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Monday, August 4, 2008

Updated: August 7, 6:32 PM ET

Steroids only get you so far in shot-putting

By Gare Joyce
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Not a day goes by without anabolic steroids figuring in at least one story in the sports-news cycle. Last week, [the International Olympic Committee stripped the U.S. men's 1600-meter relay team of its gold medal](#) from the 2000 Games in Sydney after Antonio Pettigrew admitted at the trial of his former coach that he had used banned substances from 1997 to 2003. Days before [Bulgaria pulled its entire weightlifting team](#) from the Olympics after 11 lifters tested positive for steroids. It's not always the big story -- just when major leaguers are called to testify before Congress or Marion Jones has to hand back her Olympic medals. There's a lot of debate about what the International Olympic Committee, the major professional sports leagues and the NCAA should do with their testing and enforcement. There's always a few voices in the back row saying that steroids should just be legalized. There's one point that everyone agrees on: Steroids work.

OK, almost everybody. It's just about the most radical take you can have in sports these days, that somehow steroids are overrated or ineffective or even counterproductive. And it's a point being made by those from the most unlikely circle -- the shot-put ring.

"There's nothing that you can do with steroids that you couldn't do without them," says Geoff Capes, the world's top-ranked shot-putter in the late '70s and the fifth-place finisher competing for Great Britain at the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. "They can't give you strength that you couldn't come by naturally. Among the elite [shot-putters], it doesn't come down to who's doing steroids or not. The big natural athlete is going to come through."

"If it just came down to something you got from a bottle, whether there was testing or not, somebody would be throwing 80 feet," says Brian Oldfield, a former U.S. Olympian and the first man with a 75-foot throw. (Oldfield's 75-footer was not internationally recognized as a world record because it came on a short-lived pro track circuit.)



Geoff Capes saw both sides of the aisle and knows what steroids can't do for you.

You'd presume that the shot-putters would be the athletes most likely to benefit from steroids, human growth hormone, "the clear" or whatever the cutting-edge substance of choice fresh from the lab. Casual track fans look at the shot put as a matter of pure strength. And these fans would presume that advances in the development of steroids would translate into 16-pound shots being flung farther and farther.

That's exactly what *hasn't* happened.

Times in many events on the track have dipped almost every year, likewise for times in the swimming

pool. But in the one event that would seem to benefit a steroid user more than any other, the records have been basically unthreatened for a generation. Or even two. [Oldfield's old throw of 75 feet came in 1975 and it's still the fourth-longest in history.](#) Randy Barnes set the [current record of 75 feet, 10 inches in 1990.](#) The list of top-10 performers is dominated by shot-putters from the '80s and early '90s. The only shot-putters to have cracked the all-time top 10 since 2000 are Americans: Kevin Toth, Christian Cantwell, Adam Nelson and Reese Hoffa. But their best shot puts are still more than a foot behind Oldfield's.

Then and now: How much have track and field marks improved?

Event	1976 Olympic gold	2004 Olympic gold	Current world record
Men's 100 meters	Hasely Crawford, Trinidad and Tobago, 10.06	Justin Gatlin, USA, 9.85	Usain Bolt, Jamaica, 9.72 (2008)
Men's 200 meters	Donald Quarrie, Jamaica, 20.23	Shawn Crawford, USA, 19.79	Michael Johnson, USA, 19.32 (1996)
Men's 400 meters	Alberto Juantorena, Cuba, 44.26	Jeremy Wariner, USA, 44.00	Michael Johnson, USA, 43.18 (1999)
Men's 110-meter hurdles	Guy Drut, France, 13.30	Liu Xiang, China, 12.91	Dayron Robles, Cuba, 12.87 (2008)
Men's 400-meter hurdles	Edwin Moses, USA, 47.75	Felix Sanchez, Dominican Rep., 47.63	Kevin Young, USA, 46.78 (1992)
Men's high jump	Jacek Wszola, Poland, 7-4 ½	Stefan Holm, Sweden 7-8 ¾	Javier Sotomayor, Cuba, 8-0 ½ (1993)
Men's long jump	Arnie Robinson, USA, 27-4 ¾	Dwight Phillips, USA, 28-2 ¼	Mike Powell, USA, 29-4 ½ (1991)
Men's shot put	Udo Beyer, East Germany, 69-0 ¾	Yuriy Bilonog, Ukraine, 69-5 ¼	Randy Barnes, USA, 75-10 ¼ (1990)
Men's pole vault	Tadeusz Slusarski, Poland, 18-0 ½	Timothy Mack, USA, 19-6 ¼	Sergey Bubka, Ukraine, 20-1 ¾ (1994)
Men's discus	Mac Wilkins, USA, 221-5	Virgilijus Alekna, Lithuania, 229-3	Jurgen Schult, East Germany, 243-0 (1986)
Men's hammer	Yuri Sedyka, USSR, 254-4	Koji Murofushi, Japan, 272-0	Yuri Sedyka, USSR, 284-6 (1986)
Women's 100 meters	Annegret Richter, West Germany, 11.08	Yuliya Nesterenko, Belarus, 10.93	Florence Griffith-Joyner, USA, 10.49 (1988)
Women's 200 meters	Barbel Eckert, East Germany, 22.37	Veronica Campbell, Jamaica, 22.05	Florence Griffith-Joyner, USA, 21.34 (1988)
Women's 400 meters	Irena Szewinska, Poland, 49.29	Tonique Williams-Darling, Bahamas, 49.41	Marita Koch, East Germany, 47.60 (1985)
Women's 100-meter hurdles	Johanna Schaller, East Germany, 12.77	Joanna Hayes, USA, 12.37	Yordanka Donkova, Bulgaria, 12.21 (1988)
Women's 400-meter hurdles	Not Olympic sport until 1984	Fani Halkia, Greece, 52.82	Yuliya Pechenkina, Russia, 52.34 (2003)
Women's high	Rosemarie Ackermann,	Yelena Slesarenko,	Stefka Kostadinova,

