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... WHERE WE'D TAKE CANDACE PARKER OVER JOAKIM NOAH

Why we look the other way

By **Chuck Klosterman**
ESPN The Magazine

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Shawne Merriman weighs 272 pounds.

This is six pounds less than Anthony Muñoz, probably the most dominating left tackle of all time. Shawne Merriman also runs the 40-yard dash in 4.61 seconds. When Jerry Rice attended the NFL draft combine in 1985, he reportedly ran a 4.60; Rice would go on to gain more than 23,000 all-purpose yards while scoring 207 career touchdowns.

You do not need Mel Kiper's hard drive to deduce what these numbers mean: As an outside linebacker, Shawne Merriman is almost as big as the best offensive tackle who ever played and almost as fast as the best wide receiver who ever played. He is a rhinoceros who moves like a deer. Common sense suggests this combination should not be possible. It isn't.

Merriman was suspended from the San Diego Chargers for four games last season after testing positive for the anabolic steroid nandrolone. He argues this was the accidental result of a tainted nutritional supplement. "I think two out of 10 people will always believe I did something intentional, or still think I'm doing something," Merriman has said. If this is truly what he believes, no one will ever accuse him of pragmatism. Virtually everyone who follows football assumes Merriman used drugs to turn himself into the kind of hitting machine who can miss four games and still lead the league with 17 sacks. He has been caught and penalized, and the public shall forever remain incredulous of who he is and what he does.



Stephen Dunn/Getty Images
Shawne Merriman: As big as the best left tackle of all time, as fast as the greatest wide receiver ever.

The public knows the truth, or at least part of it. And knowing this partial truth, the public will return to ignoring this conundrum almost entirely.

The public will respond by renewing its subscription to NFL Sunday Ticket, where it will regularly watch dozens of 272-pound men accelerate at speeds that would have made them Olympic sprinters during the 1960s. This, it seems, is the contemporary relationship most people have with drugs and pro football: unconditional distrust of anyone who tests positive, balanced by an unconscious willingness to overlook all the physical impossibilities they see. This is partially understandable; socially, sports serve an escapist purpose. Football players are

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real people, but they exist in a constructed nonreality. Within the context of any given game, nobody cares how a certain linebacker got so big while remaining so fast. Part of what makes football successful is its detachment from day-to-day life. For 60 minutes, it subsists in a vacuum. But this detachment is going to become more complicated in the coming years, mostly because reality is evolving, becoming harder to block out. And the Evolved Reality is this: It's starting to feel like a significant segment of the NFL is on drugs.

As a consequence, you will have to make some decisions.

Not commissioner Roger Goodell.

You.

On Feb. 27, federal, state and local authorities seized the records of an Orlando pharmacy, accusing the owners of running an online bazaar for performance-enhancing drugs. This came on the heels of a raid on a similar enterprise in Mobile, Ala., where the customer list apparently included recognizable names like boxer Evander Holyfield and late-blooming outfielder Gary Matthews Jr.

None of this is particularly shocking.

But then there is the case of Richard Rydze. In 2006 Rydze, an internist, purchased \$150,000 of testosterone and human growth hormone from the Florida pharmacy over the Internet. This is not against the law. However, Rydze is a physician for the Pittsburgh Steelers. He says he never prescribed any of those drugs to members of the team, and I cannot prove otherwise. However, the Steelers have had a complicated relationship with performance enhancers for a long time. Offensive lineman Steve Courson (now deceased) admitted he used steroids while playing for Pittsburgh in the 1970s and early '80s, as did at least four other guys. Former Saints coach Jim Haslett, a player in Buffalo from 1979 to 1985, has said the old Steelers dynasty essentially ran on steroids. The team, obviously, denies this.

Several members of the Carolina Panthers' 2004 Super Bowl team were implicated in a steroid scandal involving Dr. James Shortt, a private practitioner in West Columbia, S.C. One of these players was punter Todd Sauerbrun. Do not mitigate the significance of this point: *The punter was taking steroids*. The punter had obtained syringes and injectable Stanozolol, the same chemical Ben Johnson used before the 1988 Olympics. I'm not suggesting punters aren't athletes, nor am I overlooking how competitive the occupation of punting must be; I'm merely pointing out that it's kind of crazy to think punters would be taking steroids but defensive tackles would not. We all concede that steroids, HGH and blood doping can help people ride bicycles faster through the Alps. Why do we even momentarily question how much impact they must have on a game built entirely on explosion and power?

