

The Moral Value of Transparency in the Use of Performance Enhancing Drugs. The Case of Bodybuilding^a

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Abstract

L'articolo ha l'obiettivo di sostenere il valore morale positivo della trasparenza riguardo all'assunzione di Performance Enhancing Drugs (PED) nel bodybuilding. Per prima cosa darò una definizione di trasparenza adeguata all'ambito sportivo. In secondo luogo descriverò l'uso di PED nel bodybuilding, in particolare di steroidi anabolizzanti, mostrando come negli ultimi anni si possa registrare un fenomeno di rivelazione dell'uso di PED. Proporrò poi il mio argomento in difesa della trasparenza sull'assunzione di PED basato su considerazioni consequenzialiste. La tesi è che i bodybuilder che rivelano di fare uso di PED stiano compiendo un'azione moralmente positiva, in quanto consentono a chi si ispira a loro come modelli di ricalibrare le proprie aspettative e di fare scelte più informate. Infine risponderò all'obiezione che questa pratica possa incentivare l'uso di PED.

Parole chiave: bodybuilding, doping, steroidi, social network, riduzione del danno.

Abstract

The paper aims to support the positive moral value of transparency regarding the intake of Performance Enhancing Drugs (PEDs) in bodybuilding. First, I will adequately define transparency for the sports sector. Secondly, I will describe the use of PEDs in bodybuilding, in particular of anabolic steroids, showing how, in recent years, there has been a phenomenon of disclosure of the use of PEDs. I will then propose my argument in defense of transparency on PEDs intake based on consequentialist considerations. The thesis is that bodybuilders who reveal that they use PEDs are doing a morally positive action, as they allow those who look up to them as role models to recalibrate their expectations and make more informed choices. Finally, I will respond to the objection that this practice could encourage the

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use of PEDs.

Keywords: bodybuilding, doping, steroids, social network, harm reduction.

1. Introduction

In this article, I will analyze some ethical aspects of the use of Performance Enhancing Drugs (PEDs), that is, those drugs that are commonly called doping and which are therefore found in the list of prohibited substances drawn up by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA). In particular, I will focus on the moral aspects of transparency in using PEDs and the positive effects such transparency can have. The argument that I propose here is that being transparent about the use of PEDs has a positive moral and pedagogical value. I will not talk about sports in general, but I will focus in particular on bodybuilding. I will do this for two reasons. The first is that in this sport, the use of PEDs is pervasive and evident. Secondly, in recent years, there has been a powerful movement of disclosure of information regarding the use of PEDs.

First, I will define “transparency” in relation to sports. I will distinguish between two forms of transparency, namely, the disclosure of relevant information. The first sense is complete transparency, in which all information about the training program is provided, and the second is partial transparency, in which only general information is provided. I will explain that transparency, in the first sense, cannot be contemplated within sports.

Secondly, I will try to provide a sufficiently detailed picture of the use of PEDs in bodybuilding. I will show how at least three culturally distinct moments can be identified regarding transparency in the use of PEDs. When PEDs entered the sport, it was common to talk about them and promote them. Later, bodybuilders denied PEDs use to protect the sport’s reputation. Today, however, we are witnessing a moment in which people go back to admitting to using PEDs and also promote them through social networks.

Thirdly, I will present my argument in favor of transparency in the use of PEDs. In essence, I ground my argument on the consideration that professional bodybuilders or fitness influencers are role models for aspiring bodybuilders or amateurs. Ignoring that a particular physique has been achieved through the use of PEDs can generate frustration and discomfort. On the other hand, transparency can help to recalibrate one’s expectations or make autonomous choices.

Finally, I will respond to some objections regarding the use of PEDs being encouraged in this way. This can be the first step towards transitioning to a different model, from the current total ban to harm reduction.

2. Transparency in Sports

Transparency is not a recognized value in sports. At least at an official level. WADA, in its Code, makes a list of sports values that does not include it:

The spirit of sport is the celebration of the human spirit, body and mind. It is the essence of Olympism and is reflected in the values we find in and through sport, including:

- Health
- Ethics, fair play and honesty
- Athletes' rights as set forth in the Code
- Excellence in performance
- Character and Education
- Fun and joy
- Teamwork
- Dedication and commitment
- Respect for rules and laws
- Respect for self and other Participants
- Courage
- Community and solidarity

The spirit of sport is expressed in how we play true.¹

It has also been argued that transparency cannot be a value within sports because athletes and their clubs have every interest in keeping secret all their training methods, the technologies they use, and the results of their research.² This applies to both legal and illegal methods and activities. Suppose a specific training program or a permitted technology can produce an advantage for the athletes and lead them to win. In that case, athletes, coaches, and sports societies would want these technologies and methods to remain secret or protected by a patent. On the other hand, if the methods and substances are illegal (or could soon become so because they comply with the criteria established by WADA to be included in the list of prohibited substances), there will be a greater interest in keeping everything confidential: not only so that the athletes retain this advantage, but also so that they are not disqualified or punished. Therefore, the first thing to do is to understand the meaning of the value of “transparency” and whether it is compatible with sports practice. Some researchers belonging to the International Network for Doping Research (INDR) instead claim that transparency is a positive moral value.³ They show a critical attitude towards the

¹ WADA, *World Anti-Doping Code*, 2021, https://www.wada-ama.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/2021_wada_code.pdf, p. 13.

