

Stereotypes of Athletes' Use of Performance Enhancing Products

Dear Editor-in-Chief

A recently published study surveyed cyclists about their use of and attitudes towards performance enhancing products (PEPs) (Kisaalita and Robinson, 2014). Over 60 percent of the cyclists claimed to have used non-banned PEPs while 8 percent claimed to have used banned PEPs. Out of four reasons why the cyclists would not use PEPs, risk to health was rated the most important. When asked to rank incentives for the use of PEPs, the cyclists found winning and maintaining competitiveness with other cyclists significantly more important than obtaining/retaining sponsorship. Ultimately, this study brings to light the stereotype that everything athletes use is for improvement in their sport.

While the responses from the sample that was surveyed provided insight on cyclist's beliefs about PEP use, the appropriate population was not targeted for this study considering the survey questions. The study was advertised via flyers that were posted throughout a college campus, at bike shops and at cycling races within one community. The only requirement was that the participants had to be 18 years or older, allowing a wide and hardly limited range of individuals to participate. These strategies and requirements are not ideal when trying to attract competitive cyclists; the individuals who would have been exposed to the advertisements would most likely be amateur cyclists who cycle leisurely. No information was provided about the last competitive race that these cyclists had participated in or the highest competitive level they had achieved, so referring to them as competitive cyclists may be farfetched.

The purpose of the study was to examine the attitudes and behaviors towards PEPs amongst a sample of competitive cyclists, and the survey questions were much more applicable to that population. Competitive and non-competitive cyclists do not share the same motives or beliefs in regards to the sport (LaChausse, 2006). The survey asked participants to rate the importance of criteria believed to be significant when choosing whether to use PEPs; the three criteria were "getting caught by the Anti-doping Agency (ADA)," "amount of performance improvement," "risk to health," and "violation of the spirit of the sport." They were also asked to rate the importance of factors in choosing a PEP; these factors included "winning," "obtaining/retaining sponsorship" and "maintaining competitiveness with other cyclists using PEPs." Being caught by the ADA, maintaining sponsorship and staying competitive against other cyclists using PEPs are concerns that the leisurely cyclist would not have. The risk to health was the highest rated reason to not use PEPs, which may not be an accurate representation of the opinions of competitive cyclists. Similarly, the factors that the subjects considered most important when choosing a PEP included winning and staying competitive.

Based on the participation requirements, maintaining sponsorship would probably not apply to this population. However, it would apply to many competitive cyclists and may have been rated with a higher importance when asked of that population. Although the data gathered from this study provides good insight about cyclist's opinions regarding PEPs, it may not necessarily be relevant to competitive cyclists.

The high use of non-banned PEPs amongst the sample subjects and the non-banned PEPs that they reported using shows the large number of products that are thought to be banned in cycling, whether they actually are or not. There appeared to be no definition of non-banned PEPs in the study or the survey, which warranted a variety of responses of what were perceived to be non-banned PEPs including marijuana, EPO, amphetamines, Viagra, and B complexes (World Anti-Doping Agency, 2013). Not all of the responses were actually non-banned PEPs, and this speaks to the lack of knowledge that there is amongst cyclists regarding what is banned, not banned, and not considered a PEP at all. However, the PEPs that the subjects reported using, and some of the PEPs that are banned by the World Anti Doping Association (WADA), are used recreationally (World Anti-Doping Agency, 2013). The common recreational use of some of the PEPs along with the lack of knowledge about banned substances signals that not all athletes who use PEPs are doing so to enhance athletic performance.

As mentioned previously, this study brings up the stereotype that everything athletes do is for success in their sport (Laure and Binsinger, 2005). There is a big focus on the use of anything that could potentially enhance an athlete's performance, the problem being that some of these things have multiple uses. Marijuana can be used as a PEP or as a recreational drug (Heishman et al., 1997). Viagra can be used as a PEP or as a counterattack for erectile dysfunction (Petroczi and Naughton, 2010; Mason, 2008). Some energy drinks are considered PEPs due to the substances they contain such as caffeine and amino acids, however they are often consumed simply to quench an individual's thirst (Reissig et al., 2009; Williams, 2005). Because PEPs can serve multiple purposes, athletes are faced with the dilemma of avoiding PEPs even just for recreational purposes. When they are found using PEPs, it is automatically assumed that they are using it for its purpose as a PEP. However, athletes still have desires and needs similar to every other human being and so they may use certain products for the same reasons that the average population uses them. Unlike the average person, athletes are criticized for this due to the stereotype that they are only interested in performance enhancement in their sport. Kisaalita and Robinson conveyed this successfully in their study, and research with more competitive cyclists must be conducted in the future.

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