

Case study: Media Framing of Adderall Use in the NFL

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Introduction

For people with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, Adderall can be considered a lifesaver. The drug, which contains a combination of stimulants, helps to increase the ability to pay attention, concentrate, and stay focused. It restores the balance of neurotransmitters in the brain, and it can also be used to treat narcolepsy and relieve pain. With the benefits that Adderall exhibits, it can be easy to understand why athletes try to get their hands on it—whether to help them study playbooks, workout longer or even rid them of fatigue. The problem is that Adderall is banned by both collegiate and professional sports, unless prescribed by a doctor. This case study will discuss the illegal use of Adderall in the NFL specifically, how the media framed both the use and response by the NFL, and recommendations for future coverage of related cases.

Topic

This case study explores several articles that discuss the growing issue of illegal Adderall use in the NFL. Adderall is a combination of the stimulants amphetamine and dextroamphetamine. According to Everyday Health (Iliades & Dallas), “the drug works by challenging levels of naturally occurring substances in the brain. Adderall increases the level of the brain chemical dopamine, and increased levels of dopamine stimulate the brain.” Since Adderall increases alertness and concentration, the drug has become popular among people who do not have ADHD or sleeping disorders, such as college students, professional workers, and athletes. It is believed that Adderall enhances performance, hence why sports programs have banned its usage.

Incident Details

There have been a significant number of NFL players who have been linked to Adderall usage. This case study will focus first on the cases involving former New York Giants safety Tyler Sash and Seattle Seahawks cornerbacks Richard Sherman and Brandon Browner, and the spotlight on Adderall in the media that these cases sparked. In the Tyler Sash incident, he was prescribed Adderall by his doctor to treat his anxiety and fear of public speaking. Soon after taking the drugs, Sash was selected for a random drug test, and when the substance was found, he was suspended for four games. Both Sherman and Browner were also suspended for four games after being tested, but Sherman was able to appeal his suspension, stating that he accidentally digested the drug after drinking from a cup that contained the crushed pill. Browner did not appeal, and he served his four-game suspension for violating the league's performance-enhancement drugs (PED) policy.

Media Coverage

The coverage for this case study begins with a 2012 article from The Seattle Times by Larry Stone on November 27th. The article uses the Richard Sherman and Brandon Browner incidents to analyze the link between the NFL and Adderall that had be prevalent in prior years and why the drug is popular among athletes. The article features a quote by Dr. Gary Wadler, the past chairman of the World Anti-Doping Agency's Prohibited List Committee, stating, "It increases alertness, aggressiveness, attention and concentration. It improves reaction time, especially when fatigued. Some think it enhances hand-eye coordination. Some believe it increases the mental aspects of performance" (Stone, 2012). Wadler also calls Adderall "one of the quintessential performance-enhancing drugs." The article goes further to discuss the exemption of the penalty for usage of the drug if prescribed by a medical doctor. Though the

NFL does not disclose the number of exemptions it issues, the article mentions that the MLB issued 105 in 2011. When that number is taken into account, it can be easy to infer that there are a significant amount of athletes in other sports who also receive access to this drug, including the NFL.

That same day, Jorge Castillo released an article on NJ.com discussing the seemingly wrongful suspension of Tyler Sash. He states that Sash stepped on a “supercharged fault line” without realizing it when he took Adderall for his anxiety, and that he was placed into the same group as “athletes denying wrongdoing with pleas of ignorance or insisting it was an accident or that they had been misled by a trainer or doctor” (Castillo, 2012). The article emphasizes the difficulty of having a drug policy that tries to distinguish between players who take the drug for an edge and who are actually prescribed the drug for medical treatment. The article then analyzes specific cases dealing with the drug and the different reasons and excuses the athletes gave for using it. The closing paragraph of the article highlights the thin line between abuse and actual need by saying:

While Sash and others claim innocence and ignorance, Adderall has given them a label as a rule-breaker, an athlete seeking performance-enhancing shortcuts. Fairly or not.

“I didn’t know, or I would’ve went about it the right way,” Sash said. “At the end of the day, you’re responsible for what you put into your body” (Castillo, 2012).