² G. S. Bullock et al. *The Trade Secret Taboo: Open Science Methods are Required to Improve Prediction Models in Sports Medicine and Performance*, in «Sports Medicine», LIII, 2023, pp. 1841–1849. S. Holm, *Doping under medical control – conceptually possible but impossible in the world of professional sports?*, in «Sport, Ethics and Philosophy». I, n. 2., 2007, pp. 135–145.

³ J. Mazanov, J. Connor. *Rethinking the management of drugs in sport*, in «International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics», II, n. 1, 2010, pp. 49-63; A. Petróczi, et al. *'Clean athlete status' cannot be certified: Calling for caution, evidence and transparency in 'alternative' anti-doping systems*, in «International Journal of Drug Policy», XCIII, 2021, 103030.

current anti-doping policies of WADA, although they “welcome programmes that encourage athletes to openly declare their commitment to clean sport”⁴. However, the central point regarding transparency in these authors does not concern athletes but rather anti-doping programs: they “call for transparent and rigorous scientific scrutiny via peer-review for alternative anti-doping systems”⁵. In this perspective, transparency in the construction of anti-doping programs is obtained through ethically approved studies and protocols, results published in scientific peer-review journals, and identified authorships that take responsibility for the statements they make.

As regards the ethics of sport, the term “visibility” has been used, which refers to various phenomena: on the one hand, the term “visibility” indicates how much a category manages to get noticed; in this case, we are talking about the visibility of disabled athletes, female athletes or other categories.⁶ On the other hand, visibility has meant “the level of information that individuals have access to in regard to the kind of drugs or pharmaceuticals they are being administered, or the regimes or surgeries they undergo; and the level of transparency, and thereby accountability, that characterizes the professional sport context”⁷. Therefore, I use the term “transparency” precisely in this last sense: as the disclosure of information and results, which also leads to accountability, not only in legal terms but in moral terms to the consequences of one’s training paths and the sports results obtained.

Transparency in sports can be of two types: complete and partial. Complete transparency means the complete disclosure of all training plans and technologies used. As said before, it is impossible, under penalty of losing the competitive advantage, to disclose all the information. Doing so would be problematic not only from a sporting point of view but also for the athletes’ privacy, who would be forced to disclose a good part of their private life⁸. However, greater transparency and publicity in research results and training protocols could advance sports medicine.

The second sense of transparency is partial transparency. In this case, for example, one declares to be training in a certain way without specifying the methods in which the training takes place, or to be taking drugs but without indicating which ones, or to use certain technologies without specifying the technical details. For

⁴ A. Petróczy, et al. ‘Clean athlete status’ cannot be certified: Calling for caution, evidence and transparency in ‘alternative’ anti-doping systems, cit., p. 7.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ See K. P. DePauw, *The (In)Visibility of DisAbility: Cultural Contexts and “Sporting Bodies”*, in «Quest», XLIX, 1997, pp. 416-430; P. Serra et al. *The (in)visibility of gender knowledge in the Physical Activity and Sport Science degree in Spain*, in «Sport, Education and Society», XXIII, n. 4, 2016, pp. 324-338; H. Gammelsæter, *Media visibility and place reputation: does sport make a difference?*, in «Journal of Place Management and Development», X, n. 3, 2017, pp. 288-298.

⁷ S. Camporesi, M. J. McNamee, *Performance enhancement, elite athletes and anti doping governance: comparing human guinea pigs in pharmaceutical research and professional sports*, in «Philosophy, Ethics and Humanities in Medicine», IX, n. 4, 2014, p. 1-9: 2.

⁸ L. Cox, A. Bloodworth, M. J. McNamee, *Olympic Doping, Transparency, and the Therapeutic Exemption Process*, in «Diagoras. International Academic Journal on Olympic Studies», I, n. 1, 2017, pp. 55-74.

example, let us take the case of a bodybuilder who publishes his workout on a social network. Suppose the bodybuilder discloses all the types of exercise, number of sets and repetitions, weight load, the type and grams of supplements taken, the calories and macronutrients consumed, and the dosage of any other PEDs. In that case, he will be exercising a form of complete transparency. If, on the other hand, he limits himself to the type of exercises, supplements taken, and the declaration of being a “natural” or “enhanced” athlete, then he will be implementing partial transparency. Partial transparency also responds to the objections raised against complete transparency. First, it does not create a competitive disadvantage: hidden details are essential to obtain similar results. Secondly, the violation of privacy is severely limited. For example, in the case of taking a drug for therapeutic purposes, one does not necessarily have to say what type of drug one is taking and the reason why one is taking it. Still, it will be enough to say that one is being treated for a pathology. This also violates the athlete’s privacy, but much less. At the same time, this type of transparency is not very helpful for the progress of scientific research.

Therefore, I will adopt this second sense of transparency: making visible the strategies adopted to improve one’s performance without disclosing the technical details of their implementation. The paper aims to show how adopting this policy on transparency is a positive moral practice. I will not show it in general but about a specific aspect: the use of PEDs in bodybuilding.

