deaths in 1985, not counting those deaths attributed to other causes, such as heart failure. More alarming is the paragraph that says there are five million to six million regular cocaine users in this country alone.

Bias and Rogers will not become martyrs for cocaine users. Rogers, not a known drug user, did not grasp the lesson before taking the drug, just eight days after Bias' death. Some users will reject coke because of the deaths; most will not.

Professional athletics has done more than most in its battle against drug use. Last week Pete Rozelle, commissioner of the National Football League, announced football's new battle plan against drug abuse. The program, which includes mandatory drug testing beginning with this summer's training camp physicals, is very similar to the NBA's. Teams will tolerate two offenses and pay for rehabilitation, with the third offense resulting in permanent dismissal from the league.

This tolerance is more than the average citizen receives.

However, the National Football League Player's Association has balked at Rozelle's proposal for the same reason the American Civil Liberties Union opposes substance abuse tests for job applicants and employees by their employers.

Both feel it is an infringement of individual rights and therefore unconstitutional.

Carl Ekern, player representative of the Los Angeles Rams, told the Los Angeles Times in response to the NFL's plan that "we don't need to go searching for people, we don't need to invade everyone's privacy by spot checking. In America, it's innocent until proven guilty. People fought and died to maintain those rights."

Ekern's argument is ridiculous.

There are people on the other side of the fence who suffer from another person's substance abuse: families, consumers, employers, fellow employees, fans... the list goes on.

Employers who want a safe work environment and maximum productivity cannot be assured of it. The fan who wants superior performance for his or her dollar might not get it. A family that needs a stable home environment for children might miss out.

When public safety is threatened, role models destroyed and marriages wrecked, there is certainly an infringement of rights.

It is time to start thinking of the majority and helping the minority.

Random drug testing will not solve the drug problem, but it will open the public's eye to the cause and possibly save some lives. Professional athletes are not the only ones to be tested. The program should be instituted among employees on the corporate, public service and military levels as well.

U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett has gone so far as to suggest that all incoming college freshmen be tested for drugs before admission. As absurd as it sounds, it may be a good idea. Having up to six million people high on coke everyday, along with who knows how many high on something else — that's pretty absurd itself.

People are becoming more aware of cocaine in this society due to widespread media coverage and public education efforts to inform its pupils of the cons of getting high. Cocaine is a fad that will fade in the next generation, just as marijuana has lost popularity since its peak in the 1970s.

Without increasing law enforcement against the narcotics trade, however, a new drug will replace cocaine on the market. After two deaths of popular athletes, the Reagan administration will be pressured to pour

more dollars into eliminating the source of the problem.

Methods of drug testing also should be improved to assure accuracy. Studies indicate some testing has up to a 20 percent inaccuracy rate. If widespread drug testing is advocated, however, labs that do the analyzing would probably have to be licensed.

If incorporated, millions of innocent people will be subject to the testing through urinalysis and other methods. This most likely will cause anger and discomfort, but if an individual does not want to take the test, he or she can apply for another job or change employers.

How much of a deterrent testing will be a fighting substance abuse is unknown, but partial prevention, reinforced by education and the offer of a helping hand, is better than none at all. That education, by the way, should begin in elementary school.

Testing is designed to prevent and help, not insult anyone or take away their rights.

By Dennis Fernandes

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