

While most golfers probably aren't on steroids or HGH, testing is a good idea

by *Tod Leonard*

A friend who has been closely involved in all levels of golf for decades was mulling last week the news that all of the sport's major governing bodies had agreed to do drug testing as early as next year.

In all of his years in the sport, the friend said he could recall not a whisper of anybody even considering using steroids to bulk up.

"Honestly," he said with a chuckle, "I think a lot of golfers are just too lazy to do it."

We'll call that the Jason Gore Defense. It was the barrel-stomached Gore, playing in a pro-am in Boise, Idaho, last week, who opined, "We call penalties on ourselves. Why would we cheat with something like that? If you want to hit it farther, eat some of the buffets I do."

So there's the difference between golf and seemingly every other sport on the planet these days: love of the game's rules and traditions, and love handles.

Anybody seen Tim "Lumpy" Heron lately? The only test that guy needs is for the sugary goop from the center of a Ding Dong.

Sorry, Lump, we're going to have to suspend you because you've gone over the limit for Hostess' "majestic creme filling."

But PGA Tour Commissioner Tim Finchem, once so vehemently against testing, and other leaders did not have a choice. When the line between honor and cheating these days is as thin as Floyd Landis' yellow jersey, how can you leave open any doubt or suspicion?

It is the right thing to do, too, because despite what my friend says, I have got to believe that there are golfers out there who have tried steroids and possibly human growth hormone. Gary Player, golf's first fitness nut, stirred up a big controversy at this year's British Open when he said a player had confided in him about steroid use.

Now, Player likes to talk, and it didn't help that he refused to identify the golfer, but why would a legend

make that up? I don't think he would, so I believe it's happened and would have continued to happen, even if on a very small scale, if golf didn't come up with a drug-testing policy.

Golf has lived by the honor code for centuries. Those who play proudly point out that they call penalties on themselves, and there have been plenty of cases in which pros have cost themselves thousands of dollars for revealing the smallest of infractions.

But let's not be hopelessly naive. Men and women are playing for millions of dollars each week - far more than Tour de France cyclists - and without the safety net of guaranteed contracts. These people have to remake their living every year. If a guy thinks he could play catch-up to Tiger Woods by getting 10 more yards on his drives, couldn't he be enticed to bulk up?

"It could be tempting because the game is a power game now," veteran Woody Austin said at last month's PGA Championship. "It isn't about precision anymore."

Just look at Woods. In 10 years' time he has gone from marathoner-thin to defensive-back buff. Woods has encouraged drug testing and said he would be the first in line for it, and his vigorous fitness regimen is well-documented, but what if somebody else just doesn't want to work that hard?

"The guys I talk to, we kind of laugh about this," said Sean O'Hair, one of the most successful skinny guys on tour. "Steroids create bulk - which isn't good for golf. They're going to affect your mind and thinking - which isn't good for golf. There's no benefit from it."

If they think that, then they're not doing their homework. Part of the cheating science these days is to not produce so much bulk while adding strength. It can be done.

What other drugs could golfers use to their advantage?

For years, it has been said that pros have tried beta blockers, the high-blood pressure drugs that may slow the heart rate or reduce anxiety. Those will now be banned, although players can be exempted if they can prove the use is medically necessary.

Synthetic EPO, the bane of cycling because of its ability to increase oxygen in the blood, seems a remote possibility for golfers because they're not pumping pedals for hundreds of miles, but there is a daily recovery factor, and golfers do spend hours on the course and driving range.

Also among golf's 10 banned categories: cannabinoids. The fancy name for marijuana. And while I haven't seen any pros tumbling out of their RV amid a smoke cloud, a la "Fast Times at Ridgemont High," my well-placed golf friend says he knows of one minitour player who takes the edge off by getting stoned before every round.

The legal version of mellowing out would be alcohol, and you've got to believe golfers have taken a wee (or not-so-wee) nip long before they reached the 19th hole.

The best argument that golfers don't need drugs? It's their equipment. Why risk 'roids when the clubs and balls are juiced. The manufacturers are spending millions in research and development each year so that players can hit it straighter and farther. If major leaguers could use aluminium bats, baseball might not have had a steroid problem.

Golf most assuredly does not have a problem. Not yet, probably not ever. But as Finchem solemnly pointed out last week, the foibles of other sports are too worrisome to be ignored.

Let's hope golf stays above the stink.

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