3. *The Use of PEDs in Bodybuilding*

The use of PEDs is widespread. This statement, which seems familiar among those involved in sports or practicing it at a competitive level, is challenging to support with statistical data. Studies that try to give numbers are few. A study published in 2017, but whose data collection dates back to 2011, showed that almost half of the athletes competing at the World Athletics Championship in Daegu (South Korea) had used illegal substances, and over half of the athletes competing at the 12th Quadrennial Pan-Arab Games (PAG) in Doha (Qatar) had used them.⁹ This difficulty in quantitatively measuring the phenomenon is due not only to the reluctance of athletes, coaches, and sports clubs but also to the WADA rules themselves, which, for example, have made it extremely difficult to publish the results of these studies.¹⁰

Bodybuilding, in many ways, is a sport where doping is much more frequent and accepted. Even just from the point of view of common sense, the muscles brought by certain athletes on prestigious stages, such as that of Mr. Olympia, cannot

9 R. Ulrich et al. *Doping in Two Elite Athletics Competitions Assessed by Randomized-Response Surveys* in «Sports Medicine», XLVIII, 2018, pp. 211-219.

10 R. Ulrich, *Letter to Right Honorable Jesse Norman, Member of Parliament*, 2016. <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Correspondence/Letter-from-University-of-Tubingen-regarding-blood-doping-11-January-2016.pdf> (last accessed 31 may 2024. See also: R. Pielke, *Assessing Doping Prevalence is Possible. So What Are We Waiting For?* in «Sports Medicine», XLVIII, 2018, pp. 207-209.

be imagined without the use of PEDs. However, many anthropological and sociological testimonies have documented the use of PEDs in bodybuilding.¹¹

When we talk about PEDs in bodybuilding, we immediately think of the use of steroids, such as testosterone, nandrolone, and trenbolone. However, these are just some of the substances used. For example, drugs such as insulin are also used to improve carbohydrate management, or diuretics to increase muscle definition in the run-up to competitions. Not all PEDs have a good reputation. Even within the bodybuilding community, some substances are seen as worse than others. For example, the use of synthol is perceived very differently from that of steroids. Synthol is a drug that mainly contains oils, which is injected subcutaneously to increase muscle size. A minimal use can rebalance some imperfections, but a massive use makes the muscles “bloating” or “watery”, only increasing their size in a disharmonious and unnatural way, therefore not favoring the athlete’s performance in any bodybuilding competition. It is interesting to note that within the bodybuilding community itself, there is a negative perception of this PED. It is perceived both as something that makes it *fake* (the muscles have not grown because of training, but because they have been “inflated” with oil) and something that makes it aesthetically unnatural (the muscle is not “hard”, “swollen” or “built”).¹² Even among PED users, not all substances are created equal, and not all have the same reputation. In this article, I will focus specifically on steroid use, as its use is the most widespread and evident in bodybuilding and the group of substances that is undergoing the fastest shift in cultural perception.

A line of change in attitude has been drawn regarding the use of PEDs in bodybuilding. As in many other historical phenomena, different phases can be identified, characterized by different cultural attitudes. Bodybuilding is no exception, even if it has a relatively recent history. Regarding the use of PEDs, we can identify three distinct phases.¹³ Bodybuilding was born in the late 19th century and from the

11 For example, A. V. Christiansen, *Gym Culture, Identity and Performance-Enhancing Drugs Tracing a Typology of Steroid Use*, Routledge, London, 2020; J. Andreasson, T. Johansson, *Bodybuilding and fitness doping in transition. Historical transformations and contemporary challenges*, in «Social Sciences», VIII, n. 80, 2019, p. 1-14; D. Liokaftos, *A Genealogy of male bodybuilding*, Routledge, London, 2018; L. F. Monaghan, *Accounting for Illicit Steroid Use: Bodybuilders’ Justifications*, in A Locks, N. Richardson (eds.) *Critical readings in bodybuilding*, Routledge, London, 2012, pp. 77-90; F. Monaghan, *Bodybuilding, drugs and risk*, Routledge, London, 2001.

12 M. Rutcofsky, *7 Alleged “Synthol freaks” who went too far. These “bodybuilders” decided to take the worst shortcut imaginable, in «Muscles and Fitness»*, <https://www.muscleandfitness.com/features/newsstand/5-synthol-freaks-who-went-way-too-far/> (last access 31 May 2024); N. Albers, *Synthol: freak effects and abuse*, in «FitSociety» <https://www.fitsociety.io/bodybuilding/synthol-freak-effects-and-abuse/> (last access 31 May 2024); M. Šarčev, *How Synthol Almost Killed Milos Sarcev* in «Generation Iron Fitness & Bodybuilding Network», 3 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZUn1r5c3YI> (last access 31 May 2024).

