

Bechler's family may sue drug companies

Michael O'Keeffe
New York Daily News (KRT)

As grief envelops it, Steve Bechler's family is struggling to cope with the questions surrounding his death and the debate it has sparked: Did the Medford-native Orioles pitcher die because he was taking an ephedra-laced weight-loss supplement called Xenadrine RFA-1? Did the team push him too far? Will the players and owners agree to regulate or even ban ephedra? Will the government do something?

Add another question to the list: Will his family sue?

According to Bechler's agent Sam Levinson, Bechler's wife Kiley has hired a lawyer to look after their legal interests and to consider possible litigation. Friends say the family's main goal is to get ephedra off the shelves.

If the family does proceed with legal action, attorneys familiar with litigation against ephedra manufactur-

ers say it may consider action against the following:

—CYTODYNE TECHNOLOGIES: The Manasquan, N.J.-based company manufactures Xenadrine RFA-1, the weight-loss aid Broward County (Fla.) medical examiner Joshua Perper linked to Bechler's spring-training death.

Doctors and researchers say products like Xenadrine that combine ephedra, caffeine and other ingredients, can be especially dangerous when used during exercise. It affects the body's ability to cool itself and pumps up the heart when it is already racing from exercise. The stimulant also masks fatigue.

"They are selling a defective product," says Alaska attorney Richard Vollertsen, who has represented several clients who have sued ephedra manufacturers. "It's known to cause serious health problems — heart attacks, strokes and seizures."

A medical examiner said high blood pressure and liver abnormalities contributed to Bechler's death, and Xenadrine RFA-1's label includes a warning urging consumers to consult their doctor before using the product if they have heart problems and other health disorders.

But Vollertsen argues that consumers who buy a legal, over-the-counter product expect it to be safe. "A warning does not fix the problem," he said.

—MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL: The NFL, NCAA and International Olympic Committee have all banned ephedra, but baseball has no policy on the herbal stimulant.

"I'm very critical of Major League Baseball for not addressing this problem," says California attorney John Tiedt, who has been involved in numerous cases against ephedra companies. Tiedt says he believes the result of the inaction "is the death of a

23-year-old prospect. Baseball should have known that just because it is legal doesn't mean it is safe."

Perhaps the main reason baseball does not have an ephedra policy is MLB's long adversarial relationship with its union. The NFL banned ephedra soon after the heatstroke death of Minnesota Vikings tackle Korey Stringer in part because the league and its players association enjoy an amicable working relationship. Baseball's union is far more independent, and players' association officials have expressed reservations about banning an over-the-counter product.

Stringer's widow Kelci has filed a \$100 million lawsuit against the Vikings, arguing the team pushed her husband too hard and then failed to provide him with proper medical care. She says her husband did not use ephedra or other supplements, and ephedra was not found in his system by a medical examiner,

although team officials said ephedra bottles were found in his locker.

—BALTIMORE ORIOLES: Bechler's family could follow the lead set by the family of Northwestern University football Rashidi Wheeler, who died in 2001 during a grueling pre-season drill. In a wrongful death lawsuit filed against the school, Wheeler's family is arguing that inadequate medical care, not the ephedra an autopsy revealed was in Wheeler's system, was the cause of death. Northwestern has in turn sued the makers of the ephedra supplement found in Wheeler's system.

"What can be learned from this terrible tragedy is that athletes, coaches, trainers, and the public need to be aware of the dangers of excessive exercise in heat and humidity," Siegner says.

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Sports briefs

Holliday leads Ducks in Idaho

University redshirt senior Becky Holliday posted an NCAA automatic qualifying mark and nearly a foot season best Friday to break the school pole vault record by a half-inch in the opening day of the

Mountain Pacific Championships at the Nampa Sports Center in Nampa, Idaho.

A Sparks, Nev., native, Holliday opened the afternoon at a mark near her previous season best of 13-2 1/4 and, after a third-attempt clearance, had less trouble with subsequent heights and eventually finished second overall with a mark of 14-1 3/4 behind NCAA record

holder Amy Linnen of Arizona.

"Becky rolled the dice by starting at a height a fraction higher than she had cleared all year," women's head coach Tom Heinonen said. "But it paid off. After she made that, she got on a roll and jumped great at every height after that."

In Saturday's action, seniors Adam Kriz, Foluso Akinradewo and Janette Davis led the Ducks.

Kriz improved his chances for an NCAA Championships invite with a 1 foot, 2 3/4-inch personal best in the weight throw (second, 67-7), and trailed only UCLA's Dan Ames (first, 67-9 1/2). Kriz's mark may rank him top 10 nationally next week on the national qualifying list since last week's eighth-place mark was 67-2 1/4. Normally, a minimum of 15 throwers are

invited to the collegiate finale, scheduled for March 14-15 in Fayetteville, Ark., with only two more weekends to qualify.

A Toledo, Ore., native, Kriz made his NCAA Championships outdoor debut in 2002 in the hammer throw after earning an invite based on his winning mark and personal best from last year's Pac-10 finale.

—from staff and wire reports

Men's

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four points and three fouls in 12 minutes in the first half but only got off the bench in the second half during his exchange with Cooper.

"I certainly thought that took away from the game," Kent said. "(Joseph) needed a cooling off period. He needed to calm down a little."

Joseph met with the media briefly after the game but was pulled away by a member of the Oregon media services office before he could explain his side of the story.

"It's something he's going to have to work through, and we're going to have to work through with him," Kent said. "We'll evaluate the situation and go from there."

