

FITNESS REGIME

Getting caught taking illegal drugs can be more career-threatening for our sports stars than breaking a leg.

Andrew McNicoll reports on a harsh testing system which is more obsessed with image than individuals.



Sporting chance? Former Chelsea player and Romanian international Adrian Mutu faced heavy punishment after cocaine was found in his body

This time last year middle England's favourite sport, rugby union, hit the front pages after the highest profile drugs scandal in the game's history. In a tearful TV interview Matt Stevens, the 27-year-old Bath and England prop, confessed he'd failed a post-match drugs test and was seeking counselling for use of a "very serious substance" which was "not performance-enhancing", later revealed to be cocaine.

By February, Stevens' career lay in tatters. With World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) penalties failing to distinguish between social and performance-enhancing drugs, he was banned from 'all rugby-related activities' for two years. Just 14 months after appearing for England in the Rugby World Cup Final, Stevens faced an income void of an estimated £500,000 and the destruction of a 'role model' image worth far more.

The spectre of recreational drug use revisited rugby in March. The fallout from Bath's boozy end-of-season

party saw four first teamers quit amid allegations of cocaine use, with one admitting to shouting 'Class A, it's OK!' in front of youth players. *The Daily Mail* accused Stevens and his Bath colleagues of putting 'a sickening drug stain on the game's good name' and asked if rugby had 'a hidden drug culture?'

"If you look at society as a whole, there is a massive (recreational) drug culture among all of it, so why wouldn't there be in rugby?" Stevens told the *Mail*. "Rugby players aren't immune to drug abuse, just as they aren't immune to anything else".

He has a point. Beneath the millions spent on marketing and PR to convince us otherwise, sports stars are only human. While the majority of top-level sportsmen may well 'just say no', in an age where four in ten young adults admit to having used illegal drugs it's inevitable that some athletes will be tempted.

Those within sport don't deny the issue. The Professional Players

Federation (PPF) represents player bodies across English sport, including cricket, football and athletics. "Recreational drugs have no place in sport but we'd be naive to think sportsmen won't encounter them," PPF Secretary General Simon Taylor tells *Druglink*. "While we'd hope the vast majority would say no, there will be times when people's judgement is badly off-kilter. What matters is how you deal with it."

Taylor says that the majority of the time recreational drugs are not taken to cheat, meaning a two-year stretch out of sport is harsh. "Sport's effectively been that person's life. To take that away from them for two years to the point they can't even train with the team, I think, can be hugely detrimental to someone who's recovering."

How you deal with social drug use in sport is a controversial issue. It's generally accepted that sportsmen who use performance-enhancing drugs to cheat should be heavily punished. But

recreational drug use is a different ball game, where policies and press coverage are dictated less by evidence and more by morality and the need to protect the 'image' of sport and its participants.

Central to this is the view of modern sports stars as role models. In the era of Brand Beckham, athletes are marketed as the ultimate embodiment of human health and achievement. From car manufacturers to cosmetic brands, companies fork out millions on sponsorship and product endorsement deals to trade on the back of this aspirational and wholesome lifestyle. The flipside is that any sign of deviant behaviour results in contracts being ripped up and a sporting hero quickly condemned to folk devil status. Just ask Tiger Woods. "There is an image dimension," Taylor admits. "Our sportsmen have a responsibility as role models. Just as you don't want them going out getting drunk and getting into fights, you don't want them taking drugs."

But some do. According to a survey, published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* in 2008, almost a third of Premiership footballers said they knew a fellow professional who used recreational drugs. Meanwhile, an analysis of athletes' enquiries to the UK Sport Drug Information database, published last October, showed that 1 in 10 requests concerned social drugs.

And be it through testing schemes or tabloid investigations, plenty of sports stars have been caught dabbling with a range of illicit substances. Chelsea football stars Adrian Mutu and Mark Bosnich, champion jockey Kieran Fallon, former world champion gymnast Yuri Van Gelder and tennis idols Richard Gasquet and Martina Hingis have all fallen foul of cocaine testing in the last decade.