jump	East Germany, 6-4	Russia, 6-9	Bulgaria, 6-10 ¼ (1987)
Long jump	Angela Voigt, East Germany, 22-0 ¾	Tatyana Lebedeva, Russia, 23-2 ½	Galina Chistyakova, USSR, 24-8 ¼ (1988)
Women's shot put	Ivanka Hristova, Bulgaria, 69-5 ¼	Yumileidi Cumba, Cuba, 64-3 ¼	Natalya Lisovskaya, Russia, 74-3 (1987)
Women's pole vault	Not Olympic sport until 2000	Yelena Isinbayeva, Russia, 16-1 ¼	Yelena Isinbayeva, Russia, 16-6 ½ (2008)
Women's discus	Evelin Schlaak, East Germany, 226-4	Natalya Sadova, Russia, 219-10	Gabriele Reinsch, East Germany, 251-11 ½ (1988)
Women's hammer	Not Olympic sport until 2000	Olga Kuzenkova, Russia, 246-1	Tatyana Lysenko, Russia, 255-3 (2006)

Barnes and Oldfield might not be the best examples to make the case that steroids aren't a benefit to shot-putters. Shortly after his record throw, the IAAF banned Barnes from competition for two years for using methyltestosterone, an anabolic steroid. He was reinstated and won the 1996 Olympic gold on his last throw, but received a lifetime ban two years later. And for his part, Oldfield has admitted to using steroids during his amateur career. But neither case is as clear-cut as it seems.

Barnes contested his first suspension and, though a panel of U.S. track officials shot down his appeal, their decision made it clear that he had a good case: *"Under U.S. standards it is inconceivable that a sample to be used as evidence against an accused person would have gone through the process that Mr. Barnes' sample did and still constitute reliable evidence."* Further backing Barnes' case was the fact that the one test that came back with a positive reading was sandwiched in between negative tests, one two weeks before and the other five days after. That first suspension kept Barnes out of the U.S. Olympic trials in 1992 and robbed him of two years in his competitive prime. Still, he was tested dozens of times after his reinstatement and was indisputably clean when he won the Olympic gold in Atlanta in 1996.

Barnes didn't receive his lifetime suspension for anabolic steroid or hormone use, but for testing positive for androstenedione, the nutritional supplement that Mark McGwire made infamous and that was then readily available over the counter at health-food stores.

Though Oldfield never tested positive, after turning professional, he openly discussed his past steroid use. He maintained that he wasn't using them as a professional when he launched his 75-footer. "I'm throwing over 70 [feet] right now without steroids," he told the Track & Field News when it named him its U.S. Athlete of the Year in 1975. "The 'roids seem to give you that psychological crutch, and I experience cramps and stuff with them. I don't think they're that great. People who are using 'roids -- it's to come up to a high level, but once you're up there you don't need them anymore."

Reminded of his quote, Oldfield said recently that it's not a case of steroids not working at all, just that they only work up to a point. "Some university did research that found that there was no positive effect from using steroids," he said. "Well, I don't agree with that. It might make the difference between improving 1 percent over a training period or 2 percent. That can be the difference between medal and fourth place. But there is a point where [the steroids] can't help you and that's at the very top. That's why we haven't seen records set."

Even if Barnes and Oldfield benefited from steroids -- a big if, but one used to illustrate the point -- that wouldn't explain why there hasn't been a 75-foot shot put in the 18 years since Barnes' record toss. You don't

have to be a skeptic to believe that some shot-putters in Beijing will have used banned substances. And you don't have to be a skeptic to think that some of them over the years have used them in training and managed to fly under the radar. It's pretty safe to assume that the shot put is just as compromised as any other athletic event or sport.

