The Great Debaters

By Wayne Coffey - January 20, 2008
(excerpt from a longer article)

America is pretty schizophrenic when it comes to performance-enhancing substances - we drag jocks who juice before Congress even as we spend a fortune on fountain of youth drugs.

If the results of a debate at the Asia Society last week are any indication, America is still not ready to accept steroids in sports - but we could be convinced to flip-flop on the issue.

A sold-out audience at the Intelligence Squared U.S. debate sponsored by The Rosenkranz Foundation solidly rejected the motion "We should accept performance-enhancing drugs in competitive sports." Fifty-nine percent of the audience voted against the motion; 37% were for it and 4% were undecided.

But the panel arguing for steroids - Radley Balko of Reason magazine (no relation to Victor Conte's lab) University of Wisconsin bioethicist Norman Fost and Oxford bioethicist Julian Savulescu - won over a significant portion of the audience.

At the start of the debate, 18% percent of the audience was in favor of the motion, with 63% against and 19% undecided, so the "drug-loving team," as described by The Sporting News blogger Sarah Schorno, scored big points.

Schorno said the pro-steroid team was effective because it raised some interesting questions: Wouldn't sports leagues be able to monitor the safe use of performance-enhancing drugs if they legalized them? Doesn't the banning of these drugs lead labs that create undetectable drugs with little regard for safety?

The arguments against PEDs from sportcaster George Michael, former Atlanta Braves star Dale Murphy and former World Anti-Doping Agency chief Richard Pound, Schorno wrote, mostly came down to "What about the children" and "Steroids are bad because they are against the rules."