

Dunks and Drunks: Depictions of Drug and Alcohol Use Among High School Athletes in Film

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Abstract

Mediated portrayals of student-athletes can provide strong role models for real-world student-athletes. This research explored the images of student-athletes in sport-related films regarding depictions of drug and alcohol use. A content analysis of six sport-related films released between 1994 and 2000 was conducted 1) to address whether such films accurately depicted drug and alcohol use among student-athletes and 2) to consider how these presentations might impact viewers who are, themselves, high school student-athletes. Results suggested that the films reinforced the notion that student-athletes are supposed to experiment with drugs and alcohol as a part of the social role relative to sport participation. Further, films suggested experimentation could take place with little or no consequence. Thus, sport films likely counteract progress made through educational initiatives aimed at curbing drug and alcohol use among student-athletes.

Introduction

High school sports in the United States are widely popular. There were 6.9 million high school athletes during the 2002-03 school year, a record high (High school sports participation at record high, 2003). These athletes, while gaining valuable life experiences and physical fitness, are certainly not exempt from the more negative influences that the world of sports provides. Student-athletes regularly see and hear about their favorite “role models” from the ranks of professional sports taking painkillers and performance-enhancing drugs, checking into rehab for various drug addictions, or being arrested for drug or alcohol violations. Not only do student-athletes read or hear about these real situations, but they are also influenced by fictional media portrayals that depict athletes using drugs or alcohol. As Wenner (1989) states, “whether a sports fan or not, every individual in America is to some degree influenced by the communication of sports culture” (p. 16). Sport-related films have become an especially popular form of media. As Pearson, Curtis, Haney, and Zhang (2003) and Rowe (1998) note, sports films are now considered a genre of their own.

Teens are perhaps even more likely to be influenced by the media, both for developmental reasons and simply because they are exposed to so much of it. According to Arnett (1995), “Part of the environment of nearly every adolescent currently growing up in the United States and other industrialized countries is daily use of a variety of media” (519). Teenagers, on average, listen to music four hours per day, watch television two hours per day, and watch more movies than any other age group (Arnett, 1995). It is clear, to use the words of Farber, Provenzo, and Holm (1994), that “young people are voracious consumers of popular culture” (p. 17).

Given that teenagers are so inundated by the media, it is important to assess the ways in which the media portrays the issues faced by student-athletes. As Coakley (1998) maintains, “when people read about, listen to, and view sports, these themes may inform their own ideas about the world” (p. 385). Wedding (2000) reminds us, “cinematic representations of alcohol use and abuse serve as ‘cultural texts’ with profoundly important societal consequences insofar as films both reflect and shape individual and societal values, attitudes, and behavior” (p. 3). Roberts, Hendriksen and Christenson (1999), as cited in Wedding (2000), state, “Media messages influence young people by providing explicit, concrete ‘models’ for behaviors (e.g., smoking marijuana), attitudes (e.g., taking an anti-drug point of view), and feelings (e.g., fearing the effects of drugs)” (p. 4).

Several socialization theories underscore the need to consider the media’s potential impact on athletes and non-athletes alike. Social-self theory posits that people’s behavior is influenced by the way they think others perceive them. One source of these perceptions is the media. Social learning theory asserts that we learn about other people or groups by internalizing information and cues that have been reinforced. Again, the media provides a source of that information as well as the reinforcement in many cases (Holtzman, 2000). One of the main issues depicted in movies about student-athletes is that of drug and alcohol use. Social-self theory might contend that students learn how they are expected to act in their role as athletes from media portrayals, thus if athletes are depicted drinking or using drugs they might feel as though that is “normal” behavior. Social learning theory would suggest that non-athletes might receive misinformation about athletes from the media, which they would use to formulate opinions about them. Using these theories as a framework for considering media effects on viewers, this research addresses possible messages athletes and non-athletes may receive from media portrayals of athletes’ alcohol and drug use.

Research Methodology

This research involved a content analysis of six films regarding their portrayal of drinking and drug use, both recreational and ergogenic, amongst high school athletes. Recreational substances include alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, psychedelic drugs, heroin, and cocaine. These substances, according to Naylor, Gardner and Zaichowsky (2001), are used to achieve “altered affective states” (p. 627). Ergogenic drugs are intended to enhance performance and include drugs such as steroids, painkillers, and blood boosters (such as EPO). “In sport, such drugs are typically used to assist athletes in performing

with more speed and strength, and to endure more pain than normal” (Naylor, et. al, 2001, p. 627). Films were selected for analysis based on several criteria. Initially, a list of films depicting high school sports was compiled from cross-listing several categories in the 2002 edition of *VideoHounds Guide to Films*. Those films listed under several different sport and school categories were included. All of those films made prior to the 1990s were eliminated. Next we consulted the abstract statements about each film, verifying that it did indeed strongly feature high school sports. We were not interested in, so intentionally excluded, any films that only peripherally dealt with high school sports. The final step prior to viewing and analyzing the films was to read the description on the video case to ensure that high school sports were clearly a central focus of the film. The following movies were selected for analysis based on the criteria described: *Above the Rim* (1994), *Basketball Diaries* (1994), *He Got Game* (1998), *Varsity Blues* (1999), *Love and Basketball* (2000), and *O* (2000).

