

DRUG TESTING:
DOES IT STOP THE MERRY-GO-ROUND?

By

Chuck Patterson,
University of Missouri

The University of Missouri athletic department, like many schools, recently began implementing a drug testing program. Although originally opposed to this idea, I have become an advocate of this procedure. During the past five years, while employed as an Athletic Academic Counselor, I have grown gravely concerned about the use of drugs by athletes, be it beer, cocaine or steroids. But my concern about the athlete in today's society goes beyond the use of drugs. As counselors we must be concerned with "WHY" the athlete develops so many maladaptive or deviant behaviors (drug abuse, academic, social or personal problems).

I have always loved athletics, having been involved most of my life as a player, coach or spectator. I am an admitted sport junkie, addicted to athletics. From baseball to big time wrestling, I have either played it or watched it. Like the alcoholic who goes on the wagon, I have tried to abstain from athletics--but something has always drawn me back into the arena.

This does not mean I consider my addiction to athletics as a totally bad experience. My early orientation as an athlete came with high expectations to be a good student and to act in a responsible, sportsmanlike manner both on and off the field. Athletics taught me to set high goals and helped me develop the discipline, determination, patience, and perseverance to achieve them. I still rely on many of those developed qualities to deal with the daily challenges of life.

Today my own addiction is under control. Ironically, I have been able to achieve a balance while employed as an Athletic Academic Counselor. Dealing daily with the constant struggles between athletics and academics has helped me to gain a perspective. But old habits die hard--I must confess I still begin each day by reading the sports page. Unfortunately, this daily ritual does not always start my day pleasantly. Not because my favorite team lost, but because the stories frequently are so negative. It seems there are daily accounts of athletes arrested for rape, robbery, arson, disorderly conduct or found to have a drug or academic problem.

I am not generalizing that all athletes are developing such

behaviors. Certainly these are the headlines that attract readers, and many positive stories go unpublished. My point is not just that these stories are becoming more public, but that such behaviors are more prevalent. Many of these problem behaviors seem to be drug-related and drug testing may be a helpful preventative measure. But these problems are not solved by the test alone; as counselors we must look for causes of this deviant behaviors and seek the means to prevent them.

While searching for some answers to my concerns I recently discovered an article titled "Alcoholism. . .A Merry-Go-Round Named Denial" by Rev. Joseph L. Kellerman. I found many parallels between alcoholics and athletes. Kellerman suggests that one person does not become an alcoholic without the help of others. The friend, wife, boss or lawyer get the merry-go-round of alcoholism going by helping the alcoholic deny and conceal his dependency. The alcoholic is rescued from every crisis, denying him the process of learning by correcting his mistakes and revealing a lack of faith in his ability to take care of himself. Often these people truly believe they are helping, and do not understand that they are perpetuating the alcoholism. Kellerman states that the alcoholic will never recover as long as other people remove the painful consequences of his drinking episodes.

Similarly, the athlete often does not develop maladaptive behavior without the help of others. At an early age the athlete is also placed on the merry-go-round of denial, and success allows the athlete to deny or conceal his potential problems. The athlete finds athletic success (just as the alcoholic finds alcohol) to be psychologically beneficial. Athletics, because of their enormous, immediate benefits frequently become the most important thing in the athlete's life. Athletics for far too many young people becomes the instant solution to their problems. This merry-go-round is a fun ride for most athletes and for a chosen few will continue for a lifetime. But, for most, the merry-go-round will come to a sudden and potentially disastrous stop.

Like the alcoholic, the athlete cannot keep the merry-go-round moving unless others ride it with them. The wife, boss, friend or lawyer who helped push the merry-go-round of the alcoholic have been replaced by the parents, coaches, fans and even academic counselors who keep the merry-go-round of denial going for the athlete. Like the alcoholic, some athletes are rescued from every crisis, whether it is a drug, academic, social or personal problem by either parents, coaches, fans or counselors. Like those who enable the alcoholic to drink, many of these people truly believe they are helping the athlete. Their

desire to help may be destroying the self-concept of the athlete by revealing a lack of faith in his ability to take care of himself and denying him the process of learning by correcting his own mistakes. Kellerman stated that an alcoholic will not recover as long as other people remove the painful consequences of his drinking. Likewise, I believe some athletes will continue to develop maladaptive behaviors as long as others remove the painful consequences of their actions.

Just as abstinence is often part of the recovery of the alcoholic, I believe drug testing may be part of the solution for the athlete. Athletic participation can be a powerful motivator. If the athlete knows he cannot use drugs and participate, many will choose not to use drugs. Drug testing programs must include fair, consistent policies. Athletes who test positive for drugs must be given some opportunity to receive counseling to deal with their problems. If the athlete denies help and/or continues to use drugs, then he must face the consequences of actions and be denied the opportunity to participate. Drug testing may slow the merry-go-round, but this procedure is only part of the solution. All of those involved in athletics must work to stop the merry-go-round by making the athlete responsible for his actions. Only then will the athlete be able to change his behavior and make sensible decisions, not only about drugs, but about life.

The intent of Kellerman's article was not to denounce the use of alcohol or imply that all who drink suffer from alcoholism. Similarly, athletics is not an intrinsically negative pursuit, nor are all athletes guilty of deviant behaviors. Many athletes are learning to act in a responsible, mature, sportsmanlike manner while developing positive qualities. I love athletics and feel the potential benefits greatly exceed the negatives. But the problems, whether they are drugs, academic, social or personal, are becoming more prevalent and academic counselors are continually challenged to search for solutions.