13 See: J. Andreasson, T. Johansson, *Doping - Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, In J. Andreasson, T. Johansson (eds.) *Fitness Doping*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2020, p. 21-46; J. Andreasson, T.

beginning, the first muscular men who performed sold programs and “miracle recipes” for men who wanted to be like them. However, it was only in the 1950s that we could detect the appearance of the use of PEDs in the sense we give them today. It is said that at the World Weightlifting Championship in Vienna in 1954, Dr. John B. Ziegler learned of the Soviet experiments with anabolic substances, and upon returning to the USA, he developed Dianabol, marketed in 1958 by Ciba.¹⁴ From this moment on, the use of PEDs began to spread in bodybuilding to the point of becoming common. In the same years, an “anti-doping” culture began to spread in other sports. However, in bodybuilding, such an attitude seemed absent, perhaps also in relation to its being both a subculture and the little scientific data on the side effects of these substances. While in the 70s, the use of steroids and other substances was natural and was talked about calmly, so much so that there were even guides for their use, things began to change in the 80s, marking a new phase. The use of PEDs seemed to spread in sports, and anti-doping policies became increasingly stringent. This also affected bodybuilding, where increasingly advanced muscles became an accusation of being “fake”. In this phase, PEDs continued to circulate; however, they became a taboo, something whose use was reserved for the initiated only and which could only be spoken about in secret. It is interesting to report an ethnographic anecdote by Allan Klein that offers the measure of this. Klein spent many years conducting ethnographic research inside significant gyms in the US, interviewing various bodybuilders, and producing some of the first academic works on bodybuilding. He once said:

A few days later I came in as usual. A small cluster of bodybuilders were huddled over the latest issue of one of the premier publications in the sport, a ritual repeated in the gym each month on the day it arrives. The bodybuilder in question was flanked by his friends, poring over the magazine and commenting on each picture. When they reached the advice column he writes, he read aloud a question sent him by a teenager in Pontiac, Michigan. The question concerned what sort of steroids were best to take. As he read the question, he imitated the high-pitched voice of his fan. Laughter all around. Then he went on to read his advice to the young man, which went something like this: “Don’t destroy yourself. If you want a physique like mine, don’t take shortcuts.” Convulsing laughter. “I didn’t win my titles by taking drugs. Chemicals are not substitutes of hard work”. He would have continued, except that he was wiping tears from his eyes. His friends were on the floor.¹⁵

The anecdote manages to show the canonical attitude towards doping: it is used, and everyone knows it, but it should not be talked about. This attitude has managed, on the one hand, to protect bodybuilding from accusations of being an intrinsically perverse activity compromised by doping. On the other, it has caused a

Johansson, *Bodybuilding and Fitness Doping in Transition. Historical Transformations and Contemporary Challenges*, cit.; D. Liokaftos, *A genealogy of male bodybuilding*, cit.

¹⁴ M. Kremenik et al. *A historical timeline of Doping in the Olympics (Part 1 1896-1968)*, in «Kawasaki journal of medical welfare», XII, n. 1, 2006, p. 19-28.

¹⁵ A. Klein, *Little big men. Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1993, p. 28-29.

closure, accentuating its subculture character. Today we are going through a new phase in which the use of PEDs is not only declared but also claimed. This phase can be dated between the end of the 2010s and the beginning of the 2020s of the 21st century. This change does not only concern the use of PEDs but bodybuilding more generally. It is not my intention to explain here the reasons that caused the change; I will only limit myself to presenting some interesting features that are discontinuous with the previous period. First of all, in the post-pandemic years, there has been an increase in the number of minors enrolling in gyms worldwide. People are starting to go to the gym earlier and earlier, even in parts of the world where this was not common.¹⁶ Furthermore, until a few years ago, there was a certain mistrust towards the diffusion of bodybuilding content through social networks.¹⁷ They have become particularly common at the moment, also thanks to the younger members of the community.¹⁸ This growth in online content has been accompanied by increased ease in talking about PEDs, being transparent about their use, and how to take them.¹⁹

Even at the level of traditional media, this cultural shift can be noted in which there is more openness in stating that one uses PEDs. Take two television programs, for example. *Il Testimone* was an Italian television program that aired from 2007 to 2021, first on MTV channels, then TV8, and finally, Sky, hosted by the presenter, actor, and director Pif. In the second season, which aired in 2008, the host interviewed and documented the days of the bodybuilder Daniele Seccarecci, who was probably the most important Italian bodybuilder in the early 2010s. In the interview, Seccarecci categorically denied using doping substances, although a few years later, he was

¹⁶ M. Naglazas, *Gen gym: Why the young are leading the fitness revolution*, in «Western Australia Today», 29 May 2023, <https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/gen-gym-why-the-young-are-leading-the-fitness-revolution-20230524-p5db18.html> (last access 31 May 2024); M. Dogra, *Growing Gym culture among youngsters*, in «Daily Excelsior», 17 September 2023, <https://www.dailyexcelsior.com/growing-gym-culture-among-youngsters/> (last access 31 May 2024); Anonymous, *Gym craze among young adults is rising: Here are few dos and don'ts*, in «Times of India», 28 May 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/health-fitness/fitness/gym-craze-among-young-adults-is-rising-here-are-few-dos-and-donts/photostory/100548176.cms> (last access 31 May 2024); M. Ierace, *Se la palestra si fa precoce [If the Gym comes early]* in «Radiotelevisione Svizzera Italiana» 3 February 2023, <https://www.rsi.ch/info/ticino-grigioni-e-insubria/Se-la-palestra-si-fa-precoce--1809980.html> (last access 31 May 2024).