Several research questions guided this work. First, we were interested in assessing whether the film portrayal of drinking, recreational drug use, and ergogenic drug use was an accurate depiction of known incidence of usage among high school athletes. Specifically, we looked at the reason(s) for usage, the context of the usage, and repercussions and/or consequences of the usage. Note that for some substances little data is available about known usage by athletes. In these cases literature regarding use by teens in general is provided. Second, we were interested in considering the ways that the presentation of athletes in film, or “mediated athletes,” as drinkers or drug abusers may impact real high school athlete viewers. The research was not an audience analysis. The conclusions drawn are meant to provide a starting point for discourse on the possible impact of viewing images of high school athlete’s deviance, both on athletes and non-athletes. Thus a portion of this research addresses the authors’ interpretation of the emotions viewers are intended to have when watching these films. Philips (2000) refers to this as our allegiance, or who we are intended to feel powerfully about as well as in which direction (positive or negative) this emotion is to be felt. This feeling can, of course, be elicited in a number of ways. Philips (2000) says, “We receive all kinds of guidance from the text about how to respond to a character” (p. 82). Therefore, our analysis considers the setting, actions, words, and perceived attitudes of the characters depicted.

Each researcher initially viewed the films and drew tentative conclusions independently. Observations were shared and discussed in order to confirm that both researchers were comfortable with the conclusions. Each researcher brought unique insights to the process. One holds a Ph.D. in Sociology while the other is working on a Ph.D. in Sport Management. Yet the researchers found their conclusions were quite similar, perhaps because both had worked as high school teachers for several years prior to conducting the research and were quite familiar, at least anecdotally, with the ways teens are impacted by the media.

What follows next is a brief description of each of the films analyzed. This is followed by a review of the literature regarding high school athletes’ use of the following substances: smoking cigarettes, chewing tobacco, and use of steroids, painkillers, alcohol,

marijuana, cocaine, and heroin and other drugs. The discussion section provides a comparison of the mediated depiction of athletes' use with "reality" regarding each of the illegal activities depicted: The final section addresses implications of research findings for teen viewers, focusing specifically on student-athletes, including our perception of the allegiance or emotional responses viewers of each film are intended to have.

Film Descriptions

Above the Rim tells the story of Kyle, a basketball star caught between high school basketball and perhaps a career of playing in the NBA, and the seemingly lucrative yet dangerous life of a gangster. A side story depicts the homecoming of Shep, brother to Birdie (Tupac Shakur), the main gangster in the area. Shep once was a player, but suffers from guilt based on the death of his best friend. The basketball court provides the setting for this film more than it is the focus.

Basketball Diaries features teen-idols Leonardo DiCaprio and Mark Wahlberg as the stars of a Catholic school basketball team in Manhattan. The team is very successful despite the fact that these main characters and their two friends drink, smoke, and use a montage of drugs throughout. It is based on the true story of Jim Carroll (DiCaprio) and is written as his personal diary. Jim and Mickey (Wahlberg) self-destruct throughout the film. They start out smoking, drinking and getting high for seemingly innocent kicks, and escalate into cocaine and heroin addictions and involvements in the criminal justice system. In the end Jim gets clean and is speaking to a group of kids about his abuses, while Mickey is incarcerated for murder. Another friend, Neutron, never escalated his use and went on to play in the high school All-American game and earned a scholarship to St. John's University.

He Got Game is the story of Jake and Jesus Shuttlesworth. Jake (Denzel Washington) is incarcerated in Attica for killing his wife. Meanwhile, his son Jesus (real-life NBA star Ray Allen) is the top basketball recruit in the nation and is raising his younger sister, Mary, virtually alone in Coney Island, New York. The story takes place over one week, when the Governor of New York, a big basketball fan, has released Jake so that he can convince Jesus to attend his alma mater, Big State University. Jake is promised that he will be paroled from prison early if he is successful. Jesus struggles with making the decision of which college to attend or whether to announce his eligibility for the NBA draft. He receives unwanted advice and pressure from a variety of sources, including family, friends, his coach, local street criminals, his girlfriend and an agent. He also struggles with understanding his relationship with his estranged father, who has suddenly returned, albeit for a short time.

Varsity Blues depicts a fictional football team from West Canaan, Texas, a town where football is a way of life. When star quarterback Lance Harbor gets hurt, skeptic and intellectual John Moxon (James Vanderbeek) must step in to maintain the Coyote's dynasty and the record of coach Bud Kilmer (Jon Voight). Kilmer is cruel and will win at any cost, but eventually the players, led by Moxon, rebel against him, expel him from the big game and coach themselves to victory.

Love and Basketball is the story of the lives of Quincy (Omar Epps) and Monica (Sanaa Lathan), African-American basketball players, rivals, friends, and lovers. It begins when Monica moves into the neighborhood as a youth and challenges Quincy and the other boys' in basketball. The film follows their support for one another yet rivalry with each other into high school, where Quincy is clearly a star and Monica, by virtue of being a female, is considered a tomboy. They discover their feelings for one another at the same time they are both recruited to play for The University of Southern California. Quincy remains the big star, while Monica struggles, being pushed hard by her coach. Quincy falls apart, however, when he learns that his father, a former NBA star, has cheated on his mother. At the same time Monica is experiencing success with her game, and they drift apart. As adults they reunite, eventually cultivating their love for each other and basketball.

