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# PUBLIC AFFAIRS: INTELLIGENCE SQUARED BRINGS OXFORD UNION DEBATING TO THE LAND OF LOUDMOUTHS

*Sports, drugs and civil discourse. It can be done; Stephen Brunt witnesses something new and rare: a war of words engineered not to get out of hand*

by Stephen Brunt
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NEW YORK -- It might be the formula for an intriguing cocktail party, or the set-up to a long and elaborate joke. An ethicist, a famous retired ballplayer, a pediatrician, a very loud sportscaster, a libertarian, a former anti-doping czar and one of the more famous faces in American television take the stage in the auditorium of the Asia Society and Museum.

There they will talk for the entertainment of a crowd of about 300 (and eventually for the listeners of National Public Radio), they will argue passionately but politely in a strict debate format on the resolution "We should accept performance-enhancing drugs in competitive sports."

The timing is accidental, but fortuitous: Major League Baseball commissioner Bud Selig and players union head Donald Fehr had been hauled back in front of a congressional committee that very afternoon to discuss the findings of the Mitchell report, and the shock waves from the naming of one of the sport's top stars, Roger Clemens, as a steroid user (followed by his furious denials) have yet to subside.

There are thousands of places where you can tune in people discussing that subject right now, hollering at each other on all-sports radio or the televised equivalent, and the idea of pitting angry, loudmouths of divergent political stripes against each other has become a broadcasting staple, especially in the United States.

But this is something else, almost a throwback to the days of travelling orators, to a time of greater civility, when people actually bothered to listen to the other side, to consider the validity of its position.

Not all of the panelists this night are equally eloquent, equally skilled at the cut and thrust of formal debate. But none is waving a sanctimonious finger and screaming like Bill O'Reilly, either.

The evening is part of a series called Intelligence Squared (IQ{+2}, for short) that began in England, with a three-a-side debate format borrowed from the Oxford Union, and was brought across the Atlantic two years ago by Robert Rosenkranz, a wealthy graduate of Yale and the Harvard Law School who is the chairman of the Delphi Financial Group, a $5-billion insurance concern.

His politics tilt notably to the right, but he is the antithesis of the Fox News bully boy.

After seeing an IQ{+2} event in London, Mr. Rosenkranz asked for permission to mount his own version under the auspices of his charitable foundation. He hired a former *Nightline* producer to put the series together, found an appropriate venue on the East Side of Manhattan and waited to see how the public would respond. An unbroken string of sellouts provided the answer.

"I felt that the level of public discourse in this country was not what it ought to be," he now says. "The media was fragmented along very ideological lines. The debate in Congress was very bitter and rancorous and partisan. We didn't really have a forum where you could hear both sides of contentious issues discussed in an intelligent way. A way to let people hear two sides and come away, maybe not with their minds changed, but with 'Hey, there are intellectually respectable arguments on both sides.' Sound-bite contentiousness just was not shedding any light on issues."

Normally, the issues discussed focus on domestic and foreign public policy, or at least tilt toward the highbrow, and normally the debaters are drawn from a hotshot list of well-known writers, pundits and politicians: "Russia is becoming our enemy again," "Hollywood has fuelled anti-Americanism abroad," "Freedom of expression must include the licence to offend," "It's time to end affirmative action." (And coming up: "America should be the world's policeman," "Tough interrogation of terror suspects is necessary," "Islam is dominated by radicals.") Debaters have included the likes of Christopher Hitchens, Michael Crichton and Natan Sharansky.

'OUR BEN' A NO-SHOW

But this topic requires a different, more eclectic mix than the usual cast of tall foreheads.

Which is how it comes to pass that Canadian Dick Pound and Dale Murphy, Norman Fost and Julian Savulescu, George Michael (of George Michael's Sports Machine, not the pop star), Radley Balko and the moderator, ever-boyish Bob Costas, wind up onstage kicking around the hot-button issue of the moment in front of an audience that has paid for the opportunity to sit back and think.

There is one small disappointment. Arguing for the affirmative, alongside Dr. Fost, a medical doctor, and Mr. Savulescu, an ethicist, was supposed to be Ben Johnson: cheater, victim, pariah, scapegoat, energy-drink spokesman – take your pick. He has bailed out at the last minute on the advice of his lawyers, because of a lawsuit in which he is involved in Canada. Mr. Balko, a libertarian (the similarity between his name and that of the lab that supplied drugs to Barry Bonds, Marion Jones and others is duly noted), steps

in to take his place, killing some of the curiosity factor, but also tilting the balance considerably in terms of the actual debating talent on stage. It is obvious very early on that Mr. Murphy, the former Atlanta Brave, and Mr. Michael, who made a name for himself yelling over sports-highlight footage, are in awfully deep.

Mr. Rosenkranz takes the stage briefly to welcome the audience and introduce the subject of the debate, and then disappears for the rest of the show. Each participant is allowed a formal, seven-minute statement, followed by various back and forths, including an opportunity for the spectators to ask questions. Because it's Mr. Costas, because it's sports, the proceedings are bit looser, a little bit more folksy than you assume might be the case when, later in the series, the debate centres on whether there ought to be a legal market in human organs. Still, no one strays too far outside the bounds.