¹⁷ M. L. Wellman, *What it means to be a bodybuilder: social media influencer labor and the construction of identity in the bodybuilding subculture*, in «The Communication Review», XXIII, n. 4, 2020, p. 273-289.

¹⁸ V. A. Goodyear, *Young People, Social Media and Health. A Pedagogical Perspective on Influencers* in S. Lawrence (ed.) *Digital Wellness, Health and Fitness Influencers*, Routledge, London, 2022, p. 161-174.

¹⁹ M. Underwood, *Taking 'the God of all Steroids' and 'Making a Pact With the Devil': Online Bodybuilding Communities and the Negotiation of Trenbolone Risk* in A. Henning, J. Andreasson, J. (Ed.) *Doping in Sport and Fitness*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, p. 111-136; L. Hilken et al. *Social Media, Body Image and Resistance Training: Creating the Perfect 'Me' with Dietary Supplements, Anabolic Steroids and SARM's*, in «Sports Medicine», VII, n. 81, 2021; L. T. J. Cox, L. Paoli, *Social media influencers, YouTube & performance and image enhancing drugs: A narrative-typology*, in «Performance Enhancement & Health», XI, n. 4, 100266.

investigated for trafficking in doping substances.²⁰ On the contrary, recently, the two most important Italian bodybuilders in the open category with participation in Mr. Olympia, Andrea Muzi and Andrea Presti, have clearly and unequivocally admitted to using PEDs during one of the most watched Italian programs: *Le Iene*.²¹

The cultural change that is taking place is not only seen in the increase in content that talks about PEDs on social networks but also in the terminology. Alongside the term “doping”, we increasingly find the terms “enhanced” or colloquially “juiced” as opposed to “natural” or “natty”. This terminology finds a counterpart in a broader movement of re-evaluation of PEDs, which finds its peak in the planning of the *Enhanced Games*, a sporting event, in open contrast to the Olympics and the anti-doping rules imposed by WADA, which has the objective of having athletes who are openly enhanced compete and to break down the prejudice against PEDs.²² As in the past, there are athletes who, while using PEDs, try to hide it, both in public statements and especially in anti-doping controls. For this reason, the word “natural” in bodybuilding comes to indicate someone who may have used PEDs but who, at the time of the competition or control, is not using them. On the contrary, the term “drug-free” in recent years has been used to indicate those who have never used illegal PEDs.²³ However, the contrast between PEDs users and non-users remains quite evident in terms of media content.

4. *The Positive Effects of Transparency on PED Use*

My thesis is that transparency in the narrow sense of PEDs use in bodybuilding is something to be encouraged and has a positive value. My argument is consequentialist: that is, being honest about PEDs use has more positive than negative effects. I am not arguing that transparency is a virtue of sport or should be part of the values listed in the WADA Code, but that it is a practice that should be encouraged.

The first premise of this argument is that more and more young people, and more people in general, are entering the world of bodybuilding.²⁴ There are, therefore, more and more people who want to get a muscular physique.

²⁰ The episode of *Il testimone* is no longer available in its entirety, however excerpts containing the point in question are available online on YouTube at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1blZfk9SviM> (last access 31 May 2024).

²¹ The first episode on PEDs in bodybuilding is available at this link: https://www.iene.mediaset.it/video/bodybuilding-naturali-dopati_1303415.shtml (last access 31 May 2024).

²² <https://enhanced.org/> (last access 31 May 2024).

²³ D. Liokaftos, *Defining and defending drug-free bodybuilding: A current perspective from organizations and their key figures*, in «International Journal of Drug Policy», LX, p. 47-55.

²⁴ N. Bennett, *A New Era of Bodybuilding at CC*, in «The Catalyst», 1 February 2024, <https://thecatalystnews.com/2024/02/01/a-new-era-of-bodybuilding-at-cc/> (last access 31 May 2024); D. Collier, J. Anderson, *Bodybuilding, Weightlifting Gains Popularity Among Students and Staff*, in «The Rider Online» 8 November 2023, <https://therideronline.com/top->

The second premise is the increase in the use of social networks also to transmit fitness content. Professional bodybuilders have become influencers, and people take them as models. Therefore, those who try to develop their physique have as a model that they are inspired by and try in some way (even imperfect or mediated) to reach that of the professional bodybuilder. This is not a new phenomenon because information passed through physical culture magazines before the advent of social networks. However, the pervasiveness of social networks has changed the phenomenon's scope. As often happens, a change in quantity causes a change in quality.

Given these two premises, it is reasonable to conclude that a *frustration* effect could occur. I could try to look like someone, wish to have a physique like them, but without succeeding. In fact, if my model denies being “enhanced” when, in reality, he is, my desire to equal him, to reach him or at least resemble him, or to achieve certain types of muscularity would be doomed to failure. I can follow the training protocols used for a diet similar to his, but I still need an essential piece of information: he uses PEDs, and I do not. Lying about using PEDs is essentially a “scam”: it means encouraging the belief that certain levels of muscularity can be achieved in a “natural” or “drug-free” way when in reality, this is not the case.

