

# Athletes being given narcotics so they can play through injuries? Dangerous, unethical, perhaps criminal?

By ACSH Staff — March 4, 2015



We have been discussing narcotic abuse lately. It is a huge

and growing problem in the US, and there is no apparent solution at this time.

But, in at least one case, there is a solution. And it should involve time in jail. Not for the drug abusers/addicts, but for doctors and other officials of sports teams, especially on the college level.

A chilling segment, featured in the current episode of HBO's *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel*, correspondent Soledad O'Brien interviewed a few young injured athletes. But rather than being rested by team officials to allow their injuries to heal, O'Brien's learned that the athletes, as well as many of their teammates, were given narcotics such as Vicodin and Percocet, and then permitted to continue playing. Some reported that they were even encouraged by team trainers, doctors and coaches to return to the field. For some athletes, this dangerous practice contributed to future street-drug addiction, and soon after, their deaths.

These are not scenes from *Rollerball*, the futuristic and physically brutal sports movie. It is real, and is wrong on so many levels that you may not even believe what you're watching.

*Hooked*, a terrific, powerful and very sobering piece by producer Maggie Burbank, revealed a frightening practice that is both vile and indicative of the twisted win-at-all-cost mentality that has permeated sports today. This mentality regularly forces injured athletes to confront a lose-lose proposition: If you decide to rest and don't get back on the field, another player will take your place -- and on the professional level, your job. The alternative is consuming quick-fix painkillers, with long-term, even potentially deadly, consequences.

The HBO segment featured three athletes impacted in different, but awful ways.

One was Donny Allieri, a one-time New Jersey high school football player gifted with talent, a promising college future and aspirations of NFL stardom. Allieri suffered a torn ligament in his thumb, which required surgery. He told O'Brien that after the surgery, I felt really good. I actually felt very calm, Allieri said. I felt a sense of confidence that I never felt before. I just I knew it was gonna be the start of something.

It was. Allieri was given opioid narcotics (almost always Vicodin or Percocet) for pain, and became addicted. Once he ran out of the pills, he tried to buy them on the street, where they are expensive as much as \$35 each (they cost pennies per pill at a pharmacy). Being unable to afford this, Allieri turned to a cheap, but far more dangerous narcotic heroin.

ACSH's Dr. Josh Bloom, who has written frequently about narcotic abuse says, following surgery, the use of a strong painkiller is standard practice, and perfectly fine. But, under normal circumstances, this need should be for about a week or less, at which time patients are often switched to something like ibuprofen, and even this is usually not required for long. If a doctor writes a three-month prescription for post-surgical pain, something is very wrong.

He adds, If a patient who is given narcotic painkillers gets to the point where he is forced to start taking heroin which is far stronger and much more addictive than the pills the situation goes from very bad to much worse. No ethical doctor would knowingly let this happen.

The segment then gets even more disturbing. Cory Palazzi, a former baseball star who was attracting the attention of pro scouts, followed a similar path and ended up overdosing on heroin, which left him in a coma for five days. When he awoke, Palazzi had suffered permanent brain damage, and today is unable to care for himself. Why? Because following shoulder surgery his doctor gave the 17-year-old 120 Percocet pills -- and zero oversight about how to take them.

And when that supply was gone -- stunningly -- the doctor *refilled* the prescription.

Palazzi later stole his grandfather's wedding ring, and when asked by O'Brien what he did with it, Palazzi said, in the slurred speech that was caused by his brain damage, that he sold it for \$22. The young man said his drug addiction turned him into a dishonest person.

Finally, the most disturbing is the case told by Jeremy Bruce, a football player at the University of Akron. He became addicted to narcotics after the team physician gave him a supply so that he could continue playing while hurt. Why?

My trainers, my doctors, my coaches, they're saying, This is okay, Bruce told O'Brien. You can do this. It's okay. Be a warrior.

Bruce was lucky. He said that most of the team was taking painkillers to keep playing, including his best friend, quarterback Tyler Campbell. Campbell later died from a heroin overdose, leaving Bruce on the verge of suicide. The only thing that prevented that tragedy was his phone call to Tyler's father, Wayne Campbell, who Bruce now describes as a father figure and a guardian angel.

Dr. Bloom says, With the use of narcotics, there is always a difficult balance between adequate pain relief and the possibility of addiction. Using these medicines to enable injured athletes to get back on the field is pure evil. If justice is served, all those who are responsible for these incidents

will enjoy a nice long stay in prison, where perhaps they can suffer some fraction of the pain that they have inflicted on others.

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