O is a retelling of Shakespeare's *Othello*. It is set in a prestigious private school, where Odin (Mekhi Phifer), called "O" by everyone, is the basketball star. Everyone loves O, especially his coach (Martin Sheen). O is dating Desi (Julia Stiles), the daughter of the school's dean. Hugo (Josh Hartnett) is the son of the basketball coach and is jealous of the attention O receives from everyone, especially from his father who claims to love O like a son. He plots to convince O that Desi is cheating on him, intending to throw O's life into turmoil. The plan works, but spirals out of control and leads to the eventual murders of Desi, another basketball player and friend named Mike, an outcast named Roger, and the suicide of O.

Review of Literature

Cigarette Smoking

According to Males (1999b), daily smoking by high school seniors dropped 40% and teen smoking as a whole dropped 60% between the mid-1970s and 1992. This decline is in spite of the fact that cigarettes are relatively easy to obtain. The Michigan Alcohol and Other Drugs survey found that 97.6% of 12th grade students polled felt cigarettes were "easy" or "fairly easy" to attain (MAOD, 2002). Males (1999b) states that smoking is much more prevalent among whites than minorities, with the exception of African-American males over age 35. Nineteen ninety-three monthly smoking rates indicate that, for youth ages 12-17, whites smoke at a rate more than double that of blacks (Males, 1996). This statistic is born out by the 1998-99 Michigan Alcohol and Other Drugs survey, which found that 21.1% of the black students had smoked in the past month, while 40.9% of the white students had (MAOD, 2002). While data indicates that males smoke more than do females (Males, 1999b), female smoking rates have been on the rise.

Naylor et al. (2001) found that rates of cigarette use are significantly higher for non-athletes than athletes. They also state that athletic directors perceive athletes to be less likely to use nicotine. When athletes do smoke they do so for a variety of reasons (Lombardo, 1986). Some feel it has a stimulating affect before their event yet others feel

it calms them before competition. Still others use nicotine for its effect on weight loss. Of course, many use nicotine for reasons unrelated to athletic performance.

Many schools include a prohibition against smoking cigarettes in their athletic codes. State sporting organizations have also tried to minimize the number of athletes who smoke. For instance, the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association includes smoking in their Chemical Health Eligibility Rule. Unfortunately, not all students are aware of the rule, and even those who are sometimes violate it. Naylor, Gardner, and Zaichowsky (2001) found that 68% of Massachusetts High School athletes were aware of the rule and 38% of them had violated it. According to Naylor et al. (2001), a majority of athletes feel as though their coaches also emphasize the importance of the rule and the dangers of smoking. A problem is that often students who do violate such rules are not caught and punished. Only 12% of the students responding to the Massachusetts survey stated that they had been punished for violating the Chemical Health Eligibility Rule. In an effort to catch more students smoking, both athletes and non-athletes alike, some districts had begun to include tests for nicotine in their drug screening. Indiana did this until an appeals court recently invalidated the procedure (Some schools testing students for tobacco use, 2002).

Smokeless Tobacco

Research shows adolescent use of smokeless tobacco has increased considerably in the last two decades (Creath, Wright and Wisniewski, 1992). Lombardo (1986) cites research stating that up to one third of varsity football and baseball players in Texas use smokeless tobacco. However, Naylor et al. (2001) found no significant difference in rates of smokeless tobacco use between athletes and non-athletes.

Creath, et al. (1992) studied high school football players and found several reasons for their use of smokeless tobacco, including the influence of friends and curiosity. Other less frequently cited reasons for initiation included advertisements, taste, athletic role models, inability to smoke, a coach's influence, and to stop smoking. Most of these athletes reported using smokeless tobacco at home, while 23% said that they used some form of smokeless tobacco while playing sports.

Steroids and Performance Enhancing Drugs

According to Pedersen and Wichstrom (2001), elite athletes first used anabolic-androgenic steroids in the post-war years. Their use is now spreading to high school students. Coakley (2003) provides several reasons for the increased use of steroids. The rapid growth of the sport industry spurred the development of a variety of performance-enhancing substances. Further, fascination with technology, the increasing rationalization of the body, and an emphasis on self-medicating all contribute. Estimates of steroid use by high school athletes range from 4% to 12% of boys and 1.3% to 2% among girls (Burnett and Kleinman, 1994; Luetkemeier, Bainbridge, Walker, Brown, and Eisenman, 1995; Pedersen & Wichstrom, 2001). Steroid use is much more common among those athletes involved in power and performance sports, including football, hockey, and

wrestling (Luetkemeier, et al., 1995). Those involved in other sports use steroids no more frequently than do non-athletes (Luetkemeier, et al., 1995).

In a study of high school students reported by Luetkemeier, et al. (1995), 65% of steroid users had completed five or more steroid cycles, indicating a level of involvement referred to as “habitualization” (p. 4). Users also tend to get advice for steroid use from other sources than medical practitioners. According to Waddington (2000), the sources for advice are friends (35.8 percent), anabolic steroid handbooks (25.7 percent) and dealers (20.2 percent). Those who use steroids are significantly more likely to use other drugs as well, according to Luetkemeier et al., (1995).