For this reason, it is positive that bodybuilders, especially professionals who compete at high levels, are transparent about the fact that they use PEDs because they make it clear to the people who look up to them that a physique of that type cannot be achieved without the use of currently illegal substances. The argument has a pedagogical value in that it is a matter of not deluding people about the relationship between means and results. I have argued that the justification for the positive value of transparency is consequentialist. I do not want to argue that transparency is good; there may be other values with which it should be balanced or cases in which it does not produce positive effects. In this specific case, it produces a positive effect because, on the one hand, it allows aspiring bodybuilders, beginners, and especially young people who are new to this sport to reshape their expectations or to know that to reach specific goals, you must use PEDs; on the other hand, it avoids the frustration of not achieving results. This aspect is not secondary.

Many studies show how the image transmitted by fitness influencers on social networks such as Instagram or TikTok affects the psychology of followers. In some cases, continuous exposure to images of extremely muscular physiques, such as those of bodybuilders, can produce an extreme degree of dissatisfaction and an almost pathological search to transform one's body. To describe the condition of those who perceive significant discomfort for their body and subject themselves to exhausting training, a rigid diet, and severely limiting social interactions, the DSM V has coined

story/2023/11/bodybuilding-weightlifting-gains-popularity-among-students-and-staff/(last access 31 May 2023).

the label “muscle dysmorphia”.²⁵ It is also related to exposure to online content that fuels the desire for a radically transformed body.²⁶

There are no studies that show that knowing that your model uses PEDs reduces the psychological suffering experienced in trying to match his results. However, it is reasonable to imagine that having the belief that a muscular Mr. Olympia physique cannot be achieved without the use of PEDs can lead to lowering the bar of goals. Suppose I know that to achieve a particular goal, I have to do a whole set of things, such as training a certain number of times a week, eating a certain way, having a particular lifestyle, and taking certain supplements, but I ignore the fact that I also have to take PEDs. In that case, I may be overcome by despair when I cannot achieve the desired results. This is because essential information is hidden. However, if I know, I can act accordingly and decide if I have reasonable goals consistent with the available means. Furthermore, being transparent about the use of PEDs avoids the disappointment effect when you discover that your idol has used them. In other sports, the discovery of an athlete’s use of PEDs triggers a whole series of legal and sporting consequences, such as public censure and the loss of titles and recognition; think of the case of Lance Armstrong in cycling.²⁷ What were thought to be the results of talent, dedication, and hard work become, in common sense, the results of someone who cheated and played dirty: a fake. Knowing from the beginning that the athlete uses PEDs avoids exposing the image of the athlete to all this.

It will be argued now that this argument is exposed to at least one very obvious objection, that being transparent about the use of PEDs encourages the use of such substances, and this goes against the idea that doping is wrong on the one hand and against the fact that it is legally prohibited on the other. Although I know there may be other objections, I focus only on this.

²⁵ American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5*, American Psychiatric Association, Washington DC, 2013; H. G. Pope et al. *Muscle dysmorphia. An underrecognized form of body dysmorphic disorder*, in «Psychosomatics» CCCLXXXVI, 1997, p. 548-57; I. H. Steele, H. G. Pope Jr, G. Kanayama, *Competitive bodybuilding: fitness, pathology, or both?* in «Harvard review of psychiatry», XXVII, n. 4, 2019, p. 233-240.

²⁶ E. Chatzopoulou, R. Filieri, S. A. Dogruyol, S. A. *Instagram and body image: Motivation to conform to the “Instabod” and consequences on young male*, in «Journal of Consumer Affairs», LIV, n. 4, 2020, p. 1270-1297; K. Schoenenberg, A. Martin, *Bedeutung von Instagram und Fitspiration-Bildern für die muskeldysmorphe Symptomatik*, in «Psychotherapeut», LXV, 2020, p. 93-100; L. Paulson, *#gotmuscles? Instagram and Body Image in College Men*, in «The Journal of Social Media in Society», IX, n. 1, 2020, p. 63-84; J. Cuadrado et al. *“Muscle Pics”, a new body-checking behavior in muscle dysmorphia?* in «L’encéphale», XLIX, n. 3, p. 241-247.

²⁷ P. Dimeo, *Why Lance Armstrong? Historical Context and Key Turning Points in the ‘Cleaning Up’ of Professional Cycling*, in «The International Journal of the History of Sport», XXXI, n.8, 2014, p. 951-968; M. Spalletta, L. Ugolini, *Sports journalism between doping allegations and doping evidence. The coverage of Lance Armstrong in Italian newspapers*, in «Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies», VI, n.2, 2014, p. 221-238.

5. Legalizing Doping?

The question of decriminalization or the moral legitimacy of PEDs use cannot be resolved here. However, I will provide some answers to the objection that transparency in PEDs use incentivizes their use. I do not want to deny this phenomenon. This is an intuitive idea with some foundation. Since people have started talking more freely about PEDs on social networks, there has also been an increase in content that guides their use.²⁸ My argument is that this is not a bad thing.

Encouraging PEDs use, according to this objection, is bad for two reasons: first, because the use of PEDs that are on the WADA Prohibited List is currently illegal; second, because the use of PEDs is morally wrong. One can argue this objection for both reasons or just one. I will attempt to answer each separately to offer a well-rounded defense of my argument.