As Joseph melted on the bench, Oregon was flattened on the floor. Without Joseph, Oregon's third-leading scorer, Kent relied on heavy second-half minutes from Luke Ridnour (20 minutes), Luke Jackson (19), Ian Crosswhite (17) and James Davis (15) — and it showed.

"Some of those mistakes we made were fatigue mistakes down the stretch," Kent said.

Washington's Jeffrey Day threw down a thunderous rebound dunk with 6:30 left and freshman Brandon Roy did the same less than a minute later to energize the crowd and spark a decisive 9-0 run for the Huskies (9-15, 4-11).

Oregon had battled back from a

14-point first-half deficit to get back in the game. Crosswhite hit consecutive 3-pointers to give Oregon a 43-42 lead with 13 minutes to play. A minute later, Jackson tipped in his own miss to put the Ducks ahead 45-44, but that would be their last lead.

"We were battling through a lot of adversity," Kent said. "We were good at responding, and even taking control of the game, at one point in the second half."

Ridnour paced Oregon with 20 points and six assists — but had eight of Oregon's 15 turnovers. Davis scored 15 points for the Ducks, and Crosswhite added 14. Jackson finished with just eight points on 3-of-13 shooting and nine rebounds.

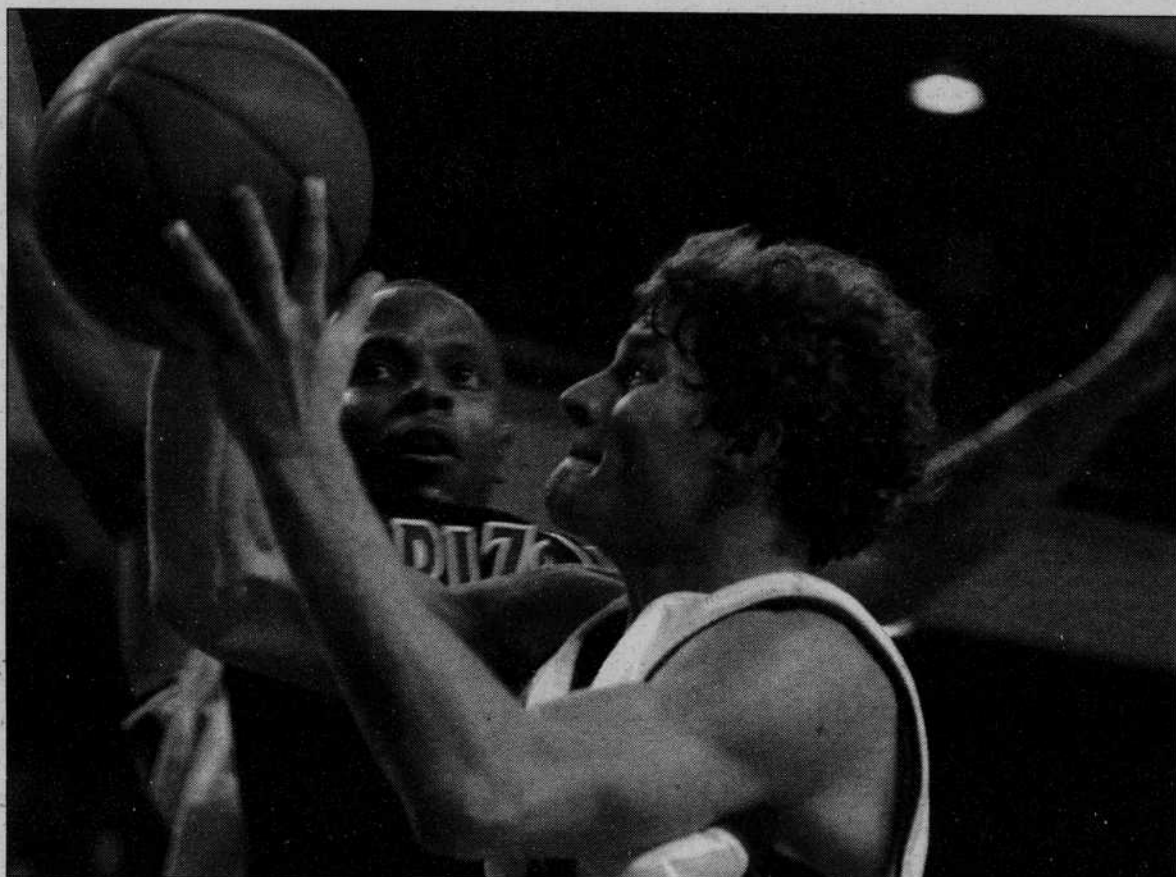
"There's no excuse," Davis said. "On the road, it's just tough to win sometimes."

Or, in Oregon's case, it's always tough to win at Washington. The Ducks have now lost two straight in Seattle and four of their last six here.

Curtis Allen led the Huskies with 17 points. Nate Robinson, Washington's freshman guard, who's generously listed at 5-foot-9-inches, finished with 15 points but was most impressive with his defense of Ridnour.

Kent called the Huskies "a really aggressive basketball team," particularly on defense, where the Dawgs hounded the Ducks.

"They played tough defense,"



Jeremy Forrest Emerald

Luke Ridnour had eight turnovers in Oregon's loss at Washington. The Ducks had 15 total turnovers in the loss.

Ridnour said. "We didn't get some calls we could of got, but you can't use that as an excuse."

"Sometimes the game goes to the aggressor," Kent said.

Ridnour missed a free throw with 1:31 left in the game, snapping a record-setting streak of 62 consecutive free throws made.

"So what?" Ridnour said when

asked about the Pac-10 and school-record streak. "I'm trying to win games. That don't matter to me."

Contact the sports reporter at adamjude@dailyemerald.com.

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