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Unnatural performance

NCAA teams with other groups to sell health and safety over supplements

By Gary T. Brown
The NCAA News

Student-athletes who use dietary supplements to get ripped may get ripped off instead. That's what many health and safety experts think, and they're launching an educational campaign to say so.

This isn't the first attempt at raising awareness among student-athletes who rely on an unregulated billion-dollar industry to enhance athletics performance. The drug-education and drug-testing subcommittee of the Committee on Competitive Safeguards and Medical Aspects of Sports sends an annual memorandum to athletics directors, compliance coordinators and athletic trainers that warns against the use of supplements, and athletic trainers work year-round to educate athletes about supplement use. But this latest effort employs a partnership approach with the American College of Sports Medicine and the National Federation of State High School Associations to deliver a four-poster series that emphasizes food, hydration, exercise and recovery over dietary supplements to maximize athletics performance.

"Food, hydration, exercise and recovery will never be found on an NCAA-banned substances list," said Mary Wilfert, NCAA assistant director of education outreach.

What does show up on the NCAA-banned substances list, though, are drugs that aren't always on supplement labels. That's what's causing some student-athletes to lose their eligibility via a positive drug test.

Of course, food, hydration, exercise and recovery aren't found in many mainstream advertisements, either. Indeed, the high-school and college student-athlete age groups are prime targets for the supplement industry, which has money to burn on flashy ad campaigns that promise quick and easy results.

"It's rather exhausting trying to beat the industry," admitted Augustana College (Illinois) athletic trainer Rochel Rittgers, who chairs the drug-education and drug-

testing subcommittee. "Our student-athletes are in an age group that wants something for nothing, something quick and fast with immediate results. Nutrition in the form of real food from the grocery store isn't flashy or exciting. It's difficult to sell that which we've known for 200 years."

Bad apples

Rittgers said not only is the industry influential, but student-athlete peers also steer decisions. Some student-athletes are getting information from their friends and roommates and they're considering that testimony as more valid than the information from athletic trainers and administrators. Rittgers emphasized this is a market-driven consequence, "but from a drug-testing point of view," she said, "we're not accepting 'I didn't know' anymore, because we have been inundating people with information for so long."



Olander

The NCAA and other health-and-safety-conscious groups have beat that drum for years. The annual memo reiterates that careless supplement use is causing student-athletes to lose their eligibility. The primary problem is that supplements aren't always what they seem. Some contain substances that aren't on the label, and some of those are NCAA-banned substances. Research shows in fact that about one-third of the supplement market in America has products not listed on the label. Thus, a student-athlete who purchases a product in good faith may be betrayed.

"There is no completely safe supplement due to the very poor regulations," said Rachel Olander of the Center for Drug Free Sport, the organization that administers drug testing for the NCAA and provides other drug-education services. "Supplements do not have to be guaranteed pure or safe -- they are not guaranteed by the Food and Drug Administration to be pure or safe. And the manufacturer does not have to prove that they are pure or safe before putting them on the market."

Olander oversees Drug Free Sport's Dietary Supplement Resource Exchange Center, established in 2001 as a confidential hot line and Web site to answer athletes' questions about dietary and banned substances. She said the problem is complicated further when supplement manufacturers that do play by the rules are tainted by those that don't disclose ingredients or that change them from batch to batch.

Rittgers in fact said the bad apples prevent athletic trainers from recommending any supplements at all, even though some might be safe. While many reputable businesses provide acceptable products, she said no one can know if they will continue to be reliable.

"We never recommend any product over another," she said. "What we do say to the athletes is that as far as we know from the research we've seen, this product has not been indicated in any positive tests. However, it is a buyer-beware market and there is no governmental regulation on this product or any other nutritional product."

For example, Rittgers said, while the supplement creatine hasn't been proven to be unsafe, she and others can't trust creatine because "we can't trust what else the manufacturer may be putting in the bottle." Rittgers said one week's formulation may be different from the next, too.

But even though the industry and its ability to advertise poses an almost unbeatable opponent, Rittgers said, "We have to keep chipping away."

Positive approach

The poster series does that by emphasizing that student-athletes can in fact get performance enhancement from food.

"There are credible nutritionists who can help with that, too," Olander said. "There are ergogenic effects from food, especially with timing -- what you eat before and after practice or right after exercise."

Jim Whitehead, executive vice-president at the American College of Sports Medicine, said, "What we want to do with this educational outreach is to provide clarity and emphasize the role that healthy lifestyles can have in enhancing performance and the well-being of the student-athlete. We also want to avoid concerns about the ingestion of prohibited ingredients -- avoid the inconsistency of the ingredients and the unknown quality of supplements in general."

Whitehead also emphasized that the posters and memos aren't the only approach.

"Many sports-sciences organizations are considering other avenues that would complement the posters," he said. "And it's going to take that kind of partnership to address the best way to combat an industry that has tremendous resources. We understand the reality of that fight, but through a consortium of organizations, we're looking at all available options. It's important that the posters be seen as one element in what is going to be a multi-faceted approach."

One difference from past efforts, Whitehead said, is that the current campaign focuses on the positive side rather than just simply railing against supplement use. Because this new approach emphasizes performance enhancement through diet and health and quality of life, perhaps student-athletes will be more likely to listen.

Olander said if student-athletes hear this same message from several sources, they may start to believe it, rather than succumbing to advertising that may not be able to back up the claims.

"There is no proof that 99 percent of dietary supplements work -- in fact, there are very few that have any scientific evidence supporting their effectiveness," she said. "But when you look at a muscle magazine and see a 5-foot-9 280-pound bodybuilder holding a can of product and saying that's how he did it...Ours certainly isn't as flashy of an approach as the supplement industry's, but it certainly is safer. And the benefits to the student-athletes are greater."

The NCAA Student-Athlete Advisory Committees will review the posters at their July meetings. The posters will then be distributed to campuses this fall.

"We can't spread the word enough," the NCAA's Wilfert said. "The student-athlete who uses a nutritional supplement without checking the ingredients with the athletics staff and tests positive for banned substances will be held in violation of NCAA rules. And an athletics department that does not adequately educate current and incoming student-athletes about NCAA-banned substances, including the risks of over-the-counter nutritional supplement use, will be held in violation in the event the student-athlete tests positive for such substances."

That's a message worth getting.