

# Shortcut to



# Tragedy

**T**he first word that comes to his mind is “devastating.” And then, for a moment, Don Hooton pauses to consider his answer, one he never thought he would have to give.

“There’s just no way to describe what it has been like,” Hooton says of the year that has passed since his teenage son committed suicide. “It’s terrible. People ask me or tell me, ‘Don, I just can’t imagine how hard this thing is on you.’ And my response to that, even today, is ‘I can’t imagine it either.’”

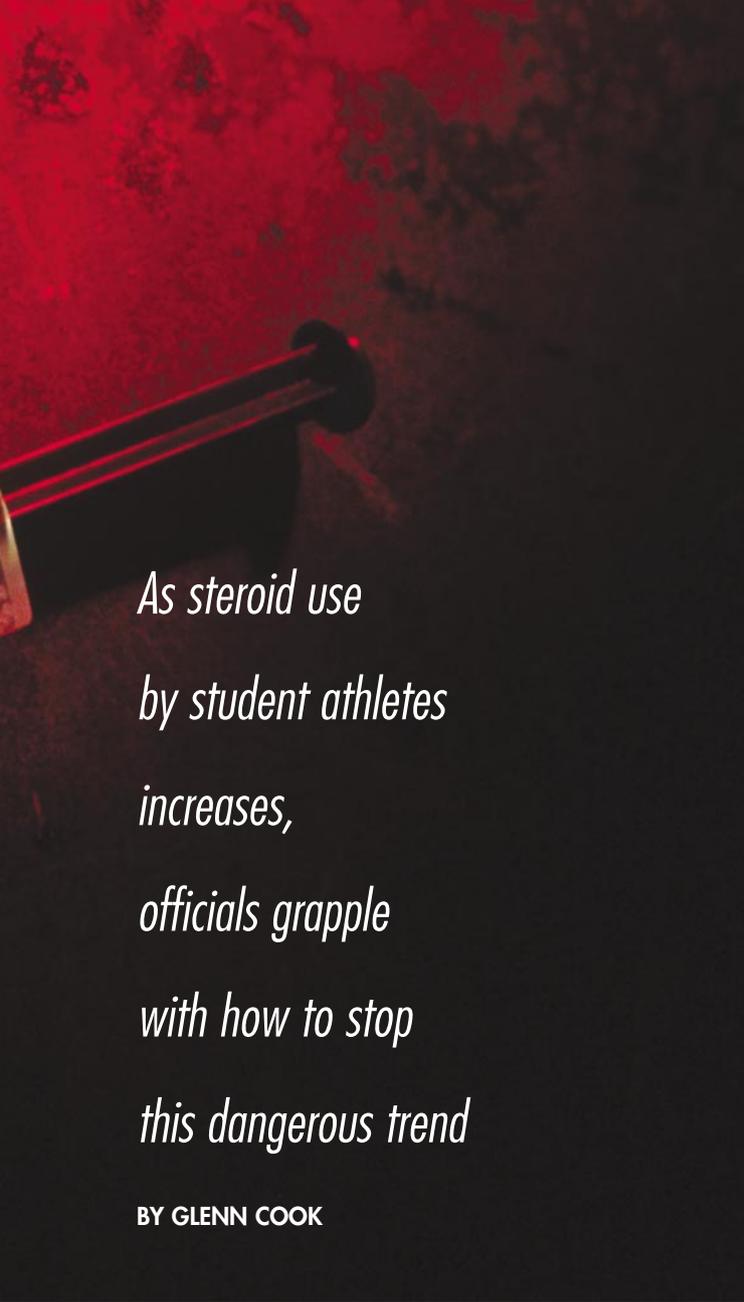
He has relived his son’s life and death thousands of times since July 15, 2003, the day 17-year-old Taylor killed himself in his room. A popular and promising student athlete at Plano West Senior High School outside Dallas, Taylor had used anabolic steroids as a shortcut to self-esteem and athletic success. Instead, the side effects—depression, feelings of helplessness, extreme mood swings—led him to take his life.

Hooton knows now that Taylor’s feelings are common signs of a person who stops using a performance-enhancing drug, especially one so physically and psychologically addictive. He

also knows that, like a growing number of teenage athletes, his son was looking for an easy way to bulk up for the upcoming season and a possible college scholarship. But Hooton questions whether parents, coaches, and school administrators know what to look for, and he has made it a personal crusade to help others see the signs he and his wife missed.

Now, six years after researchers started pointing to disturbing increases in steroid and supplement use among high school students, politicians and professional athletes are becoming part of the same crusade. As criminal investigations swirl around professional baseball players and Olympic athletes accused of using performance-enhancing drugs, legislators in California and Florida are considering bills that would force districts to implement drug-testing programs for high school athletes.

“It is beyond comprehension for a parent to lose a child,” Hooton says. “Just that it’s a suicide puts it into the category of the worst of the worst. But to be caught completely off guard with the steroid stuff ...”



*As steroid use  
by student athletes  
increases,  
officials grapple  
with how to stop  
this dangerous trend*

BY GLENN COOK

He pauses again. "Somebody asked, 'Who do you blame?' You wind up blaming yourself because you didn't protect your child. Why didn't we know any more than we did about steroids and what they could do? If we had known, I think we could have saved Taylor's life. That's taken a devastating situation and made it even worse."