Last summer, the *News of the World* splashed photos of 14-times Olympic gold swimmer Michael Phelps smoking a bong across its front page. And as Christmas approached, former tennis world number one Andre Agassi had Wimbledon's chattering classes choking on their strawberries and cream, after admitting using crystal meth while on tour in 1997.

The celebrity status of top footballers means they regularly rub shoulders with stars from the music, TV and film worlds – where cocaine use is often considered a rite of passage. But as sports stars, they are held to a higher moral code than many of their celebrity peers and, as a result, have further to fall if they fail to live up to it.

Journalist Denis Campbell, who spent seven-and-a-half years as a sports reporter for *The Observer*, says that the 'role model myth' means the tabloids view any drug scandal involving footballers as legitimate and juicy reporting territory. "It gives journalists a complete ethical cover to report on what are, a lot of the time, private matters," says Campbell. "Newspapers could easily fill their pages with stories of politicians, minor soap actors and countless others taking drugs if they wanted. But footballers have a certain cachet."

While the tabloids will determinedly pursue any sniff of a drugs scandal, most social drug use in sport is uncovered via drug testing. Under the WADA code, players are tested 'out of competition' for performance-enhancing drugs only. But on match days, or 'in competition', stars are tested for every substance on the WADA prohibited list, which includes cannabis and cocaine.

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For many involved in sport, the inclusion of cocaine, and particularly cannabis, on the list sits uncomfortably. But any efforts to challenge WADA on the issue have fallen on deaf ears.

In 2006, then Sports Minister Richard Caborn, argued for the removal of social drugs from the WADA list. "We are not in the business of policing society, we are in the business of rooting out cheats in sport," he told the Commons' Science and Technology Select Committee. Caborn's comments provoked a predictable response from WADA. "Apart from the fact there is a health risk, [social drugs] are contrary to the spirit of sport," said the watchdog's head Dick Pound.

Pound's comments relate to the three WADA criteria for including substances on the prohibited list, at least two of which have to be met – performance enhancement, possible health dangers and "a contravention of the spirit of sport". With, at best, ambiguous evidence that cocaine or cannabis enhance

performance, WADA usually falls back on the 'health risk' and 'spirit of sport' arguments to justify testing for them.

Dr Michael Turner, Chief Medical Adviser to the Lawn Tennis Association, has long been frustrated by the lack of consistency in WADA's approach. He feels that the 'health risk' and 'spirit of sport' arguments for including cannabis on the prohibited list are both flawed, particularly given that other social drugs such as LSD, and many pharmaceuticals, are not included.

With cocaine and cannabis included on the prohibited list, players who test positive face the same penalties as athletes using performance-enhancing drugs. Whether a post-match test reveals traces of cocaine or a steroid in your system, a two-year ban from playing, training and any 'related activities' to your sport is standard.

Turner believes WADA's failure to distinguish between recreational and performance-enhancing drugs is flawed. "[The WADA approach] takes no account of the real world," he says. "There is no other occupational environment where testing positive for cocaine would see you banned from making a living for two years. If you are a soldier or policeman or banker you will be offered some kind of rehab and you would be treated as having an illness, not slung out."

Michele Verroken, the former head of anti-doping at UK Sport, also has concerns about the weight placed on moral concepts such as the 'spirit of sport' in compiling the prohibited list. "There's a danger when you're making a bigger judgement call on elite sportspeople and the way they live their lives because you can't truly argue the performance enhancement link with many social drugs," she tells Druglink.

Verroken is yet to be "one hundred per cent convinced" that testing alone actually changes people's drugs use and feels that the total absence of rehabilitation provision in WADA's approach is a flaw. "Certainly when there are so many proven treatment programmes for drugs, it's a lost opportunity," she says.

In September last year, the PPF did meet with WADA to argue that recreational drug use should be dealt with through treatment and rehabilitation rather than a blanket ban from training and playing. But despite official statements about 'constructive talks', Druglink understands that little has progressed since.

