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An Athlete's Dangerous Experiment

By JERE LONGMAN (New York Times)

ANO, Tex., Nov. 25 — After recording one save last season, Taylor Hooton expected to join the starting rotation next spring for the baseball team at Plano West Senior High School.

"You could count on the kid to throw strikes," said Billy Ajello, Taylor's best friend and a catcher at Plano West, which is located amid the affluent sprawl north of Dallas.

By all accounts, Taylor was popular and ebullient. He was a cousin of Burt Hooton, the former major league pitcher, and his brother pitched in college. Next spring, he would make his own mark during his senior season. But on July 15, a month past his 17th birthday, Taylor Hooton killed himself. The authorities ruled the death a suicide by hanging.

His parents and a doctor familiar with the case said they believe that Taylor's death was related to depression that he felt upon discontinuing the use of anabolic steroids. The sense of euphoria and aggression that accompany the use of steroids can be replaced by lethargy, loss of confidence, melancholy and hopelessness when a person stops using performance-enhancing drugs, doctors said.

"It's a pretty strong case that he was withdrawing from steroids and his suicide was directly related to that," said Dr. Larry W. Gibbons, president and medical director of the Cooper Aerobics Center, a leading preventive medicine clinic in Dallas. "This is a kid who was well liked, had a lot good friends, no serious emotional problems. He had a bright future."

Taylor Hooton's example is extreme, but the use of steroids by athletes and nonathletes in high school is considered even more troubling than the use of them by elite athletes who are involved in widely publicized scandals in sports like football, baseball and track and field, a number of doctors said.

While there are relatively few professional athletes, some doctors estimate that 500,000 to one million high school students, or more, use steroids. Adolescents are also more susceptible to some physiological dangers, including premature cessation of bone growth, which can limit a person's height, doctors said.

By nature, teenagers are risk takers, and they are less likely to understand the health risks or to be concerned with potential side effects like infertility, atrophied testicles, high blood pressure, liver damage and prostate cancer, some of which may not appear for 20 or 30 years, doctors said.

"I'm worried about kids," said Dr. Donald A. Malone, a psychiatrist at the Cleveland Clinic, who wrote a 1995 study indicating an association between depression and steroid use. "Elite athletes know the side effects, and they can afford to pay for the real stuff. Kids don't have the knowledge, and they're buying it from some clown selling it at school. Who knows what they're getting?"

High school students take muscle-building steroids to enhance athletic performance, improve self-confidence and become more attractive to the opposite sex, athletes and doctors say. Young athletes say they are influenced by their professional role models who use illicit substances. Parents are often clueless about signs of steroid use and some parents even encourage it in a

misguided attempt to promote their children's careers, doctors said, while many coaches are also uninformed or seem to turn a blind eye.

Four percent of high school seniors said in 2002 that had used steroids, according to a survey by the University of Michigan. Other surveys indicate that 3 percent to 11 percent of high school students said they had used steroids. A survey by the National Collegiate Athletic Association indicated that nearly half of college athletes who admitted using steroids had begun in high school. As many as 3 percent of eighth graders said they had used steroids, according to the Michigan survey.

"While we focus on the elite athletes that are headline grabbers, the underbelly of all this is a much more serious problem," Dr. Gary I. Wadler, a professor of medicine at New York University, said.

Parents and students are rarely willing to speak about steroid use in high school. But Don Hooton, Taylor's father, and Ajello, Taylor's close friend, have begun holding seminars and granting interviews, believing that parents, administrators and coaches need to become better educated and need to confront the issue more forcefully, so that another tragedy may be prevented.

"Don't tell me it's not a problem," Don Hooton, a director of worldwide marketing for Hewlett-Packard, said. "My kid just died."

Symptoms Overlooked

Those who knew Taylor Hooton described him as a young man who smiled often, was popular with girls and had many friends from different backgrounds. "He was very popular," Blake Boydston, the baseball coach at Plano West, said. "He always came to the field in good spirits. When he spoke, it was, 'Thank you; no, sir; yes, sir.' "

Ajello said that Taylor was also a teenager who colored his hair and looked twice when he passed a mirror. During a chemistry class in the fall of 2002, Taylor mentioned that he might begin using steroids, Ajello said. When Ajello asked why, he said Taylor replied: "I'm not doing it for baseball. I'm doing it for myself."

After Taylor's death, his parents said they had learned from his psychiatrist that he had low self-esteem, and that to feel as if he measured up, he had to make himself bigger, drive a big pickup truck. A junior varsity coach had also suggested to Taylor that he get bigger, Don Hooton said.

Late last winter and into the spring, Don and Gwen Hooton, who is an elementary school teacher, began to notice changes in Taylor's physique and behavior. Taylor, who was 6 feet 1 1/2 inches, grew to 205 pounds from about 175 pounds. Initially, his parents did not suspect steroid use. Don Hooton said he felt proud that his son seemed to be working hard in the weight room.

"There is a checklist of symptoms, and he was showing almost all of them," Don Hooton said. "We didn't know any better. We should have."

Taylor began to develop acne on his back and to exhibit signs of aggressiveness and irritability that are often associated with steroid use, his parents said. He flew into rages, then became tearfully apologetic. He took several hundred dollars from his parents' bank account without permission. He would pound the floor with his fists in anger. Once, he punched a wall and injured a knuckle on his pitching hand.

After his death, his parents said, they learned that Taylor had hurled a phone through a wall, hiding the damage behind a picture, and had pummeled his girlfriend's former boyfriend, who required nine stitches to close a wound.

Ajello said that he had warned Taylor about the health risks of steroids, but that Taylor "kind of blew it off." Apparently, none of Taylor's friends alerted an adult.