"People may give a certain amount of slack to football players because there's this unspoken sense that in order to play the game well, you need an edge," USC critical studies professor Todd Boyd told the Los Angeles Times last month. Boyd has written several books about sports, race and culture. "That's what people want in a football player -- someone who's crazy and mean."

It's a subtle paradox: People choose to ignore the relationship between performance enhancers and the NFL because it's unquestionably the league where performance enhancers would have the biggest upside. But what will happen when such deliberate naiveté becomes impossible? Revelatory drug scandals tend to escalate exponentially (look at Major League Baseball and U.S. track and field). Merriman, Sauerbrun and the other 33 players suspended by the NFL since 2002 could be exceptions; it seems far more plausible they are not. We are likely on the precipice of a bubble that is going to burst. But if it does, how are we supposed to feel about it? Does this invalidate the entire sport, or does it barely matter at all?

This is where things become complicated.

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It can be strongly argued that the most important date in the history of rock music was Aug. 28, 1964. This was the day Bob Dylan met the Beatles in New York City's Hotel Delmonico and got them high.

Obviously, a lot of people might want to disagree with this assertion, but the artistic evidence is hard to ignore. The introduction of marijuana altered the trajectory of the Beatles' songwriting, reconstructed their consciousness and prompted them to make the most influential rock albums of all time. After the summer of 1964, the Beatles started taking serious drugs, and those drugs altered their musical performance. Though it may not have been their overt intent, the Beatles took performance-enhancing drugs. And this is germane to sports for one reason: Absolutely no one holds it against them. No one views "Rubber Soul" and "Revolver" as "less authentic" albums, despite the fact that they would not (and probably could not) have been made by people who weren't on drugs.



AP Photo

Herschel Walker built his body the old-fashioned way: with push-ups and sit-ups.

Jack Kerouac wrote "On the Road" on a Benzedrine binge, yet nobody thinks this makes his novel less significant. A Wall Street stockbroker can get jacked up on cocaine before going into the trading pit, yet nobody questions his bottom line. It's entirely possible that you take 10mg of Ambien the night before a big day at the office, and then drink 32 ounces of coffee when you wake up (possibly along with a mind-sharpening cigarette). Anytime a person takes drugs for purposes that aren't exclusively recreational (i.e., staring at your stereo speakers, watching "Planet of the Apes," etc.), he or she is using them to do something at a higher level. Yes, I realize there is a difference between caffeine and HGH. But there's probably an even greater difference between a morning of data processing and trying to cut-block Shawne Merriman.

My point is not that all drugs are the same, nor that drugs are awesome, nor that the Beatles needed LSD to become the geniuses they already were. My point is that sports are unique in the way they're retrospectively colored by the specter of drug use. East Germany was an Olympic force during the 1970s and '80s; today, you can't mention the East Germans' dominance without noting that they were pumped full of Ivan Drago-esque chemicals. This relationship changes the meaning of their achievements. You simply don't see this in other idioms. Nobody looks back at Pink Floyd's "Dark Side of the Moon" and says, "I guess that music is okay, but it doesn't really count. Those guys were probably high in the studio."

Now, the easy rebuttal to this argument is contextual, because it's not as if Roger Waters was shooting up with testosterone in order to strum his bass-guitar strings *harder*. Unlike songwriting or stock trading, football is mostly physical; it seems like there needs to be a different scale -- an uncrossable line -- for what endangers competitive integrity. But how do we make that distinction? In all of these cases (sports-related and otherwise), people are putting foreign substances into their bodies in the hope of reaching a desired result. The motive is the same. What's different, and sometimes arbitrary, is when people care. Baseball fans are outraged that Rafael Palmeiro tested positive for Stanozolol; they are generally indifferent to the fact that most players regularly took amphetamines for 40 years. Meanwhile, as a member of the Philadelphia Eagles in 1994, Bill Romanowski electively received two trauma IVs to help recover from injuries. Trauma IVs are what emergency room doctors give to people dying from car accidents. In his autobiography, Romanowski claims one of his teammates received six trauma IVs in the span of one season. This is natural?