Randy Matson, the Olympic gold medalist from 1968 and a former world-record holder, thinks that steroids might actually hurt performances.

"I was just 19 at the Olympics in '64 and we knew that [steroids] were out there, that the Eastern Europeans were doing them," Matson said. "They just looked different. I never did them and neither did the older throwers who were my mentors -- Parry O'Brien and Dallas Long. Dallas was the strongest of all the throwers I knew -- he could bench 500 [pounds], very strict. But people just think of the shot as a strength event. When I set my world record, I wasn't the strongest one out there. Not even close. But it's a technical event, even a speed event. It doesn't come down to who has the best bench [press]."



Would Randy Barnes' record have fallen long ago if steroids made a difference?

"We used to use caffeine pills sometimes, but they didn't help me at all. It messed up my timing and my technique, just getting things out of balance. If caffeine can do that to you, steroids probably could too. Maybe you get stronger in one way but slower somewhere else. The emphasis at every level seems to be strength, but it's how you apply that strength and athletic ability. I look at shot-putters today and a lot of them don't look like great athletes -- stronger than I ever was, but they had bellies on them, paunches. I don't see how that translates into good footwork, good technique and speed. Randy Barnes and Brian Oldfield were just tremendous athletes. At indoor events, Brian used to beat NFL running backs in the 50 yards and he could high jump 6-6 at 280 pounds."

Capes had a unique perspective on the shot. He not only trained in the U.S. with Oldfield, among others, but also spent months in East Germany working with the top throwers and coaches before the Berlin Wall came crashing down. He also won the World's Strongest Man contest twice and won Highland Games championships. "The strength athlete has to have the ability to physically adapt," he said. "Whether it's the shot put, Olympic lifting or the World's Strongest Man, it's a test of applied strength. Strength without speed or flexibility or technique or the need to compete isn't enough in any of the disciplines. The shot put records are out there because those throwers were just amazing athletes. Brian revolutionized the event by bringing in the discus-style spin to the shot put and broke the record by feet. I always think his ability was untapped." For his part, Randy Barnes said that, more than ever, strength athletes who would be star shot-putters feel the pull of other sports. "I guess new-generation talent went elsewhere for a long time," he wrote via e-mail. Barnes, like Matson and Oldfield, still thinks it's a matter of technique more than anything else. And maybe a little intimidation. "Brian Oldfield threw 75 feet in 1975 when no one else could throw 72 feet and no one would break that mark for 12 long years," Barnes wrote. "[I started mimicking Oldfield's technique](#) in 1986. Unfortunately, many erroneously believed that Oldfield was such a freakish talent that whatever he did couldn't possibly apply to their mortal selves. They were never more wrong. I trusted it and followed it without asking questions, and the better I got, the more I was able to understand what he was doing that made [the spin technique] work so well."

Records are set in other events almost on a yearly basis. One that parallels the shot put, though, is another that you'd presume would have its records constantly jacked up with steroid-assisted training: Super-heavyweight weightlifting. (The world records in other divisions are tougher to track because the

International Weightlifting Federation has changed its weight classes in the '90s.) Probably the first athlete who comes to mind in this event is Vasily Alexeyev, gold medalist at the 1972 and 1976 Olympics. "The most amazing feat of strength I ever saw was Alexeyev military pressing 500 pounds," said Bob Brown, a Hall of Fame tackle with Philadelphia Eagles and Oakland Raiders who was widely regarded as the strongest man in the NFL in the '70s. He last bench-bench pressed 500 pounds at age 50. Eight times, strict. "What Alexeyev managed to achieve was strength, not chemistry."

From 1970 to 1978, Alexeyev broke the world record in the clean and jerk 29 times and raised it from 221 kilos to 256. "He lifted what was necessary to win and then to break the record each time by a minimal amount, just so he could collect a bonus each time," Capes said. "It might be that we never saw him test himself with the most he could have lifted."

Over the past 30 years, lifters have barely chipped away and improved on Alexeyev's best recorded lift by about 10 kilos. Again, though Alexeyev never had a positive test, for the sake of argument presume that he could have benefited from steroids. And also presume that others have benefited from it, too, in the years later -- not hard to imagine given events like the Bulgarian lifters pulling out of Beijing or a similar exodus by other nations in Athens. Maybe science has made advances over the years by leaps and bounds, but not the superheavyweight record.

There's no knowing how much steroids and other banned substances have factored into any entry in the record books of every sport. But there are some very large gentlemen who would tell you, in their events anyway, steroids aren't the silver bullet.

Gare Joyce is a regular contributor to ESPN The Magazine and ESPN.com.

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