The upshot is that most sports still have their hands tied to WADA's 'in

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Stoke-on-Trent Safer City Partnership

Procurement of Pharmacological Interventions and Associated Provision to Support Recovery Focused Community Drug and Alcohol Service Delivery in Stoke-on-Trent (Reference number ITT28825)

Stoke-on-Trent Safer City Partnership recently redesigned substance misuse services in line with a recovery focused, community based model that considers all aspects of need, including drug and alcohol use, health, offending behaviour and social functioning.

In 2008/2009 the partnership commissioned service providers to deliver adult and young people's community and inpatient services. The next stage is to commission a suitably qualified and proficient organisation to deliver **Pharmacological Interventions and Associated Provision to Support Recovery Focused Community Drug and Alcohol Service Delivery.**

Please register with Bravo Solution www.wmcoe.bravosolution.com to express an interest and receive further details. Proposals should be completed and returned by 12 noon on Friday 12 February 2010.

A training event will be held in Stoke-on-Trent on Wednesday 20 January 2010 to provide interested parties with further information.



"Rugby players aren't immune to drug abuse": England and Bath rugby star Matt Stevens was dropped from the sport for two years after he took cocaine



competition' testing regime and penalties. However, a rare few have sought to complement, or work around, the WADA approach by developing their own 'out of competition' social drugs policies.

In football, the Football Association (FA), Premier League and the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) have developed a social drugs policy where players are tested for recreational drugs out of competition on the proviso that findings are held in confidence. Players who test positive are banned from competition, but not from training, for three to six months and offered the chance to get treatment. On exiting treatment, players are subjected to target testing for the next two years. *Druglink* understands that following the Stevens and Bath scandals of last year, rugby will be implementing a similar policy in early 2010.

"Football has a programme with the right balance between carrot and stick," Verroken tells *Druglink*. "Players are given really clear notice that these types of drugs can wreck your career and it's made clear that you can only look to the patience of the club and the PFA for so long. You have to be a willing participant to engage with treatment and come through it and come back and achieve as much as you could have achieved before."

The PPF's Taylor agrees the approach is far preferable to "throwing someone on the scrapheap". He says that the

programme's guarantee of anonymity is particularly important. "When your world has fallen apart the last thing you need is to be on the front of the newspapers. That is not good for anybody."

FORMER SPORTING CHANCE CLIENTS OFTEN PASS ON THEIR EXPERIENCES DURING ADDICTION SEMINARS RUN BY THE CLINIC

But where do sports stars head for anonymous treatment? It's hard to envisage many Premiership footballers parking their Lamborghinis outside their local drug treatment service. Many are offered treatment at the Sporting Chance clinic, set up by former Arsenal and England captain Tony Adams following his own recovery from alcoholism.

Footballers from all levels have passed through the clinic's doors and, while the majority prefer to remain anonymous, players like Adrian Mutu have spoken publicly about the value of the support they received. Chris Mordue, Sporting Chance's Director of Training, admits the centre 'doesn't have all the answers' but he feels the fact that clients share sporting backgrounds can help them identify with one another's issues.

"There's not many people who go to work in front of 50,000 people every week" he tells *Druglink*. "Clients say that they benefit from being in rehab with people who understand what it's like to be a sportsman. It's not the clincher for a positive recovery. But it helps."

Mordue says that, in his experience, a relatively small number of top-level sportsmen engage in regular substance abuse, but he stresses their need for support. "Just because it's a minority involved, they shouldn't be marginalised for the greater good. They deserve a duty of care."

It's not necessarily incompatible with the role model responsibility either. Former Sporting Chance clients often pass on their experiences to current players during addiction seminars run by the clinic. And the PPF's Taylor agrees that players who are supported to overcome drug problems can provide positive examples for future generations. "You've got to think about the fact that this is someone who's lost it all, been through that and got back on track. There's a lot people can learn from that."

It seems that the overriding challenge is to convince WADA that supporting fallen stars to resurrect their careers is closer to "the spirit of sport" than casting them on the scrapheap as demonised and damaged goods.

■ **Andrew McNicoll** is DrugScope's Press and Communications Officer