

Handout for Performance-Enhancing Drugs in Sport: The Ethical Issue

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1 Introduction

The philosophical literature on the ethics of PEDs (in the mid 1980s) was scant but there were lots of popular accounts of athletes using PEDs. What Fraleigh is concerned with are two things:

1. What is the most crucial ethical issue concerning PEDs and sports?
2. What is the best way to resolve that issue?

2 The Central Ethical Issue

There are several ethical and philosophical issues associated with PED but are not thought to be central. These considerations are excluded:

1. Recreational use of drugs by professional athletes
2. Using drugs for medical purposes
3. Whether a drug or process is natural or artificial
4. How well current bans against PEDs work
5. How the use of PEDs by professional athletes impact young people

In zeroing in on the central ethical issue, it is helpful to make some assumptions:

- A1** There are drugs that (when taken correctly) enhance performance.
- A2** These same drugs pose serious health risks to those who take them.
- A3** Use of these drugs in professional sports is widespread.
- A4** Athletes are not forced to take PEDs.

Given these exclusions and the assumptions, the central ethical issue concerning PEDs and sports is this:

Central Moral Question #1: Is it morally right to restrict the choices of an adult athlete who consents to using drugs (or some other non-natural process, e.g. blood doping) for the purpose of enhancing his or her performance even though that athlete is well-informed of the harmful side effects of doing so?

The central reasons for saying that it is morally acceptable to restrict the choice of well-informed and consenting athletes are:

1. PEDs are harmful
2. Use of PEDs is coerced
3. Use of PEDs creates unfairness in sports.

Two views on this matter are those of W. M. Brown and R. L. Simon.

2.1 Brown on PEDs

Brown contends that an athlete's choice is informed, voluntary, and reflective of the values of the athlete. Restricting such choice is, according to Brown, an attempt to impose on the athlete alternative values even though s/he is not harming others. There is nothing about the idea of sport that makes the use of PEDs wrong. Therefore, restricting the athlete's choice is wrong as it denies him/her the ability to choose his/her own values.

2.2 Simon on PEDs

In contrast to Brown, Simon thinks that PEDs should be restricted. He contends that drug use is wrong because it goes against the ideal of sport, which is for persons to compete against each other and not machines and how they react to drugs. Therefore, use of the PEDs is morally wrong because it reduces sport to competitions between machines and so it dehumanizes people.

3 Resolving the Debate

Fraleigh attempts to solve the debate in a three-stage process. First, he accepts the assumptions **A1** - **A4** noted above. Second, in accepting the assumptions above, he considers two hypothetical scenarios:

Scenario #1: There are no restrictions against the use of PEDs for well-informed and consenting adults.

Scenario #2: There are at least some restrictions on the use of PEDs.

Third, he says that we should compare the consequences relating to (i) harm, (ii) coercion, and (iii) fairness under the two scenarios.

4 Classroom Exercise

Consider what Fraleigh says would happen in the two scenarios. Not considering his ultimate conclusion that PEDs are wrong, do you agree with the consequences he thinks would follow in the two scenarios? Are there any consequences that might result that he failed to mention?

First, consider the two consequences of the two scenarios:

Scenario 1:

Scenario 2:

Now consider these scenarios in relation to harm, coercion, and fairness:

	Harm	Coercion	Fairness
Scenario 1:			
Scenario 2:			

5 Conclusion

Fraleigh (p.28) agrees with Simon in saying that "we are primarily interested in testing persons rather than simply bodies or in attaining machinelike competency." But Fraleigh seems to agree for a more complex set of reasons. Whereas Simon contends that PEDs undermine human dignity by adding a non-sporting element to contests (how well bodies react to drugs), Fraleigh contends that we need to examine the consequences relating to harm and coercion together *and* we need to think about how their impact on *others* and not merely on those who have already decided to be athletes. However, his exact point is a little unclear. What it seems to be is this: allowing PEDs has a negative effect on all individuals as it institutionalizes certain rules that coerce people to harm

themselves. Allowing PEDs creates an institution that coerces people to hurt themselves for performance gains and this is morally wrong.

In response to the objection that all individuals are not forced to use PEDs as everyone is free either to (i) not become a professional athlete or (ii) settle for suboptimal performance, Fraleigh (p.28) as follows:

why, morally speaking, should a highly competent athlete be forced either to lower his/her expectations or discontinue sport involvement because he/she cannot complete with drug users? Why should the effective coercive force not be in the opposite direction against drug users? The effect of more people harmed by coerced drug use under the no restriction condition amounts to *tacit social approval of coerced self-harm of athletes*.

So, since more people are harmed by the scenario where PEDs are permitted, allowing PEDs amounts to saying that it is morally acceptable to coerce people to hurt themselves. That is, it is perfectly fine to encourage or create social institutions that attempt to persuade other human beings to inflict harm on themselves.

6 Reading Questions

1. What does Fraleigh take to be the central ethical issue involving PEDs in sport?
2. Name one of the three factors Fraleigh thinks ought to be considered in resolving the ethical debate over PEDs?
3. Briefly describe the two hypothetical scenarios that Fraleigh considers.
4. Does Fraleigh believe that PEDs should be freely allowed or restricted?