The only thing slightly gimmicky is a poll of those in the audience, who use electronic keypads to indicate their feelings on the subject at hand, first before, then after the debate. Not surprisingly, given the obvious public mood at the moment, 63 per cent of them come down against legal doping, while only 18 per cent support the motion, with the remainder undecided.

What's fascinating, minus the sideshow that would have come with Our Ben, is how an issue that in the familiar forums of the sports pages and talk radio always boils down to a black-and-white question of good guys versus bad guys, liars and whistle-blowers and gotcha moments, is revealed in this context in all of its many, glorious shades of grey.

Arguing in favour of the motion, Norman Fost kicks things off with the manner of a kindly country doctor.

"Every athlete in recorded history has used performance-enhancing drugs. Babylonians and Romans used herbs to improve their performance. The ancient Greeks put on shoes to run faster. Kenyan runners trained at altitude to improve their oxygen-carrying capacity. And runners everywhere carbo-load before races to enhance their performance.

"Why then do we have a replay of the Salem Witch trials with the strategy to humiliate and incarcerate elite athletes for doing what has been standard practice for millennia? And why out of the thousand and one ways that athletes enhance their performances have steroids and human growth hormone been selected for particular vilification?

"The short answer is that they're illegal and that these athletes were breaking the rules and perhaps the law and therefore it's immoral. Which begs the question: Why are they banned in the first place? We contend that the reasons given are morally incoherent, reek of hypocrisy and are based on wrong information."

Julian Savulescu, an Oxford professor with what seems like an encyclopedic knowledge of cutting-edge doping techniques, hammers away at the futility of the war on drugs and argues that the best way to create a level playing field is to allow equal access to safer, better substances. He also fires a pre-emptive strike across the stage. "When Dick Pound was asked by The New York Times which performance enhancements he thought were against the spirit of sport, he said it's like pornography: You know it when you see it.

"Well, of course, D.H. Lawrence's novels were thought to be pornographic a century ago. They're not now."

Radley Balko offers classic libertarian arguments about allowing adults to make informed choices. "It's about paternalism and it's about control. We have a full-blown moral panic on our hands here."

Though the sympathies of the crowd – and, it certainly appears, Bob Costas, who struggles in the moderator's role not to wear his heart on his sleeve – are with them, the side arguing against doping is a little short on ammunition.

Dale Murphy, who is a dead-square honest guy, a Mormon and a borderline Hall of Fame candidate, just thinks that drugs are flat-out wrong. "To accept this motion would simply set us back," he says. "To legitimize performance-enhancing drugs in sports, I feel, would send the wrong message to young athletes."

George Michael, a familiar, popular figure with this audience, spends most of the time talking about famous athletes he knows and what they have told him, using a lot of "I's" and a lot of "me's" – unprovable, anecdotal stuff that the guys on the other side of the table easily tear to pieces.

The real surprise of the evening is Mr. Pound, the Montreal lawyer, former Olympic athlete, International Olympic Committee member and former head of the World Anti-Doping Agency. In other situations, he certainly isn't short of swagger, prone to making wild, vague assertions about how many athletes in a given sport might be using and how teen girls use anabolic steroids to "tone up."

Here he seems a bit cowed by the setting, and by the opposition. There is one easy swipe at the pathetic absent party: "Ben Johnson lied to me in 1988. I was really looking forward to having him here tonight. Too bad his lawyer pulled him out."

But beyond that, while throwing out quotes from Vince Lombardi and Bishop Fulton Sheen, he makes an argument that effectively boils down to the notion that rules are rules, which athletes must accept if they are going to play the game. But since the parameters of this debate involve not breaking rules but changing them, in the end he is left to quibble about how dangerous some drugs are, or are not.

A CHANGE OF HEART

When all is said and done, the sense sitting in the audience is that the battle of hearts, of emotions, hasn't been won. Those who were appalled by the whole idea of hero athletes doping at the start probably still aren't ready to accept the kind of measured, equal, open application of drugs that the affirmative side suggests.

The battle of ideas, though, is something else entirely. Just as Mr. Rosenkranz had hoped, there has obviously been a willingness to open up, to listen, to put preconceptions aside. In the final poll, the yea-to-nay ratio has shifted to 37-59, not the makings of a public-opinion revolution, but a clear victory for those pushing against the tide.

Afterward, the evening continues for the participants and a selection of guests at a private room in a local restaurant where Mr. Rosenkranz plays host to a dinner that is half after-party, half salon. At his table, with Mr. Costas and Mr. Murphy among those drinking fine wine and eating coq au vin, the debate rolls on long into the evening, bringing to mind one of Prof. Savulescu's bon mots from the debate. "To complain about drugs enhancing performance in sports," he said, "is like complaining about alcohol enhancing sociability at a party."