On November 28, 2012, USA Today released a story discussing whether sports leagues have an Adderall problem. The article references an Adderall case from 2009 featuring Garrett Hartley, stating that his positive test kick-started Adderall news in the NFL. It talks about the issue the NFL has with trying to regulate “the use of a powerful prescription drug that the

leagues exempt as medicine for players who need it and classify as a performance-enhancer for those who don't" (Moore & Corbett, 2012). This story also clarifies the exemption process for prescription use of Adderall by players by stating:

Athletes in other leagues can use Adderall by being granted therapeutic use exemptions, but the leagues say it is a misconception that any player with a prescription qualifies for an exemption. The pro leagues and the NCAA have a process to determine whether an exemption is warranted.

"The process in the NFL for obtaining a therapeutic use exemption on any drug I would say is extremely rigorous, and the number of persons who obtain them is very small," Birch says. (Moore & Corbett, 2012)

This article introduces the huge problem facing the NFL and drug testers: players who use other banned substances can easily blame their positive test results on Adderall—a lesser evil—since the NFL and NFLPA do not identify which drug caused the positive test.

An article released by Jack Dickey for Slate.com on November 29th takes a different angle for the Adderall suspension boom, stating that Adderall does not enhance performance at all and that players are only using it to mask their steroid use. Dickey mentions Browner and Sherman, saying that they went from being “nobodies” to key parts of one of the top defenses in the NFL. He mentions that, “no one expects Adderall to turn scrubs into all-stars. So the logic took its next step: Browner and Sherman had to be lying about what they had actually tested positive for” (Dickey, 2012). He also speculates that the long list of players suspended for amphetamines *had* to be scams. He then compares the use of amphetamines by NFL players to that of MLB players, who, according to him, “need” it more because baseball season is more demanding; they have more games and require more focus and hand-eye coordination. He ends

the article by suggesting that NFL players stick to “old-fashioned stimulants,” like cocaine, ecstasy, and bath salts, rather than pharmaceuticals.

In December 2012, The New York Times released an article featuring interviews from NFL players Anthony Becht and Will Hill. Becht gave his account of conversations he had with teammates who used Adderall, while Hill was one of the players who had been suspended for using Adderall that year. The article mentions that the NFL had a record-high number of suspensions that year: 21 in 2012 [at the time of the article] versus 12 in 2011. Seven of the suspended players in 2012 were linked to Adderall use. Hill points out his disapproval of players using the drug if they do not have ADHD—the intended disorder Adderall is meant to treat. He places the blame on these players, claiming they are the ones causing this problem. He is quoted saying, “It foggies everything up. This person can say it’s Adderall, and how do we decipher the fakers from not? When you try to get an advantage over the next person, that’s why we get into these situations we’re in” (Battista, 2012).

In April 2013, Richard Sherman released a statement saying that “half the league” uses Adderall, and the NFL should lift its ban on the drug. Both Yahoo! Sports and Bleacher Report posted articles on April 10th with the statement from Sherman. In the Yahoo article, writer Brian McIntyre disputes Sherman’s claim by saying there would be a significantly higher number of PED suspensions if Adderall use were as widespread as he says. The Bleacher Report article, written by Tim Daniels, first simply reported Sherman’s statement. Then after Sherman tweeted that he was misquoted, Brandon Galvin updated the article with an actual transcript of Sherman’s conversation with Vancouver Sun reporter Mike Beamish. The transcripts prove that Sherman in fact did say that the NFL should lift its ban due to such widespread use of Adderall. The article ends by saying, “While it’s unknown how accurate Sherman’s 50 percent estimate on use of the

stimulant is for prescription uses, he clearly believes that it's used enough throughout the league for the NFL to reconsider its stance on the issue" (Daniels, 2013).

The next day, NFL.com posted a video of Washington Redskins wide receiver Pierre Garcon vouching for Adderall as a PED, saying, "It gives you an upper hand that regular guys like myself don't have. It helps you focus more attention to what's going on, on the field and that is an advantage because regular people like myself ... don't have it. But it is an advantage. We're all trying to get an advantage, but if it's illegal, it's illegal -- you can't do it" (Sessler, 2013).