"The last thing you want to do is accuse someone of being on steroids," Ajello said. "You don't want to make their work ethic look bad."

Boydston, the high school's baseball coach, said he had noticed no troubling behavior by Taylor, and that if he seemed to be gaining weight, it appeared natural. "He had room to grow," Boydston said.

Eventually, Taylor's parents became suspicious. He mentioned an interest in steroids, then later confided to his brother, Donald, that he was using them, while still denying it to his parents.

At his parents' urging, Taylor was tested for drugs last April, but his parents said they later discovered that the screening had involved recreational drugs, not steroids. When the test came back clean, Taylor told his parents, "I told you I hadn't been doing anything."

Still, his behavior grew more alarming. During a rage last April, he told his mother, "I'll just take a knife and end it now." His parents sent him to a psychiatrist. Taylor told the doctor that he had been injecting himself with the steroid Deca 300, and taking oral Anadrol, Don Hooton said, but by May 19 Taylor said he had stopped using the drugs. Ajello said he believed that Taylor had halted his usage later and had planned to start again after a family vacation to England in July.

While on the trip, Taylor did something completely out of character, stealing a digital camera and a laptop computer, his father said. When the family returned home on July 14, his parents, brother and sister confronted Taylor and told him that his behavior had become unacceptable. He was grounded.

The next morning, Taylor asked his mother to lift the punishment, but she said no. He went upstairs and, using belts to fashion a noose, hung himself from the door in his bedroom, Don Hooton said. Later, when Taylor's room was inspected by the police and his father, vials of steroids, along with syringes and needles, were found. An autopsy revealed the presence of the metabolized steroids 19-norandrosterone and 19-noretiocholanolone in Taylor's system, a report by the Collin County medical examiner said.

Taylor was not the first athlete whose death was believed to be related to the psychological effects of steroid use. In August 1989, Eric Elofson of Bakersfield, Calif., hung himself from a tree in his front yard. He had stopped using Dianabol about a month before his suicide, his parents wrote in a journal, *The Physician and Sports Medicine*.

Suicide attempts related to steroid withdrawal are "more common than most people suspect," Dr. Harrison Pope, a Harvard psychiatrist who has done extensive research on steroids, said.

No Drug Testing at School

After Taylor Hooton died, Plano West made counselors available to its baseball players. In September, 600 administrators, coaches, students and parents attended a steroids seminar at the school. Another seminar earlier this month at Plano Senior High School drew a disappointing number of male athletes, Don Hooton said.

He and Ajello said they doubted that the school district was taking the dangers of steroids seriously. Ajello said that Boydston, the baseball coach, had not mentioned Taylor's death to him since shortly after school started, a statement the coach said was inaccurate.

"They don't want to talk about it," Ajello, an 18-year-old senior, said of school officials. "They want to pretend it didn't happen. The administration will probably tell you otherwise, but from a student's perspective, it's done and over with."

Mike Hughes, the athletic director and football coach at Plano West, disputed this. "We're not trying to brush it aside," he said. "We hurt, but we have to move on and continue to educate kids."

Phil Saviano, the principal at Plano West, said Taylor Hooton's death was his first encounter with steroids.

Some of the coaches and athletic officials insist that steroids are not a big problem at Plano West. Hughes said, "I have been in the district 21 years and I have not known of a kid that was on steroids."

Asked about the most urgent challenges the school faced with students, Boydston said, "I think steroids are at the bottom of the list."

Ajello had a more disturbing assessment. He said that he had never used steroids himself, but that use of steroids at Plano West was "extremely widespread" before Taylor's death. Some students had been scammed by dealers selling vials containing water and cooking spray, he said. "Some kids have stopped," Ajello said. "It hit home to some people, but I don't think enough."

Don Hooton said he had no evidence that coaches encouraged his son to use steroids. Hughes and Boydston said they had advised players to get bigger and stronger properly, through better nutrition and weight lifting, and had cautioned against using steroids.

The translation of that message by players is somewhat more complicated, Ajello said. "Coaches don't come out and say, 'Take steroids,'" Ajello said. "Freshman, sophomore, junior year, they tell you you're too small. A kid thinks high school sports are everything: 'I have to take it to the next level to get bigger and stronger to play.'"

"You take every little step, every chance you get to win, to play, to step on that field in front of a couple of thousand people on Friday night. I think the coaches know and almost kind of turn their heads. I think if they knew for sure, certain coaches would pull a kid aside and say, 'What are you doing?' I think other coaches would turn their heads, and even if they knew wouldn't say anything to a kid."

The United States Supreme Court has granted schools permission to screen for drug use among students who participate in extracurricular activities. A school district like Plano, which has built a \$15 million stadium and indoor practice facilities for its three high school football teams, could surely afford drug testing, Don Hooton said.

But school district officials say they cannot afford to test students for drugs. "We've all said drug testing is good," Cliff Odenwald, athletic director for the Plano district, said. "At this point, with the financial situation we're in, we can't do that."

School officials said that the football facilities were built through bond issues approved by voters and that money for drug testing would have to come out of an annual district budget that is stretched to the limit. This year, the district sent \$130 million, or 32 percent of its budget, to the state for use by less affluent school districts, officials said, and next year Plano faces a \$15 million budget cut.

So how are students to be discouraged from using steroids? Dr. Tedd Mitchell, associate medical director of the Cooper Aerobics Center, said the most effective approach might be an appeal to their honor.

"If you play football," Mitchell said, "you never say, 'We'll let this team have 11 players and you get 8.' That's cheating. If you start cranking up on steroids, that's cheating. Any coach that allows this is allowing cheating. Any parent trying to live vicariously through their kids and who looks the other way is allowing cheating."