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Think Muscle Newsletter #4

August 14, 2000 - Number 4

Think Muscle <http://www.thinkmuscle.com/>

ISSN: Pending 4,481 opt-in subscribers

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The Think Muscle Newsletter publishes the latest news and research on exercise physiology, dietary supplements, performance enhancement, lifestyle management, health & nutrition, and bodybuilding & fitness. The newsletter is dedicated to providing accurate and unbiased scientifically based information.

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Growth Hormone: The Controversy That Never Was

By Bryan Haycock

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A funny thing happened to me this summer. One day I was checking my e-mail and I came across a message that appeared to be from a popular primetime news program. (I'm not looking to burn any bridges here so I will refrain from identifying them.) I get tons of junk e-mail so I was a bit incredulous as to its source. As I read, sure enough, it was the real thing from one of the big 3 networks. They were interested in contacting me after coming across an article on hGH I wrote for Mesomorphosis.com. Feeling as if I was about to experience my first taste of fame, I quickly called the cell number provided in the e-mail. Turns out they weren't really interested in my article, or me for that matter. They were looking to dig up dirt on the hidden dangers of using hGH for anti-aging purposes.

I watch just enough of these types of news/entertainment programs to know their angle. It's all about controversy. They were hoping that I knew someone who had experienced horrible side effects from using hGH. It turns out they had been working on the story for nearly a year but had not been able to come up with a "victim" of hGH.

Still believing that this might actually lead to some airtime for me, I offered to assist them in their search. After all, appearing on camera would be extremely cathartic for me. Let me explain because I am sure many of you have felt the same way on occasion while watching this stuff. I sit getting all riled up as I watch the media misrepresent things like diets, nutrition, supplements, and yes hormones, to the point where my wife finally just turns the TV off so I'll quit ranting and settle down. I naively thought this might be my chance to set the record straight on the safety and usefulness of hGH. In an honest effort to help, I contacted everyone I knew who might know someone using hGH. Nevertheless, no one had any negative experiences to share.

I eventually got back to the producers of the story to tell them I had come up empty handed. This most certainly eliminated my chances of presenting the voice of reason for sensible hormone replacement therapy.

I am well aware that anything I would have had the chance to say on air about this or any other topic would simply be taken as "one point of view" by the millions at home watching. Not only that but I would probably be presented in little audio blurbs, taken out of context, that would make me sound like some sort of fanatic, totally out of touch. I remember the episode where they highlighted low carb diets. They had one guy on who wrote a book called the "Neanderthal Diet". The diet involves eating only unprocessed foods such as fruits, vegetables and meat. He mentioned that his children ate this way as well. The producers aired this comment with over-dramatized music and camera angles making him out to be some sort of child abuser. They would have undoubtedly done the same thing to me, considering I think hormone replacement isn't immoral. Oh, and if you're interested in reading the article that got their attention, you can find it at <http://www.mesomorphosis.com/exclusive/haycock/growth-factors.htm>. Keep in mind that this article is NOT about hormone replacement by any stretch of the imagination. It is simply an examination of the use of GH and other pharmaceuticals in bodybuilding.

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I guess the moral of the whole experience is that there are proper channels for disseminating information. First and foremost, those channels must be interested in the truth, not ratings. The drive to get ratings has led the major media outlets far away from truth. I think that is why the internet is so important. It allows the truth to be presented to those looking for it without sensationalism. I'm not saying every thing on the internet is truth, far from it. But I can say that our goal and mission here at Think Muscle is to find the truth, whatever it may be, and bring it to our readers. And at the end of the day, we can sleep in peace knowing we have been true to you, and ourselves.

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“Natural Bodybuilding”: A Modern Oxymoron? Part III

By Rick Collins and Krista Scott-Dixon

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Natural and Bodybuilding – Concepts in Conflict

The many health supplements sold by health food stores raise other interesting issues, further complicating the evaluation of what is “natural.” Vitamin C (ascorbic acid) is sold as a natural food supplement. But is it “natural” to ingest Vitamin C not by the ingestion of various fruits and foods, but by swallowing it whole in processed tablet form? Further, how can anyone argue that it’s “natural” to take two, four or even more grams of Vitamin C daily – so-called “megadoses” – when nobody could possibly consume such quantities by eating food? Another example is creatine monohydrate, a substance that has recently been widely marketed as a supplement for building muscle. Red meat contains small quantities of creatine. But is it “natural” to consume five, ten or (during so-called “loading phases”) up to a whopping thirty grams of creatine daily, when such amounts could only be consumed through artificially manufactured products? And yet, these wildly “un-natural” quantities are routinely consumed by many so-called “natural” athletes.

These “natural” athletes have convinced themselves that such extreme dietary supplement practices are perfectly natural, but for years have drawn a bright line to distinguish the difference between natural and non-natural athletes: the use of supplemental androgens. All supplemental androgens, including anabolic steroids, are derivatives of testosterone, a naturally-occurring hormone in both men and women. But unlike the athlete taking Vitamin C capsules or creatine powder to enhance his performance, one taking supplemental testosterone tablets is no longer considered “natural” and one taking supplemental testosterone injections is even less natural. (Ironically, the more hazardous anabolic steroids are orally ingested.)