I am told we live in a violent society. But even within that society, football players are singular. Another former Eagle, strong safety Andre Waters, committed suicide last November at age 44. A postmortem examination of his brain indicated he had the neurological tissue of an 85-year-old man with Alzheimer's, almost certainly

the result of using his skull as a weapon for 12 seasons. Andre Waters hit people so hard, and so often, that he cut his time on earth in half. Hitting was his life. This is why the relationship between drugs and football is different from the relationship between drugs and baseball: Baseball is mostly about tangible statistics, which drugs skew and invalidate; football is more about intangible masculine warfare, which drugs quietly enhance.

Announcers casually lionize pro football players as gladiators, but that description is more accurate than most would like to admit. For the sake of entertainment, we expect these people to be the fastest, strongest, most aggressive on earth. If they are not, they make less money and eventually lose their jobs.

This being the case, it seems hypocritical to blame them for taking steroids. We might blame them more if they did not.

Around this time last year, I wrote an essay for The Magazine about Barry Bonds -- specifically, how steroids made his passing of Babe Ruth on the career home run list problematic. I still believe this to be true, just as I believe that the notion of an NFL that's more juiced than organic is more negative than interesting. It would be easier to be a football fan if none of this was going on. But since it is going on, we will all have to decide how much this Evolved Reality is going to bother us.

This will not be simple. I don't think there will be a fall guy for the NFL; over time, we won't be able to separate Merriman from the rest of the puzzle (which MLB has so far successfully done with Bonds). It won't be about the legitimacy of specific players. This will be more of an across-the-board dilemma, because we will have to publicly acknowledge that the most popular sport in the country has been kinetically altered by drugs, probably for the past 25 years. In many ways, the NFL's reaction barely matters. What matters more is how fans will attempt to reconcile that realization with their personal feelings toward the game. The question, ultimately, is this: If it turns out the lifeblood of the NFL is unnatural, does that make the game less meaningful?

The answer depends on who you are. And maybe how old you are.

In 1982, I read a story about Herschel Walker in Sports Illustrated headlined "My Body's Like an Army." It explained how, at the time, Walker didn't even lift weights; instead, he did 100,000 sit-ups and 100,000 push-ups a year, knocking out 25 of each every time a commercial came on the television. This information made me worship Herschel; it made him seem human and superhuman at the same time. "My Body's Like an Army" simultaneously indicated that I could become Herschel Walker and that I could never become Herschel Walker. His physical perfection was self-generated and completely pure. He had made himself better than other mortals, and that made me love him.

But I was 10 years old.

There comes a point in every normal person's life when they stop looking at athletes as models for living. Any thinking adult who follows pro sports understands that some people are corrupt and the games are just games and money drives everything. It would be strange if they did not realize these things. But what's equally strange is the way so many fans (and sportswriters, myself included) revert back to their 10-year-old selves whenever an issue like steroids shatters the surface.

Most of the time, we don't care what football players do when they're not playing football. On any given Wednesday, we have only a passing interest in who they are as people or how they choose to live. But Sunday is different. On Sunday, we have wanted them to be superfast, superstrong, superentertaining and, weirdly, superethical. They are supposed to be pristine 272-pound men who run 40 yards in 4.61 seconds simply because they do sit-ups during commercial breaks for "Grey's Anatomy." Unlike everybody else in America, they cannot do whatever it takes to succeed; they have to fulfill the unrealistic expectations of 10-year-old kids who read magazines. And this is because football players have a job that doesn't matter

at all, except in those moments when it matters more than absolutely everything else.

It may be time to rethink some of this stuff.

Chuck Klosterman, whose latest book is "[Chuck Klosterman IV: A Decade of Curious People and Dangerous Ideas](#)," is a columnist for Esquire and a regular contributor to Page 2.

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