The first part of the objection, that transparency about PEDs incentivizes their use and therefore incentivizes the use of illegal substances, is missing the mark. My argument here is moral, not legal. Indeed, a certain number of drugs are currently illegal, but they may not be. Transparency about PEDs could be seen as a transformative movement to change these policies, an act of civil disobedience or conscientious objection. When abortion was illegal, some practiced it in secret. In many cases, these clandestine abortions became an occasion for protest: women who had had abortions and doctors who had performed abortions would report themselves in protest as an act of rebellion to trigger change. If we make the comparison with the case of bodybuilding and PEDs, it would be like saying that the transparency of women who declared they had had abortions was an incentive to perform abortions. That is precisely how it was, and that was the point. It was a practice that arose on the one hand from a desire for transformation and on the other from moral disagreement on the legal prohibition of abortion. The same can be said for transparency in the use of PEDs, in which, on the one hand, one would like to be able to change the way they are seen and, on the other, to abolish the legal prohibition on using them. The supporter of this objection could continue to say that my answer only works if one accepts the goodness or moral legitimacy of the use of PEDs. This brings us to the second part of the objection, that PEDs should continue to be prohibited and that their use is morally wrong. It is beyond the scope of this paper to

²⁸ K. van de Ven, Katinka, K. J. D. Mulrooney, *In a bid for the perfect profile pic, young men are increasingly turning to steroids*, in «The Conversation», XXIII, 2016, <https://theconversation.com/in-a-bid-for-the-perfect-profile-pic-young-men-are-increasingly-turning-to-steroids-60874> (last access 31 May 2024); L. Cox, N. Gibbs, L. A. Turnock, *Emerging anabolic androgenic steroid markets; the prominence of social media*, in «Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy», XXXI, n. 2, p. 257-270; L. Paoli, L. Cox, *Across the spectrum of legality: The market activities of influencers specialized in steroids and other performance and image enhancing drugs*, in «International Journal of Drug Policy», CXXIII, 2024, 104246. For example see the guide inspired by harm reduction principles edited by The Love Tank and Queer Health: B. Weil, *Demystifying Steroids. Your guide to safer anabolic steroid use for building muscle with fewer risks*, 2024, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60be2f8a0cc8001044609e26/t/655ccb6d12b05c46c9c2f69a/1700580206131/Demystifying+Steroids.pdf> (last access 31 May 2024).

argue for the moral goodness of doping and the use of PEDs. Here, I will limit myself to making some suggestions regarding the use of doping.²⁹

First, there is no consensus on the immorality of doping, either in philosophical or sports contexts. The majority and the foremost philosophers of sport argue for its illegitimacy.³⁰ However, there is room for dissent: there are those who argue that there are reasons to support its legitimacy³¹, and others nevertheless admit that the reasons supporting the prohibition are weak³². Even in the world of sports, the Enhanced Games campaign is correct at the level of proposing a different moral paradigm regarding sports and the use of PEDs.

Secondly, it is impossible to eradicate cheating from sports; it is inherent to it.³³ So, it is very likely that as long as PEDs exist, they will continue to be used. The current system, which criminalizes them, only allows their use to take place in the shadows. Making PEDs use visible could lead to a paradigm shift from total bans to harm reduction. Eric Moore and Jo Morrison have recently defended medically supervised doping.³⁴ In their argument, the starting point is that anti-doping programs do not work. This assumption is difficult to dispute, given that although WADA continues to be particularly severe in anti-doping policies, doping continues not to be eradicated from sport. If doping is unavoidable in sports, the authors argue, then let us make it legal under strict medical supervision. In this way, we also avoid some of the problems that PEDs generally cause, namely health problems, which are often accentuated precisely by the fact that they must be taken secretly. The two authors argue that in this way, a relationship of trust would be created between the athlete and

²⁹ A crucial point that I decide to leave aside is whether the use of PEDs is contrary to the spirit of sport. The expression “spirit of sport” although used in the WADA code is deeply ambiguous and has raised reflections on the part of the major philosophers of sport. On this subject see: S. Loland, M. McNamee, *Fair play and the ethos of sports: an eclectic philosophical framework*, in «Journal of the Philosophy of Sport», XXVII, n. 1., 2000, p. 63-80. S. Loland, M. J. McNamee, *Anti-doping, performance enhancement and ‘the spirit of sport’: A philosophical and ethical critique*, in N. Ahmadi, A. Ljungqvist, G. Svedsäter (eds.) *Doping and public health*, Routledge, London, 2016, p. 111-123; S. Loland, *Performance-enhancing drugs, sport, and the ideal of natural athletic performance*, in «The American Journal of Bioethics», XVIII, n. 6, 2018, p. 8-15; S. Loland, M. J. McNamee, *The ‘spirit of sport’, WADAs code review, and the search for an overlapping consensus*, in «International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics», XI, n. 2., 2019, p. 325-339.

³⁰ For example, S. Camporesi, *Partire (s)vantaggiati? Corpi Bionici e atleti geneticamente modificati nello sport*, Fandango, Roma, 2023; M. J. McNamee, J. Parry (eds.) *Ethics and sport*, Routledge, London, 1998.

