

Cannabis: The Worst Kept Secret in Athletics

For years, cannabis use has been the worst kept secret in athletics. It is widespread in just about every amateur and professional arena from universities to Olympics to the major leagues; and can be found in every sport imaginable from basketball and football, to swimming, snowboarding, martial arts and mountain climbing. Most estimates of cannabis use in the NFL range around 50%, and it is generally agreed its even higher in the NBA.

Yet cannabis use remains unacknowledged because the laws have yet to catch up with science. Most of the time it is unmentioned, hidden away in a closet until it is dragged out to harm the career of competitors like Ricky Williams, Michael Phelps, and Josh Gordon. NFL officials suspended Gordon multiples longer for cannabis use than they initially suspended Ray Rice for coldcocking his fiancé in a hotel elevator— a full season vs. two games.

This stigmatizing of cannabis is a two-fold tragedy. It first inflicts unfair and unwarranted pain and loss and humiliation on the individual athletes—and it demonizes what may be the most valuable sports medicine on the planet. We now know ability of cannabis to dilate bronchial tubes can help an athlete get through a tough workout; and that the painkilling, anti-inflammatory, and sleep inducing qualities of cannabis powerfully assist repair and recovery from those workouts. We know it protects against concussion, and promotes recovery from post-concussion syndrome. It can help build muscles and maintain ideal body mass, reduce anxiety, focus attention, and enhance creativity.

Elite triathlete Clifford Drusinsky described it this way "Marijuana relaxes me and allows me to go into a controlled, meditational place," says Drusinsky. "When I get high, I train smarter and focus on form". Clients at the Denver gym he owns, **F.I.T.S. Conditioning**, echo his comments. Entrepreneur John Hunt said "I work out longer high," and product developer Chad White said "If I take a little bit before heavy training, I am totally dialed in." No wonder athletes seek it out cannabis despite its legal status, and risk their careers to use it.

But we know that cannabis is not the real drug problem in sports. The real problem is the pharmaceutical opioids handed out like candy by league doctors. And the real scandal is not athletes using the best medicine to maintain their health—it is medical professionals and league officials knowingly dispensing harmful, addictive substances while denying players safer and more effective cannabis therapy.

This would be scandal no matter where it happens— like it is for the one American arrested on cannabis charges every 42 seconds. *Every minute, every day, all year long.* But its even more scandalous to level this kind of attack at athletes. In our society, we hold our athletes to many of the same qualities and expectations we have of our warriors: physical endurance, courage and determination, self-sacrifice. And we all know it is wrong to send our soldiers or our athletes onto the field without everything we can give them to be successful, and to keep them safe.

Yet our federal government, and many state governments and important institutions continue to deny both our warriors and our competitors the best medicine available for their needs. This shameful treatment is based on an outdated understanding of cannabis which is inconsistent with science and out of step with to the vast majority of public opinion, but still is still promoted by some of the most influential organizations in our society.

That's why athletes who have stood up in public, become advocates for reform, and stepped into the cannabis industry—like Ricky Williams, Cliff Robinson, and Eugene Monroe—are more than just investors or entrepreneurs. They are heroes. Heroes for stepping out of the shadows and into the light, for leading the way and blazing the trail for their team mates and for league officials, for being the good role models Americans expect their athletes to be.