In May 2013, Behind the Steel Curtain, a blog by SB Nation, released a post about the nickname given to the Seattle Seahawks after yet another member of the team—Bruce Irvin—was suspended for PED use. The team had become known as the "Sea-Adderall Seahawks" after five its players had been linked to the drug, excluding Sherman, whose suspension was overturned. The post states, "It should be perfectly clear by now using Adderall without going through proper channels within the league isn't allowed. To Irvin's credit, he admitted his mistake instead of pleading ignorance, and he'll serve his suspension and move on. But there shouldn't be any excuse for anyone else" (Coolong, 2013).

In August, SB Nation released a report about a potential new PED policy in the NFL that could ease the penalty on Adderall usage. Under the new deal, a positive test due to Adderall would be filed under substance abuse rather than PEDs. This in turn changes the first offense penalty from suspension to counseling and treatment. That same day, USA Today also released a report about the new deal, claiming that "the league is trying to ramp up pressure on the NFL Players' Association, which has won the battle for appeals of positive drug tests to go to third-party arbitrators, but also wants to take appeals of discipline not triggered by positive tests out of Commissioner Roger Goodell's hands -- such as a drug-related arrest" (Pelissero, 2013).

In an article by Caitlin Swieca for The Denver Post, it is noted that awareness is an issue with the Adderall suspension cases. According to Swieca (Swieca, 2013), many of the suspended players claimed to not know the drug was banned. She then mentions the NFL's effort to combat this excuse by increasing its efforts to make sure all players are aware of the policy. Denver Broncos linebacker Wesley Woodyard is quoted saying, "I get an e-mail probably once a week or so (from the NFL) of a new drug or a new supplement that's banned. You've just got to stay on top of it. There's a lot of stuff we really don't know about, but that's why you've got to use your resources" (Swieca, 2013).

One year later, in September of this year (2014), CBS Sports released a report about Denver Broncos wide receiver Wes Welker, who had been suspended for amphetamine usage. In the report, it states that Adderall was the reason for Welker's suspension, rather than the street drug Molly (a form of MDMA), as previously reported. Welker claimed to have taken Adderall to stay focused. This article mentions that the Broncos already had concerns about Welker's health and his ability to sustain a 16-game season (Canfora, 2014). This assertion seems to attempt to provide reason to morally accept Welker's use of Adderall.

Analysis

There are several common themes within the articles studied. One theme is the possibility of players using Adderall as a way to cover up other PED usage. Several articles referenced the NFL's inability to disclose which drugs triggered positive testing, making it easy for players to play the blame game with the prescription drug. Another theme is the debate about whether or not Adderall should be considered a performance-enhancement drug. Some articles highlight the drug's ability to provide players with an edge, while others discredit it, claiming it is just a cover-up.

The most important theme is that the NFL has a huge issue with trying to regulate the use of the drug and separate the abusers from the ones who actually need it. While testing techniques to detect the drug may not be flawed, the system of issuing exemptions for therapeutic use may be. This is evident in the incident involving Tyler Sash who was properly prescribed the drug from a doctor but was still subject to penalty from the league, while Richard Sherman, who was not prescribed the drug but instead claimed to accidentally ingest it, was able to appeal his suspension.

When attempting to provide reasons for the use of Adderall among NFL players, a few writers mention the demands of playing professional football, making it easy to see why they would need the drug to help them cope and remain energized throughout the season. When assigning blame for the Adderall phenomenon, some articles strictly blamed players for abusing the drug when they have no use for it. Others blame the players' lack of knowledge about the NFL's policy against Adderall and that it is in fact considered illegal. Over time, the media leaned more towards the theme of Adderall use as a way to cover up the use of other PEDs, agreeing that there is no real need for its use, but it is an easy way to mask more serious drugs.

Recommendations for Improvement

In future cases, it would be helpful for the media to highlight the negative effects of misusing drugs like Adderall. Very few mentioned the long-term negative implications using a drug like this could have on anyone that does not need it. More quotes from doctors or studies about Adderall could help paint the picture of why this is potentially harmful and why younger athletes should shy away from trying to follow this trend. Also, it appears that though many of the articles were written at different times, a lot of them were saying the same things. With such

a hot topic, everyone wants to report on it. However, different angles and approaches could better help the public understand the issue.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Adderall use has been a major trend in the NFL in the past few years. The media has typically done a fair job of reporting on this issue. In the future, with the above recommendations, coverage of cases involving performance-enhancement drugs and substance abuse can improve greatly, assigning responsibility to the right sources and providing the public with all of the necessary information.

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