

'Tainted supplement' excuse outmoded

by Mark Zeigler

Blaming a tainted nutritional supplement might be a plausible explanation for a positive urine test for a banned stimulant.

Five years ago.

But anti-doping experts say the already slim chances of a supplement triggering a positive for a stimulant, as San Diego Padres outfielder Mike Cameron suggested recently, have dwindled significantly since the Federal Drug Administration barred the popular stimulant ephedrine from supplements in 2005.

"It's not a very high likelihood it's from a contaminated substance," said Victor Conte, the founder of the BALCO lab that supplied dozens of elite athletes with performance-enhancing substances. "It's certainly possible that some of these products still have a kick in them, but most of these are loaded up with caffeine or synephrine, neither of which is banned by baseball."

Major League Baseball announced recently that Cameron has received a 25-game suspension for stimulants, which under the league's anti-doping policy means it was his second positive since stimulant testing began last year. The first positive results in a warning, increased education and six unannounced tests over the next 12 months - as opposed to the two months major leaguers generally face in a season.

Neither MLB nor the players union reveals the actual substance, and Cameron declined to provide it in a radio interview Wednesday with AM-1090, the Padres' flagship station. Cameron and his agent did not respond to interview requests from the The San Diego Union-Tribune.

"It was probably something I was taking as far as an energy drink or whatever," Cameron told the radio station. "I can't really call the name out because it would not be right for me to call a name out ... in a situation where I could have a lawsuit."

Most of the 30 stimulants on baseball's banned list fall under amphetamines or ephedrine classes. Anti-doping experts say they aren't aware of any research or circumstances in which amphetamines - "greenies" in baseball parlance - contaminated a nutritional supplement. And ephedrine-laced products were removed from shelves in the spring of 2005 after a series of deaths, including that of Baltimore Orioles pitcher Steve Bechler, were linked to them in 2003.

After decades of neglecting the issue of stimulants in the clubhouse, baseball's powerful players association finally agreed to testing in 2006, but with two key provisos. One was that the first positive test did not result in a suspension. The other was that baseball's banned list would include less than half the 62 stimulants on the World Anti-Doping Agency's list.

"This isn't drug testing, this is IQ testing," Conte said. "All you have to do is look at the list and find one of the 30 that's not on the list and use that. This guy (Cameron) didn't fail a drug test. He failed an IQ test."

Cameron becomes only the second baseball player, majors or minors, to fail a second stimulant test and be suspended. Detroit Tigers shortstop Neifi Perez received a 25-game suspension on July 6 and an additional 80 games - the penalty for a third strike - in August. A fourth positive can result in a permanent ban from baseball.

Figures from the Montreal lab that handles MLB's testing, however, indicate far more players have had at least one stimulant positive.

In previous years, the Montreal lab reported about 20 annual positives for banned stimulants; in 2006, the first year MLB began stimulant testing there, the number jumped to 104.

People such as Conte have suggested energy-boosting stimulants are a bigger problem in baseball than steroids, given their prevalence in clubhouses and their highly addictive characteristics. In 2006, former Arizona Diamondbacks pitcher Jason Grimsley reportedly told federal agents, "Everybody had greenies. That's like aspirin."

In an interview with the Union-Tribune earlier this year, MLB Executive Vice President Rob Manfred defended the alleged loopholes in his league's anti-doping policy.

"I will tell you unequivocally, if there are players who are addicted to greenies, they will get caught under this program," Manfred said. "We may not get him the first time, but we'll get him sooner or later."

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