



## Intellectual Juicing

By Shawn Macomber  
1/18/2008

MANHATTAN -- The Oxford-style Intelligence Squared debates at the Asia Society are precisely what I hoped to discover moving to New York City last spring: Provocative, unabashedly intellectual, lively. How could anyone who slogs through the pathetic, pandering spectacle of modern American politics not love a debate series with a mission statement that includes a promise to "transcend the toxically emotional and reflexively ideological"?

Organizers certainly did not shy away from controversy Tuesday evening, inviting six men of varying backgrounds to debate the proposition, We should accept performance-enhancing drugs in competitive sports.

Two bioethicists -- Dr. Norman Fost and Oxford's Julian Savulescu -- joined Reason magazine Senior Editor Radley Balko in support of the motion. Dale Murphy, two-time National League MVP for the 1980s Atlanta Braves teams, argued against the motion alongside well-known sportscaster George Michael and Richard Pound, a 1960 Olympic finalist who now runs the grandly/sternly-titled World Anti-Doping Agency. Bob Costas, though clearly not enamored of the "for" position, moderated with a warmth and humor that gave glimpse of how fame found him.

As someone who doesn't follow sports I walked into the debate without any real dog in the fight. Generally, I knew my sympathies would lie with those who believed, for once, we might want to have a grown-up, non-hysterical national conversation about synthetic or organic substances and, further, that at the very least what professional sports organizations do or do not allow should be far outside the purview of Congress. "I'm not advocating that Congress mandate to the NFL that they have to allow performance-enhancing drugs," Balko argued at one point, "but I also don't think it's any business of Congress telling leagues they have to ban them."

Amen. When Virginia Republican Rep. Tom Davis justifies such intervention on the grounds that Congress has the power to investigate "at any time, on any matter," so many red flags shoot up in my mind that it suddenly resembles a 1950s Mao rally. (Referring to Davis's sudden dedication to scaled-back "smart growth" when housing in his safe district threatened to attract Democrats, Balko got off the best line of the evening: "This guy is cheating at democracy and he's lecturing baseball players on fairness.") Connecticut Republican Rep. Chris Shays had it right when he told Time, "as it relates to the legacy of individual players, and the disputes among players and their trainers -- that's not our responsibility."

If fans want to shame players out of lucrative advertising deals or leagues want to run them out of town on a rail, fine. The nation need not take its moral cues from Tom Davis and Henry Waxman.

AS TO WHAT EXTENT performance-enhancing drugs should be regulated within sports, I will mimic our new hope-mongering national hero Barack Obama and vote, simply, cowardly dodge, er, I mean, present.

With a mind open to condemnation, I had been bracing for an avalanche of horrifying statistics from the opposition. Instead, they offered mostly a lot of flailing posturing without much actual engagement of the other side's arguments. Michael, for example, bellowed out a steady list of tragedies that had befallen unnamed players he'd spoken with in confidence, explicitly adding after each tale that there was no proof steroids had anything to do with the horrors he had just detailed as a somewhat novel way of suggesting the drugs had everything to do with it.

"I don't want to have to go to the cemetery and tell all the athletes who are dead there, 'Hey guys, you're going to have a lot more of your friends coming because we're going to legalize this stuff,'" Michael said, drawing a bit from that well of toxic emotionalism. "The only good news out of it? They wouldn't hear the news. Because they're all dead."

According to Pound, support for the motion was tantamount to agreeing our children should be walking "chemical stockpiles" and our beloved national pastimes transformed into "increasingly violent, extreme and meaningless" activities "practiced by a class of chemical and/or genetic mutant gladiators." Why this has not already come to pass isn't clear. (The Mitchell Report seems to suggest a good many of baseball's celebrities are already "juiced" to the max.) And "meaningless"? To whom? Baseball has remained popular throughout the controversy, it was noted more than once.

Pound's books very well may tell a different tale, but this night his dissent appeared more intent on imposing a personal aesthetic of how players should look and behave than offering hard evidence as to why rules should not change. Likewise, Dale Murphy doesn't want his record surpassed by someone with a chemical leg up, which is understandable. All future policy can't be set on the basis of protecting Murphy's record, though. That may be the outcome of a policy, but it is not a rationale for a policy in an ever changing world.

One reason I personally don't consume alcohol is that I prefer not to subsidize the misery it causes. (You'd know the other reason if you ever spent an evening with drunk-you.) Nevertheless, teenagers frequently abuse alcohol, illegally. Other journalists have an easier time schmoozing at parties with a couple drinks in them. Yet who would accept an attempt by me to foist a neo-prohibitionist philosophy upon society? Personal bias is or at least should not be enough to impose one's will on others, whatever Henry Waxman has told you.

THE MOST COMPELLING argument against allowing performance-enhancing drugs into professional sports is that athletes who don't want to "juice" may feel compelled to do so as a prerequisite to reasonably compete. It could be, as Balko argued, that inexpensive, legal, regulated-and-therefore-safer drugs might "democratize" professional sports by making it possible for poor athletes to attain the same advantages rich athletes currently glean from access to pricey high-altitude training facilities and the other privileged like.

Still, while it's true there are plenty of other sacrifices and dangers a professional athlete submits his or herself to, hypodermic needles containing these drugs obviously gives people pause. Maybe it's natural resistance to change? A sense of real danger? Media sensationalism? Subliminal fear of the Ubermensch?

Does any of this outweigh, in principle, allowing individuals, as Balko put it, to "explore their own boundaries and their own potential"? Overall, I'd argue no. Within the confines of professional sports? It depends. Sports fans should vote with their dollars and their feet. They, after all, are the ones who keep professional sports afloat, not the U.S. Congress.

WHEN FIRST ARRIVING at an IQ Squared debate you are asked to vote for or against the motion, or declare yourself as undecided using a little electronic pad attached to each seat. After the debate the process repeats. Initially 18 percent of the sold-out crowd voted for the motion, 63 percent against and 19 percent were undecided. An hour-and-a-half later 37 percent voted for the motion, 59 percent opposed it and a mere four percent remained undecided.

However clever or grounded the arguments, it is difficult to imagine performance-enhancing drugs receiving the Mainstream America Seal of Approval in the foreseeable future. And maybe they shouldn't. What the IQ Square debates prove, however, is that thoughtful, intelligent debate on even the most sensitive, controversial issues is possible and, what's more, people are actually still capable of changing their minds.

Now if we could just expand that ethic and process beyond the exquisite tree-lined interior of the Asia Society, perhaps we could have a discussion worthy of our hopefully still-evolving frontal lobes.

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