

Steroid testing: a sad reality

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Ok, maybe I'm a little naïve.

With all this talk about steroid use at the high school level and threat of random testing in the not-so-distant future, I continually ask myself, "is this that big a problem?"

Evidentially, it is.

In a national survey not too long ago, 3.5 percent of high school seniors reported they have used steroids at least once, up from 2.1 percent in 1991. Those figures do not include users of over-the-counter supplements. Other figures show six percent of U.S. high school students took steroids in 2003 without a doctor's prescription.

These numbers are such a concern that a California senator has come up with a bill which calls for random testing of any high school athlete in Texas any time during the coming school year. There are a lot of questions like who will foot the bill? Can we perfect it in time for kickoff this year and who will do the testing of these students?

According to some published reports, lawmakers hope to test as many as 22,000 students per year or more. If approved, the bill would leave most of the decision making on punishment up to the University Interscholastic League.

In New Jersey they've already instituted such processes. New Jersey's plan is a bit different in that it calls for random testing for athletes who have qualified for team or individual championships, with a one-year loss of eligibility for those who test positive.

I am all for random testing. Steroids can lead to dramatic mood swings, heart disease and cancer to name a few complications. While it's something we can only shake our head at in disappointment at the professional level, we certainly don't want our kids emulating this same behavior.

At the same time, I sit here amazed at just how this could have happened.

For the last 10 years, I've walked the sidelines of high schools everywhere. I've sat in press boxes at many a stadium and watched local kids perform feats that I was sure could wind up on ESPN highlight reels.

Not once during those 10 years has the question, "is this kid using steroids?" even come close to crossing my mind. No matter how big they were, no matter how gaudy their individual numbers were, high school athletes simply weren't looked at like that. At least I didn't, anyway.

But here we are, sitting in a world where we can't even watch a single sporting event without wondering if athletes are cheating. I, for one, would be extremely saddened if random testing at the high school level turns into a giant circus where hundreds of athletes are testing positive.

Again, we can only hope for the best.

Until next time, I'll see you on the sidelines.