English, as cited in Anshel and Russell (1997), has suggested that there are six reasons why athletes take steroids: blocked or unattainable goals, or the need to overcome limited ability; expression of solidarity in a group; as a way to cope with anxiety, either based on fear or to compensate for poor performance; identity confirmation; rebellion toward authority; and the development of a “win at all costs” philosophy. Anshel and Russel (1997) state that, “another common explanation of drug abuse in sport is referred to as the ‘superman complex’ in which athletes, typically strong, relatively young and healthy, do not perceive any harmful links between their drug taking actions and dangerous outcomes” (p. 126). Wadler and Hainline, as cited in Naylor, et al. (2001), point to five instances where athletes are most likely to use performance enhancing drugs: when they are at risk of not making a team or performing at the level they desire; when they are approaching the end of their career and want to remain competitive; when they are experiencing weight problems; when they are battling injuries and are looking for a quicker way to heal; and when they feel external pressures, either from family, peers, or coaches to use performance enhancing drugs. Others “indicate that use is encouraged by lack of attention, concern and consequences by adults” (Manning, 2002, p. C-2). Further, high school athletes may elect to use steroids because they want to emulate their sporting idols, some of whom have not only admitted use of performance enhancing substances but have avoided any severe sanctions for doing so. According to Manning (2002), “Teenagers, looking up to those elite athletes whose muscles ripple with steroid-enhanced power, are picking up some dangerous training tips” (p. C-1). She cites the example of Mark McGwire in 1998, and retired MVP’s Jose Canseco and Ken Caminiti who all admitted use of performance enhancing substances.

Another performance enhancing substance, androstenedione, has become the object of controversy in recent years when use by Mark McGuire, the year he set the homerun record, was made public. According to Waddington (2000), sales of androstenedione quadrupled in the United States following the announcement of McGuire’s use. Contributing also to the increased use of legal performance enhancers is that the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994 exempted many substances (Coakley, 2003).

Additionally, use of substances such as creatine, that are available at the local General Nutrition Store but are banned by some leagues, was found to be a rising problem among teens, both athletes and nonathletes. Naylor et al. (2000) found that

athletes used creatine at rates more than two times those of non-athletes. Fragakis (2003) states that up to one half of all male teen athletes routinely use creatine. According to Naylor, et al. (2001), “the legality and availability of creatine are perhaps the greatest reasons for the higher level of use among athletes, who are likely trying to gain a competitive edge” (p. 636). Fragakis (2003) maintains that high usage rates are due, in many cases, to coaches encouraging athletes to use this legal but questionable substance.

Painkillers

While no data are available regarding use and abuse of cortisone and painkillers among high school athletes, it is likely that some schools have had problems in this area, given that overuse of painkillers is quite well publicized at the collegiate and pro-levels. Every fan of the National Football League has seen players limp off the field and into the locker room with injuries, only to make their “courageous” return to the action minutes later. It is no mystery what happened in the locker room to facilitate such speedy returns. According to Shank (2000), “Athletes who reject the pain principle became pariahs among their teammates, coaches, and fans,” and “painkillers are an illegal, but necessary, part of the brutal culture of professional football” (p. 199).

NFL players such as Brett Favre are not only role models for actual high school athletes but are also used as the basis for stereotypical film characters. As Berger (1991) states,

Another method we have of learning roles is by observing “models,” people we respect and admire, and imitating them in various ways. The importance of heroes and heroines (especially in the mass media) cannot be underestimated here. Most Americans watch about three hours of television a day...which means that we are exposed to large numbers of heroes...with whom we identify to varying degrees and in varying ways (p. 48).

One anecdotal example of painkiller use at the high school level can be offered; a highly successful track and cross country coach in Michigan was asked to resign because he was providing his athletes with a variety of painkillers.

Outside of the sporting realm the abuse of painkillers by teens is certainly a concern; in fact, is arguably more problematic than use of illegal substances. According to Males (1996), “the drug found in the most teenage emergency room victims-four times more than the total involving cocaine, heroin, or marijuana-was aspirin and aspirin substitutes” (p. 23). Prescription drugs counted for six of the top fifteen teenage ER visits, with the “Big Three” being acetaminophen (Tylenol), aspirin, and Ibuprofen (Advil) (Males, 1999a). Males (1996) explains that these might be from suicide attempts or “over-medication of the pain of the injury that really occasioned the ER trip” (p. 23).

Alcohol

Athletes at the university level self-report less use of alcohol and drugs (Naylor et al., 1995). There was no significant difference in alcohol use rates among high school

athletes and non-athletes (Naylor, et al., 1995). Alcohol use occurs more frequently amongst athletes involved in team sports (Peretti-Watel, Guagliardo, Verger, Pruvost, Mignon, and Obadia, 2003).

Green, Burke, Nix, Lambrecht, and Mason (1995) found that the primary reasons for alcohol consumption among athletes were to have a good time with friends, relax, be one's self around friends, and to celebrate. Athletes interested in drinking seem to have no trouble finding a source. It was found in 1998-99 that 96.4% of seniors polled could "easily" or "fairly easily" obtain alcohol, and 17.8% drank at a school event, 9.6% drank at school, and 14.3% drank near school in the month prior to the survey (MAOD, 2002).

