

Doping Debate

By Rachel Cohen - 15 January 2008

NEW YORK (AP) -- Just hours after baseball assured Congress it's working to address the sport's doping problem, another group debated whether performance-enhancing drugs should even be banned.

Intelligence Squared, an organization that holds Oxford-style debates on such topics as global warming and illegal immigration, hosted one about performance-enhancing drugs Tuesday that included two-time National League MVP Dale Murphy and former World Anti-Doping Agency chief Dick Pound.

Both argued the drugs should remain banned, but apparently the other side was more persuasive.

Before the nearly two-hour debate began, 63 percent of audience members indicated they were for prohibition and 18 percent believed the drugs should be allowed, with the rest undecided. Afterward, 59 percent said they should be banned, and 37 percent said they should be permitted.

Just how dangerous such drugs are -- and the best method of shielding athletes from their perils -- were major points of contention.

"More people died playing baseball than died of steroid use," declared Dr. Norman Fost, a professor of pediatrics and bioethics at the University of Wisconsin. Joining Fost in arguing that the drugs should be allowed were Radley Balko, a senior editor for Reason magazine, and Julian Savulescu, a professor of practical ethics at the University of Oxford.

They suggested that permitting them would result in the development of safe substances whose manufacture is regulated, creating a less hazardous environment.

Murphy, Pound and sportscaster George Michael countered that the drugs are indeed too dangerous to be allowed. Pound noted that little is known about their full effects because the clandestine nature of their use makes research difficult.

The anti-drug side also mentioned the threat of youngsters being influenced to use performance-enhancers. The pro-drug panelists agreed that the substances' effects are harmful to kids, but they responded that they could be prohibited for minors just as alcohol or cigarettes are.

Fost, Balko and Savulescu argued that athletes already take on many risks to compete at an elite level, and using drugs is no different.

"World-class athletes subject their bodies to stresses they're not designed to endure," Balko said.

They also contended it's impossible to distinguish between taking drugs and other performance-enhancing techniques such as training at a high altitude.

Moderator Bob Costas raised whether athletes would take only approved drugs if they were allowed, or if they still would seek out other substances in pursuit of an edge.

"Athletes don't take drugs to level the playing field," Pound said. "They do it to gain an advantage."

The debate was scheduled five months ago, so it was a coincidence that it took place the same day as the Congressional hearings. Ben Johnson, who was stripped of his gold medal in the 100 meters at the 1988 Olympics after testing positive for steroids, was originally slated to participate, arguing that the drugs should be allowed. But he pulled out on the advice of his lawyer because of a legal case he is involved in.

The appropriately named Balko, as Costas pointed out to laughter from the audience, replaced him.

The debate, held at Asia Society and Museum, will air on National Public Radio.