³¹ B. Foddy, J. Savulescu, *Ethics of performance enhancement in sport* in W. J. Morgan (ed.) *Ethics in sport*, Human Kinetics, Campaign (IL), 2018 p. 307-320; J. Savulescu, B. Foddy, M. Clayton, *Why we should allow performance enhancing drugs in sport*, in «British Journal of sports medicine», XXXVIII, n. 5, 2004, p. 666-670.

³² R. L. Simon, *Fair Play. The ethics of sport*, Westview Press, Boulder (CO), 2010.

³³ V. Møller, P. Dimeo, *Anti-doping—the end of sport*, in «International journal of sport policy and politics», VI, n. 2, 2004, p. 259-272.

³⁴ E. Moore, J. Morrison, *In defense of medically supervised doping*, in «Journal of the Philosophy of Sport», XLIX, n. 2, 2022, p. 159-176. A similar argument is proposed by J. S. Russell, A. Browne, *Performance-enhancing drugs as a collective action problem*, in «Journal of the Philosophy of Sport», XLV, n. 2, 2018, p. 109-127.

the sports physician, which would replace WADA and certify that the athlete is in the right health conditions to be able to compete safely. Moore and Morrison offer a list of nine principles in order to regulate the use of PEDs:

5. There should be a prohibited substance list specific to each sport;
6. There should be education on PEDs use;
7. There should be research on PEDs;
8. There should be doctors who specialize in PEDs;
9. There should be pharmaceutical tracking on PEDs safety;
10. Conscientious objection should be allowed;
11. Penalties should be provided for those who are negligent or corrupt;
12. Confidentiality should be safeguarded;
13. The rule prohibiting PEDs use within sports codes should be equal to others.

Having a culture of PEDs, both from a medical and social point of view, would perhaps guarantee the possibility of their use in a safer way. Since safety interests us, we can only admit substances that have been tested and whose traceability in the production system is guaranteed. According to Moore and Morrison, transparency on the use of PEDs would not affect competition between athletes since, in the end, the substances are more similar than one might think. One could argue that in many sports, this proposal is unfeasible.³⁵ However, this model works for bodybuilding. The substances used are not very many; they are mainly anabolic steroids, testosterone and its derivatives or analogs, anti-estrogens, and a few other substances, such as diuretics or drugs for the management of sugars and carbohydrates. There is scientific literature on their use for almost all of them; their side effects are known, and active medical monitoring during their use would help limit them.

Thirdly, it promotes individual decision-making autonomy. Suppose people are genuinely aware of the risks and benefits of PEDs and have the possibility of taking them in a controlled and as safe a way as possible. In that case, we will have made the exercise of true informed consent possible, and therefore, individuals will have made a truly autonomous choice. In reality, the complete ban is characterized by a paternalistic nature.³⁶ Furthermore, athletes who find themselves caught in the net, that is, who are forced to take PEDs to remain competitive, do not have the possibility of being monitored during their intake. Transparency on the use of PEDs could benefit both athletes who want to use them and those who do not wish to do so. Acceptance of the use of PEDs could lead to the establishment of a dual regime: that is, competition for those who use them and others for those who do not, in order to allow everyone to make an autonomous and informed choice.

³⁵ See S. Holm, *Doping under medical control - conceptually possible but impossible in the world of professional sport?*, cit.

³⁶ W. M. Brown, *Paternalism, drugs, and the nature of sports*, in W. J. Morgan (ed.), *Ethics in Sport Human Kinetics, Campaign (IL)*, 2018, p. 253-261.

6. Conclusions

I believe that the recent phenomenon of greater transparency on the use of PEDs in bodybuilding, primarily through social media, is a fact to be evaluated in a morally positive way. This is because it reveals fundamental information. This information allows people who try to achieve that result or are inspired by it to make conscious choices, whether to take PEDs themselves or restructure their goals. Transparency in using PEDs should be encouraged, as well as the dissemination of the methods of intake, controls, and risks. Indeed, it would be desirable for the transfer of information not only to occur informally through influencers and athletes but also through doctors in order to move from a model of total prohibition of PEDs to one of risk reduction.

In summary, being transparent about the use of PEDs is a positive practice, at least within bodybuilding, as it produces positive effects. For athletes, especially beginners, who do not want to use PEDs, it allows them to avoid the frustration effect, allowing them to reshape their goals in light of the awareness that a specific type of result is possible only through the use of PEDs. For those who are willing to use them, it allows greater awareness of the methods and risks involved. Furthermore, this may give rise to a transformative process that leads to a harm reduction model, where the use of PEDs is done under medical supervision. In any case, greater knowledge and awareness of the risks and benefits of PEDs can only lead to more informed choices, ensuring a more conscious exercise of one's decision-making autonomy.

The phenomenon we are witnessing of greater transparency in bodybuilding on the use of PEDs seems to be the beginning of a transformation process that seems to have many positive sides and which should, therefore, be encouraged.³⁷

³⁷ I would like to thank for the profitable discussions on philosophy and psychology dr. Lina Maria Lissia, and the two anonymous reviewers for the useful comments and suggestions. Also I would like to thank Simone Melotti and my students with whom I discussed this and other topics related to bodybuilding. The responsibility for what I wrote remains mine alone.