While some schools have attempted to deter drug use by student athletes with random drug testing, few schools include testing for alcohol. Some have suggested that the introduction of drug testing may have led to increased use of alcohol by athletes.

Marijuana

Use of marijuana in American society in general is on the rise, suggesting that more athletes will also experiment with cannabis. Results of studies assessing degree of marijuana use between athletes and non-athletes are mixed, however. Ewing (1998) found that male athletes are significantly more likely to have tried marijuana than non-athletes, while 37% of male athletes who reported to Naylor, et. al. (2001) stated that they had smoked marijuana in the last month, compared to 43% of non-athletes. Ewing (1998), however, states that, "the use of marijuana by young people is extraordinary" (p. 147). Female athletes, on the other hand, use marijuana at rates that mirror that of the general population (Ewing, 2001). Black male athletes, according to Ewing (2001), are more likely to try marijuana after high school, while white male athletes are more likely to experiment during their high school years. Marijuana is not performance enhancing; in fact, it impedes performance as it makes the heart work harder (Campos, Yonamime, and Moreau, 2003).

Cocaine

Naylor et al. (1995) found that high school athletes are less likely to use cocaine than are non-athletes. It is possible that some athletes may try cocaine because of its almost-immediate effect and perceived enhancement of physical abilities. Lombardo (1986) explains that when cocaine is absorbed through the nasal mucosa, the high is rapidly achieved and peaks in about twenty minutes. He further lists some effects as feelings of increased physical and mental power, paranoia, and feelings of agitation and anxiety.

Heroin and Other Drugs

According to Sullum (2003), heroin use, and especially heroin abuse, is relatively rare among all segments of the population. Although there was allegedly a rise in teen heroin overdoses in the 1990s, with rates more than doubling between 1994 and 1995,

Kappeler, Blumberg, and Potter (2000) explain that this is deceptive, in that the number rose from 14 to 32. No data was available regarding high school athletes' use of heroin.

While it is not entirely clear that athletes use drugs more than non-athletes, there is some suggestion that they are more willing to experiment (Naylor, et. al., 2001). Wadler and Hainline, as cited in Naylor, et. al., (2001), suggest that athletes use recreational drugs to cope with the pain of injury rehabilitation, to deal with stress or as a result of low self-confidence and because the culture of the particular sport may socialize the athletes into drug use.

Discussion

As described in the Introduction, the analysis of drug and alcohol use depicted in the films is organized by substance, rather than by film. Each section connects observations about the films with the extant literature regarding real use by high school student-athletes, including their reason(s) for use, the context of the use, and its consequences.

Cigarette Smoking

Only the film *Basketball Diaries* depicts athletes smoking cigarettes. Jim, Mickey and their other two teammates/friends smoke throughout the film. The fact that only one group of athletes is seen smoking does seem to be consistent with the literature regarding decreased rates of teen smoking in general. None of the students shown smoking seem to have any difficulty attaining cigarettes, which is also consistent with the literature regarding ease of access to nicotine (MAOD, 2002). It should be noted, though, that it is difficult to assess the time period in which *Basketball Diaries* is set. While many features of the film are timeless, there are clues, such as players wearing Converse Chuck Taylor All-Star basketball shoes, that suggest the film is set in an earlier time period.

The fact that none of the African-American characters (in any of the films) are seen smoking is also consistent with what we know about tobacco use among youths. While only one of the films, *Love and Basketball*, showed a female athlete, she did not smoke cigarettes. The female athlete in this film, Monica, is also African-American, making it even less likely that we would have seen her smoking.

It is possible that the boys in *Basketball Diaries* were smoking for a perceived stimulating effect, as they mention that they enjoyed "getting high" and playing ball. It is more likely, though, that their nicotine habits were unrelated to athletic performance, as they did not indicate that they expected an increased performance until they turned to harder drugs. While their cigarette use may not have provided an athletic advantage it is not shown to hurt their performance in any way.

The way the adults deal with youths that are caught smoking is also of interest. In *Basketball Diaries* the coach, Swiftly, catches a player smoking a cigarette in the locker room. This athlete receives no punishment or meaningful counseling; Swiftly merely

grabs the cigarette and says, “Smoking will stunt your growth.” This action, or lack thereof, runs contrary to established practice at virtually every high school in America. Most schools’ policies call for some form of removal from games for a percentage of the season. It is consistent, however, with the fact that few students are punished for violating anti-smoking regulations (Naylor, et al., 1995).

Smokeless Tobacco

None of the films analyzed showed athletes using smokeless tobacco. This is consistent with Naylor et al.’s (1995) finding of no significant difference in usage rates between athletes and non-athletes. That *Varsity Blues* was about Texas football makes it surprising that use of smokeless tobacco was absent from that film, however, as Lombardo (1986) suggests that up to one third of Texas high school athletes in football chew. Perhaps because smokeless tobacco offers less visible effects than alcohol, which is shown frequently in the film, it is less appealing to filmmakers.

Steroids

Only the film *O* explicitly showed an athlete using steroids. The basketball players in *Basketball Diaries* ingested several pills, thinking that they would enhance their performance. These athletes stated that they were unsure what they were taking, but were hoping they were “uppers” and would thus allow Mickey, for example, to “get 50 rebounds tonight.” These drugs turned out to negatively impact their performance, however, making the boys groggy and lethargic on the court.