Of course, the increased popularity of recently hyped products has further complicated the picture. Herbs, such as yohimbe and tribulus terrestris, can reputedly increase natural testosterone levels. The desired effect -- increased serum levels of male hormone -- is the same as with anabolic steroids. Yet the so-called natural athletes using these products seem oblivious to the hypocrisy. Even more troubling is the whole new class of

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supplements known as prohormones, such as androstenedione (andro), promoted as a natural alternative to steroids. While these substances are but one tiny molecular step away from testosterone, they can be readily converted into testosterone by the human body. Again, the effect -- increased serum levels of male hormone -- is the same as with anabolic steroids? Some have tried to argue that the difference is that these substances are legal, while steroids are not. Of course, that is not entirely true, as steroids are legal if prescribed for a legitimate medical condition. Further, we must recognize the arbitrariness of the laws -- in some countries, steroids are legally available over-the-counter, while in others even creatine is banned! Most significant of all, President Clinton's top drug policy adviser has recently renewed his vow to have andro classified as an anabolic steroid as quickly as possible. If he's right -- that andro is and has always been an anabolic steroid -- haven't all athletes who've ever tried it forfeited their "natural" status? Or do they exist in some gray area in between?

Some natural athletes cite the amounts of supplemental administration as relevant to the issue. Of course, this raises a lot of issues, such as whether an athlete with low or low-normal range testosterone levels who brings his levels up to high-normal range (or even to just mid-normal range), but not beyond, is "unnatural." To further complicate the picture, what if testosterone supplementation is lawfully and medically prescribed, such as in the case of the aging athlete whose endogenous levels have declined and who is restored to normal levels by hormonal supplementation? Can such an athlete still call himself natural? If so, what if the lawful dose administered restores higher serum testosterone levels than would be normal for a man his age -- i.e., a fifty-year-old athlete who now has a twenty-year-old's testosterone levels?

Conclusion

Bodybuilding is, in its method and ideals, a contradictory practice. Bodybuilding both enhances and diminishes health -- it increases bodyweight, the wear and tear on joints, and the risk of both chronic and acute injuries. It relies on a highly regimented nutritional intake in terms of food choice and caloric allowance. In terms of psychic health, it rewards its practitioners with increased self-esteem, self-discipline, and self-empowerment, but can also be driven by insecurity, shame over weakness, and for men, a desire to live up to a particular masculine ideal. The famous "muscle dysmorphia" study in *Psychosomatics* (1997) produced media hysteria over men obsessively scrutinizing their bodies (and subsequent mockery by many serious lifters who argued that there was no such thing as too big and people who said so were just jealous pencilnecks), but after hacking through the hype on both sides, it seems evident that some mental and emotional ambivalence is frequently at work when people strive to improve their physiques. The argument to be made here is that bodybuilding is not one thing or the other, but that it blurs facile categories of healthy/unhealthy, weakness/strength, and so forth, so that to label it one thing or the other is to miss the point. Bodybuilding is all of these things at once, in constant tension with itself. It is both natural and cultural. In the case of hardcore competitive bodybuilding, however, it is difficult to argue that anything about the sport is natural. It is, almost by definition, unnatural. While the safety risks of

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chemical enhancement rampant at today's elite level is regrettable, the line between hardcore natural and unnatural bodybuilders is quite fuzzy.

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2. Levi-Strauss, "The Culinary Triangle". In Counihan, Carole and Penny van Esterik, eds. Food and Culture: A Reader. New York: Routledge, 1997.

About the Author(s)

Rick Collins, JD, is a New York criminal defense lawyer, partner in the firm of Collins, McDonald & Gann (www.cmgesq.com), and former competitive bodybuilder and certified personal trainer. He has written extensively on issues related to bodybuilding and anabolic steroids, has represented or advised numerous athletes investigated or charged in such cases, and maintains an educational web site at <http://www.steroidlaw.com>.

Krista Scott-Dixon, M.A., is a Ph.D. candidate at York University in Toronto. She maintains a website devoted to women's weight training at <http://www.stumptuous.com/weights.html> and has written on gender and training for Mesomorphosis. When not slaving over her dissertation she is reading labels in health food stores or making her gym trainees beg for mercy.

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Tell Us What You Think?

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1. *Growth Hormone: The Controversy That Never Was* by Bryan Haycock

- It was good.
- It was okay.
- I didn't like it.
- I'm not interested.

2. *"Natural Bodybuilding": A Modern Oxymoron? Part III* by Rick Collins and Krista Scott-Dixon

- It was good.
- It was okay.
- I didn't like it.
- I'm not interested.

3. *What type of articles would you like to see in the future? (Check all that apply.)*

- Anabolic Steroids and Pharmaceuticals
- Anti-aging medicine
- Body Transformation
- Children's Health and Nutrition
- Competitive Bodybuilding
- Diet and Nutrition Reviews
- Dietary Supplements
- Exercise Physiology
- Fitness Competitions
- Fitness Psychology
- General Health Topics
- Lifestyle Management
- Men's Health
- Powerlifting
- Seniors Health Topics
- Sports Specific Training
- Women's Health and Nutrition

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We hope you have enjoyed the latest issue of the Think Muscle Newsletter. Suggestions? Comments? Questions? We'd love to hear them!

Best regards,

The Think Muscle Editorial Staff

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