

The Balco Story: How Reporting It Changed U.S. Sports

INTRODUCTION

The slate-colored building sits on a frontage road steps from a freeway where the roar of San Francisco Bay commuters swirls in the salty air. The building has a windowless facade, aside from a glass door that leads to a narrow hallway lined with autographed photos of superstar athletes. It is ground level and squat, as nondescript as an American strip mall. Few, if any, paid much notice to Bay Area Co-Operative Laboratories until federal and local law enforcement agents burst through the door with guns drawn, subpoenas in hand, on Sept. 3, 2003. Even then, U.S. media were slow to comprehend the magnitude of what Internal Revenue Service agent, Jeff Novitzky, had uncovered: a systematic and calculated method to circumvent sports drug-testing rules by using sophisticated and oftentimes undetectable performance-enhancing substances.

In the ensuing two years, much of what the Balco defendants were doing surfaced in the Bay Area's two major newspapers, the San Francisco Chronicle and San Jose Mercury News. Some of the information was released in public court documents but most came from secret, unidentified sources that even broke U.S. law by leaking transcripts of private grand jury testimony of famous athletes. The two papers have published about 1,200 stories with Balco connections. This blanket coverage has impacted sports journalism in the United States by forcing beat reporters from high schools to Major League Baseball to begin learning about the affects of performance-enhancing drugs on the athletes they cover. By virtue of media attention, steroids have entered the lexicon of American idiom. In turn, the gripping details of the Balco affair raised public awareness and forced the power brokers of America's major sports – particularly baseball – to take the issue seriously for the first time. This did not happen quickly or with immediate cooperation. Major sports officials endured public embarrassment

before taking action – a phenomena that continues today. It has created a chasm between athletes and their sycophants, painfully exemplified in the Lance Armstrong discord that began in August by the publication of tests results from five-year-old samples. A country forced to question the veracity of some of its biggest baseball stars now had to question its larger-than-life hero.

After the initial outrage over athletes who cheat, some Americans are starting to tackle an essential element of the conversation: What should sport be? Is it simply entertainment like another Hollywood movie? Or does it represent some intrinsic human value that needs protection like a Faberge Easter egg? The writer Joe Lindsey told me: “Doping in sport isn't any more inherently immoral than violating any other set of arbitrary rules. Those rules, after all, are what define a sport - you can't run with the (American) football after you are tackled. Why? Because that's the rule. So if sport is just entertainment, then doping isn't really wrong.”

The guardians of Olympic sports would wholeheartedly disagree. Even the most skeptical individual must acknowledge that major U.S. professional sports such as baseball, football, basketball and ice hockey also hold dear the same standards. Universally, sports officials seem to frame their anti-drug messages as a way of preserving “true” values of sports; they revel in the triumph of the human spirit, the results that come about only through laser-focused determination and hard, lonely work. No doubt, legends have been created on the legs of such old-fashioned pillars. At its most luminous, sports transcends the scores and statistics and becomes something resplendent.

But every time a star athlete tests positive for drugs, it punctures the mythology until finally the society is forced to honestly evaluate its values and morals. After the 1988 Summer Olympics, Canadians experienced a national cleansing with an examination of

the Ben Johnson drug case. Americans didn't know it at the time, but they started down a similar path two years ago with the raid of Balco. It was the warning sign that all was not right in our world of fun and games and we would never again sit in the stands and watch with glassy-eyed innocence.

Chapter 1

MIXING SPORTS AND POLITICS

Jeffrey Novitzky is a tall, green bean-thin man with a shaved head, whose standard-issue government suits hang like an overcoat. A local sports star, Novitzky jumped 7 feet (2.13 meters) at a Bay Area high school and played basketball for San Jose State University. He became a criminal investigator with the IRS, dealing with tax fraud and money laundering cases. In August of 2002 he became interested in the activities of Victor Conte Jr., founder of Balco and formerly a bass player in the band Tower of Power. Through tips, the government suspected Conte of laundering money he earned from selling drugs to athletes. After 18 months of surveillance of Conte and Balco, Novitzky concluded he had uncovered a steroid-distribution ring that was servicing celebrity U.S. athletes. By June 2003, the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency also was interested in Balco on a separate plane. Here's how it happened: Track and field coach Trevor Graham and Conte were embroiled in a flame war on a sprinters' message board on the Internet. Their cutting remarks hit close to the bone and chafed both men. They each independently decided to do something to undermine the other. Conte penned a letter to the IAAF and drug testers detailing Graham's drug pipeline in Mexico. So far, federal authorities and the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency have not done anything with this information from what we can tell. Conte cooled down and tore up the letter instead of sending it. A day later, a spokesman at the anti-doping agency received a call from a Reuters' track and field writer who said he knew of a coach who

been such a big story that Balco had become a household name in the sports world. But while the government uncovered a fascinating case of a performance-enhancing drug operation, it did not have mounds of evidence to put away the defendants for a long time. Some had hoped to witness a trial because it would have forced American star athletes to publicly answer questions about drug use under oath. The settlement saved 30 or more athletes from that embarrassment. It also might have allowed the system of drug testing to escape serious scrutiny. The Balco defendants were prepared to take on the Olympic program, which has been heralded as the gold standard in sports. Conte and company were ready to expose its flaws and attack its weaknesses. In the end, this might have been beneficial because if the Balco affair taught us anything, it underscored how easy it was for athletes to cheat. Kelli White, for example, passed multiple drug tests despite the regimen of steroids and blood-boosters she took. This is not only bad for sports officials, but it hurts clean athletes as well. Those athletes cannot cite their drug tests as proof of their innocence. They find themselves in the most dubious position: How do you prove a negative?

The Balco case also illustrated athletes today use many drugs that cannot be tested. Some include insulin, adrenalin and thyroid medication. Sports officials have dismissed such claims although they seem real and credible. I reported in December that authorities confiscated from Balco piracetam, a prescription drug used to treat disorders of cognition and balance, and mazindol, a prescription appetite suppressant. These drugs had not appeared on the sports scene before. New designer drugs are bound to surface, too, and, many point to gene therapy as the Frankenstein-like future we face. Circumventing the testing will continue, along with using drugs to aid performance.

Congress still work to do. For example, the public should hear from Dr. Wade Exum, the physician who ran the U.S. Olympic

Committee's drug program before it was taken over by the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency in 2000. Although Exum is considered controversial in some circles of the Olympic movement, he has offered invaluable insights into the history of drug-testing as well as solutions to make it better. Conte, the Balco mastermind, is another individual who could offer a view from the inside.

Americans have not yet even considered the ramifications of drug-test cover-ups. A number of track athletes have alleged it happened to them as a way for the IAAF to save itself from embarrassment. Who knows what has happened in any drug-testing program. Correcting ethical issues surrounding testing is going to be as equally important as stopping the cheaters. Put simply, more media scrutiny is necessary to tell the full story. Drug testing lacks real transparency. Sometimes it seems to be as cloak-and-dagger as the athletes in the shadows taking drugs. Once we have an honest and open dialogue, we likely will be confronted with serious moral questions. It will go to the heart of who we are as human beings and how we want to conduct ourselves. The exhaustive coverage of the Balco has cracked open the window but some suggest none of the bluster will effectively change the complexion of American sports. I think it depends whether America is ready for the full view. At the least, we'll now see sports for what they are: games that almost always lead to individuals willing to cross the line in an effort to win.

Thank you.