One athlete is shown using an unidentified type of steroid in *O*. Hugo uses them early in the film, purchasing them from a seemingly caring dealer. The nature of their conversation makes it clear that this is certainly not his first purchase. He says his use has already added to his vertical leap and increased his speed. His dealer inquires whether he has been ingesting enough water. Hugo responds that he is taking care of himself, and that the dealer is selling him “a dream in a bottle.” It is not surprising that Hugo knew his dealer well; it is reasonable to assume that a frequent user of steroids would rely on the same dealer for repeated purchases, a demonstration of his habitualization (Luetkemeier, et al., 1995).

Hugo’s reasons for using steroids are consistent with the literature regarding steroid use by athletes. Hugo’s comments to his drug dealer indicate his desire to overcome limited ability, reflecting reasons indicated by both English, in Anshel and Russel (1997), and Naylor, et. al. (2000). He was also coping with the anxiety he felt from being a part of a successful team yet fighting for the accolades he felt he deserved and for the love of his father. Identity confirmation can also be considered a motivating factor for Hugo, as he wanted to be identified as an outstanding player but was, in reality, no better than the third best player on the team. His father’s win at all costs coaching philosophy certainly contributed to Hugo’s feelings of inadequacy and need for affirmation, thus driving him to inject a dangerous substance.

No films showed athletes using legal performance enhancing substances, like creatine. Perhaps even though athletes use creatine much more frequently than do non-athletes, rates are still relatively low and are thus unlikely to be depicted in film. Further, it is possible that use of creatine is not portrayed in film because it is less sensationalistic than to portray athletes using harder, illegal substances.

Painkillers

Use of two types of painkillers, cortisone and those in pill form, were featured in *Varsity Blues* several times. Early in the movie, Lance Harbor, the star quarterback, is given injections by the coaching staff of what can be inferred to be cortisone. The shots are administered to his knee and are intended to help mask pain and keep him on the field. Shortly after that another player on the team complains of knee pain and the coach responds, "Never show weakness." Harbor complains about continuing pain in the knee following a game, so a teammate gives him two five-hundred milligram pills in response. The exact type of pill is not revealed to the viewer but it can be inferred they are painkillers. Later, when Harbor suffers a season, and perhaps career, ending knee injury that requires an operation, the doctor remarks that he had to remove a lot of scar tissue and feels that Harbor should not have been playing. It is when running back Wendell Brown goes down with an knee injury in the all-important district game and Coach Kilmer orders the trainer to "fix it" that the players rebel and oust Coach Kilmer.

It is interesting to note that this film was released in 1999, considering only three years prior National Football League star quarterback Brett Favre admitted an addiction to the painkiller Vicodin. Favre had led the Green Bay Packers to the Superbowl title in 1996 following an amazing 13-3 season and he was named the league's Most Valuable Player in 1995, 1996, and 1997.

Alcohol

Athletes were shown drinking in four of the six films. The films that included scenes of athletes drinking were *Varsity Blues*, *Basketball Diaries*, *O*, and *Above the Rim*. In *Varsity Blues* the athletes drink many times, including at after-game parties and at a pre-game all-nighter at a strip club. Drinking is depicted as a part of the culture surrounding the sport, as the families of the athletes are shown drinking at cookouts and in the stands at games. In addition, the local law enforcement is well aware that the athletes are drinking and either choose to look the other way or feel powerless to change the behavior, given the community's acceptance and even encouragement of the athlete's drinking. For example, when the police raid a celebratory party their only concern is that people might drink and drive, not that the partiers, largely the athletes, are breaking the law by drinking under-age. One athlete is even shown being given, for free, a six-pack at a party store when he intended to purchase a soft drink.

The athletes in *Basketball Diaries* consumed alcohol throughout the film, although it was not done as a celebratory act so much as simply a part of life away from basketball. The athletes drink with teammates because the teammates are their friends

and neighbors. It is not done as a pre or post-game ritual but rather appears as another means of escaping their environment.

The only time an athlete drinks alcohol in *Above the Rim* is when Kyle is invited to a dance club and is purchased a drink by Birdie, a neighborhood drug dealer who is hoping to recruit him to play for his team in an upcoming tournament. Kyle clearly looks uncomfortable in this situation, perhaps suggesting that he is not a seasoned drinker. *Above the Rim* is perhaps more notable for its lack of depictions of drug use, given it is set largely in a drug culture and drug dealers are among the main characters.

In *O* we see the players drinking beer at post-game parties and two players are drinking shots before they leave for the big game. Much like in *Varsity Blues*, their drinking is clearly tied to their athlete role.

The athletes in *Varsity Blues* seemed to be immersed in a culture that celebrated alcohol use. This is consistent with the findings of Sanchez-Sosa and Poldrugo (2001) who state

The family members who are naturally most likely to serve as role models during childhood and early adolescence are the parents or significant adults who perform the main child-rearing tasks. If these adults drink, the young person will learn to imitate part or most of the drinking patterns and associated behaviors, just as she or he will probably learn to associate particular emotions, expressions, beliefs, interpersonal styles, and so on with particular drinking patterns (p. 68).

An example from the film is when the parents of Moxon and Harbor, the two quarterbacks, are drunk at a cookout and the fathers goad their sons into a contest to demonstrate their throwing ability and thus their machismo. This reinforces for the characters, as well as for viewers, a connection between drinking behavior and macho antics. It is of little surprise that the two sons are later shown drinking, hooting, and hollering into the wee hours of the morning at a strip club.

The result of the boy's late night revelry is that they play poorly the following night and lose a game. This seems to send the message that drinking is detrimental to performance and to a successful season. However, once the boys win the big game and secure the district title, the viewer is left feeling that the lost game was little more than another hurdle along the way and that by winning in the end the boys are even more heroic. Troubling is the fact that the boys are chastised by the coach and their fathers for losing a game and not for the drinking behavior that led to the loss.

In *O*, when the coach is told that a fight at a party, involving a player, was related to alcohol, he responds, "I didn't hear that." The clear implication is that he must deal with athletes drinking if he is aware of it, so he would prefer to be, or pretend to be, unaware. He suspends the player for being involved in a fight but does nothing about the drinking.

Marijuana

Surprisingly, none of the film athletes were shown smoking marijuana. In fact, none of the athletes even made reference to marijuana. The lack of depiction of marijuana use in these films is not consistent with the literature. The lack of coverage of marijuana use in these films is also surprising when viewed in the context of high-profile marijuana use by such NBA players as Allen Iverson and Chris Webber.

Cocaine

Two films, *O* and *Basketball Diaries*, showed athletes using cocaine. This is a fairly high rate, given that research suggests athletes use cocaine less frequently than do non-athletes (Naylor, et al., 1995). In *Basketball Diaries* Jim's cocaine use, like his drinking behavior, appears to be purely recreational; he does not use cocaine before or after a game, nor does he ever state that he used it for any reason associated with athletic performance. In *O*, on the other hand, the cocaine use by the main character is intended to be performance enhancing. O purchases cocaine from the same dealer that Hugo uses for his steroids. He does so before the slam-dunk contest, where he proceeds to slam the ball so hard he shatters the backboard. He then throws the ball at the backboard, creating further damage and demonstrating a lack of sportsmanship that, until recently, was uncharacteristic. In another scene Hugo gives O some coke, saying, "It will help you make it through."

Virtually no sports have gone untouched by the downfall of athletes from cocaine use. Such high profile athletes as baseball's Darryl Strawberry and Dwight Gooden, football's Lawrence Taylor, track and field's Javier Sotomayor, cycling's Gilberto Simoni, and soccer's Diego Maradona have all indelibly linked cocaine and sports in the minds of countless sports fans. "Such drug use is obviously detrimental to these athletes. It is also detrimental to young people for whom well-known athletes serve as role models and idols. The habits of famous individuals tend to trickle down through colleges, high schools, and elementary schools" (Lombardo, 1986, p. 86). One could certainly argue that film characters, shown taking drugs and following it with superhuman athletic efforts, could have an equally damaging impact on those who aspire to similar greatness.

O's reaction to taking cocaine prior to the slam-dunk contest is consistent with known reactions to consumption of cocaine via inhalation. Following his consumption of the drug, O physically assaults Hugo, breaks the backboard, and pushes down a young boy that came out to retrieve the ball. After he breaks the backboard he stands on the court with his arms raised, seeking approval from the crowd for his superhuman act. His behavior certainly demonstrates that he could be feeling increased physical power, is anxious, agitated and paranoid.

Heroin and Other Drugs

Basketball Diaries, which is a story about the pitfalls of drug use more than it is about the game of basketball, is the only movie viewed that shows athletes taking heroin,

unidentified pills, and sniffing glue. When Jim begins taking these drugs it seems to be to escape the inner-city environment, pressures from basketball and the pain of the loss of a close friend to leukemia. Jim says of heroin, "It was like a long heat wave through my body. Any ache or pain or sadness or guilty feeling was completely flushed out." He explains that it started as a "Saturday night thing" to kill the boredom and to look cool but then it spreads to other days and then "It's got you." At the point that it "has him" others begin to notice changes in his behavior, including severely decreased basketball skills. Jim also says, "You become capable of anything." We then see Jim and other players taking pills prior to a game even though they admit that they don't know what the pills are or how it will affect their play. One player, Neutron, tells them to put it away, remarking, "It used to be about getting high then playing basketball. Now it's just about getting high." Neutron declines the pills and is shown later to be playing in all-star games and accepts a college scholarship. The pills have an obvious negative impact on their play as we see them stumbling around the court and Jim eventually passes out on the floor. At the request of the school headmaster, the police show up and search the boys' lockers, finding nothing. The boys are kicked off the team at that point but quit at the same time, making the separation mutual. Jim's use certainly is not related to injury rehabilitation but could be related to stress and low self-confidence.

Allegiance

Many of the messages that viewers may take from these movies are troubling. While serious drug addiction is depicted negatively (Jim and Mickey in *Basketball Diaries*), casual consumption of drugs and alcohol is shown to be far less problematic. Drinking alcohol is generally associated with people having a good time and celebrating victory. In addition, in three movies it is clearly shown that coaches are willing to overlook the use of alcohol and cigarettes by players. There seems to be a "boys will be boys" attitude from the coaches, especially from the win-at-all-costs Coach Kilmer in *Varsity Blues*. In *O*, the coach and dean make it clear that they are willing to overlook O's prior drug problems, which they allude to, because he is an asset to the team and can bring notoriety to the school. The message that "winners" can recreationally use drugs and alcohol and escape punishment from the coaches is clearly sent.

Non-athletes may feel as though **all** athletes drink and use drugs. This might impact their feelings about athletes and perhaps even their support for their school. It is possible that non-athletes will be concerned about the ways that drug and alcohol use is dealt with, basing their perceptions more on media depictions than on reality at their particular school.

Any drug that is performance enhancing, or is even perceived to be, is accepted and even promoted by the coaches. Kilmer has his trainers administer the drugs and Swifty expresses that he knows his athletes are on drugs but as long as they are playing well he is reticent to take action. The coaches and fans in these movies look upon the athletes as god-like and put the highest premium on performance, which creates an atmosphere in which the use of performance enhancing drugs could be acceptable because the results that follow bring accolades to the coaches and entertain the crowds.

Based on these films it can be inferred that a high school athlete should see no reason not to emulate the behavior of many of the films' athletes. Jim (*Basketball Diaries*) is held up as the athlete that took drug use too far and, in the end, ruined his athletic career. Troubling to consider is that because his drug use stems in part from his environmental conditions, students in dissimilar environments may miss the message. They may feel that because they aren't living and playing in an inner-city environment, they can handle recreational drug use without ending up on heroin, dropping out of school, or landing in jail. Suburban athletes may relate better to the characters in *Varsity Blues*, feeling that as long as they "just" get drunk to celebrate their victories or to bond with teammates it is acceptable and harmless.

Conclusions

According to Holtzman (2000), "popular television [and film] has an enormous impact on children and teenagers. These programs [and films] play a role in shaping a sense of self, gender identification and roles, and beliefs about what we can do as well as what we want to be and do as both children and adults" (p. 74). In fact, Gerbner, as cited in Holtzman (2000), has shown that people who watch fifteen hours or more of television per week "tend to believe the 'TV reality' over their own experience and observations in the world" (pp. 74-75). Thus we contend that students may indeed "learn" from these films some things about use of drugs and alcohol by athletes. As Wedding (2000) notes, it is too simplistic to say that there is a direct influence; that student-athletes seeing these films will go on to do what they see the mediated athletes doing. Further, not all facets of these films were unrealistic. However, "a detailed examination of the ways in which alcohol use and abuse is portrayed in films may offer some insight into the ways in which societal values and beliefs about alcohol [and drugs] are influenced and maintained" (p. 10). According to social-self theory, high school athletes may begin to internalize the messages they receive and shape their drinking and drug use to fit the ways they think they are supposed to act.

While some (see Moulton, Moulton, Whittington, and Cosio, 2000) have found drug use decreases during the competitive season, films such as those analyzed make it appear that there are no dangers associated with in-season "controlled" use. Further, as Moulton, et al., (2000), state, "positive social experiences with alcohol may be associated with increased consumption" (p. 18). Following this, the depiction of student-athletes drinking and using drugs with little academic, physical, social, or legal consequence likely sends the message to student viewers that use of drugs and alcohol is not only nonproblematic, but actually provides positive outcomes. According to social-learning theory, non-athletes may form negative opinions of athletes based on cues from films such as these.

Additionally, many sports studies scholars contend that some degree of use is inherent in the sporting culture, and that athletes are more likely to experiment with drug

and alcohol use (Naylor, et. al, 2001). The films analyzed here reinforce the notion that high school athletes are, at a minimum, supposed to experiment as part of their social roles.

Luetkemeier, et al. (1995) found that students' definitions and understanding of performance enhancing drugs is lacking. Athletes do not always see steroid use as cheating, nor do they perceive the negative consequences associated with it. These films will certainly not add to their understanding in any positive way. Luetkemeier, et al., (1995), recommend delivering the message about the consequences of steroid use "early and often," yet these films are likely to counteract any progress made through educational initiatives. As Males (1999b) states, "there is a reason why U.S health policies aimed at reforming youths have been such dismal failures and why other Western nations with more successful policies tend to focus on adults: teenagers get their cues on how to act from adults around them, not from government 'messages'" (p. 15). It seems fair to extend this to the media; students are more likely to pick up a message from a popular film such as *Varsity Blues* than they are from government sponsored "Just Say No" campaigns and the like. If their peers, even their mediated ones, are seen drinking and using drugs with few if any negative consequences, student viewers are unlikely to believe an authority figure who tells them about such effects. As Wedding (2000) notes, films depicting alcohol are two times more likely to depict a "pro-use" message than an "anti-use" message.

As it is probably unrealistic to expect that bottom-line focused film producers will change what seems to be a money-making equation, we would recommend that educators, coaches and parents spend some time talking to both athletes and non-athletes about the depiction of drug and alcohol use by mediated athletes. Certainly athletes can benefit from knowing and analyzing the true numbers, reasons, and consequences of such use, while non-athletes, often prone to over-estimate the incidence of high school athletes' use and ability to avoid punishment, could also benefit from a higher level of media literacy in this regard. More research should also address the ways that athletes and non-athletes are influenced by media depictions. Audience analysis techniques could be used to test whether the analysis and conclusions drawn here hold true for various demographic groups, including males and females and whites and non-whites.

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