### **The numbers are growing**

How many students are actually using steroids? About one in 30, says Lloyd Johnston, head of a University of Michigan research team that surveys 50,000 high school students annually about the use of steroids and other substances. The number of male students who were on steroids rose steadily for more than a decade before dropping slightly in 2003; the numbers for girls, while rising slightly, remain statistically insignificant compared to boys.

Johnston said the biggest jump was in 1998-99, the year St. Louis Cardinals slugger Mark McGwire pursued the major league record for home runs in a season. McGwire, who hit 70

that year to set the since-broken record, admitted he was using a legal steroid-related substance, androstenedione (known as Andro).

"When you look at the media frenzy around that event, and the fact that he not only set the home-run record but had famously large forearms, you can see how kids would be influenced," Johnston says.

From 1994 to 2002, the number of boys who said they used steroids within the past 12 months grew by more than 50 percent, Johnston says. The number declined in 2003, when 3.2 percent of boys surveyed said they used steroids, compared to a high of 3.8 percent the previous year.

"I think it's past the peak, in terms of where it's going now," Johnston says. "If you've got a lot of people getting in trouble and kids are seeing them face adverse consequences, my guess is that it will be seen as more negative than positive" in the future.

Other studies, however, show even higher rates, especially in the South. More than 11 percent of high school boys in Louisiana reported using steroids in a 2001 survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And in March of this year, California Sen. Jackie Speier released a survey of 500 students that said 11 percent of boys and 5 percent of girls have used performance-enhancing drugs.

Speier is sponsoring a series of bills that would require school districts to mandate steroid testing of athletes by 2006-07 and provide education to coaches and trainers. Companies that produce supplements would be banned from sponsoring high school sports events under Speier's legislation, and coaches would not be allowed to endorse or provide supplements to athletes. Speier, who successfully sponsored a similar ban on ephedra sales in 2003, is garnering support from current and retired professional athletes and coaches who are promoting her cause.

"There has been a collective denial by coaches, students, and parents," Speier says. "It's a danger that we can no longer ignore."

### **Student testing remains low**

The NCAA and all the major professional sports leagues randomly test athletes for steroids. And over the past decade, state and federal courts generally have supported school districts that want to test athletes for drugs.

Still, only 13 percent of the nation's high schools have drug-testing policies for students, according to a June 2003 survey by the National Federation of State High School Associations and the National Center for Drug Free Sport Inc. No states currently require drug testing of high school athletes.

"There's a great deal of pressure and competition among high school athletes, and along with that pressure comes the tendency to want to take a shortcut without realizing the life-long effects of steroid use," says Florida state Rep. Marcelo Llorente, who is sponsoring legislation similar to Speier's. "If you have a possibility of being selected for a random test, there's a deterrent there. At the high school level, there's no such deterrent in place."

## TWO PROGRAMS AIM TO EDUCATE STUDENT ATHLETES

ATLAS and ATHENA are not your average pair of squabbling siblings. In fact, they coexist quite nicely at the Oregon Health and Science University.

The programs—ATLAS for boys, ATHENA for girls—use sports settings to encourage high school athletes not to use performance-enhancing drugs. Working with a highly scripted curriculum, coaches and students lead the series of 10 45-minute sessions to talk about exercise and nutrition as the best way to enhance self-esteem and build muscle and endurance.

Funded by federal grants, ATLAS (Athletes Training and Learning to Avoid Steroids) was created in 1994 by Linn Goldberg, head of the university's division of health promotion and sports medicine. Goldberg also serves as the doping control officer for the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, the regulatory group that oversees America's Olympic athletes.

"What happens at school is more important than what happens in the sports world, and it can have a direct influence," Goldberg says. "Like all politics is local, what the student athlete—the pitcher, the quarterback, the all-star center—does is cool because you can relate directly to that person."

While ATLAS focuses on boys and steroids, "younger sibling" ATHENA (Athletes Targeting Healthy Exercise and Nutrition Alternatives) looks at eating disorders and other problems female athletes face. ATHENA was launched in 1999.

Goldberg says the programs, now used in 23 states and Puerto Rico, target high school students because others do not. "Most prevention programs don't even attempt to go into the high schools," he says. "They are focused on the primary grades and middle school. We want to address the kids who are actually using this stuff, or thinking about using it."

The two programs cost districts a few hundred dollars per school. Goldberg, who is using a \$150,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to track how districts are implementing the programs, says the results—available at [www.atlasprogram.com](http://www.atlasprogram.com)—show it has been worth the investment.

"Doing steroid testing is really problematic, especially when there is the abuse of all these other drugs out there," Goldberg says. "It's very expensive, and to me, it seems that schools that adopt only a drug-testing program and not an education program are very similar in mind-set to the steroid or performance-enhancing abuser. You want the results without a lot of work."

"Education does take work and investment of time and effort. Drug testing takes little investment of time and effort, but [takes] money. It all depends on what you're trying to do."

—G.C.



Taylor Hooton pitches in a game for the Plano West High School baseball team in spring 2003. Hooton, who used steroids in an effort to bulk up and gain size, committed suicide in July 2003.

In addition to cost, random testing for steroids presents several other potential snags for school districts. One is that athletes take steroids in cycles, usually six to 12 weeks long, and perhaps will not have the drug in their systems when a random test is administered. And while Andro has joined steroids on the federal government's list of regulated drugs, supplements such as creatine remain legal, popular, and widely available.

According to Johnston, about one in 20 seniors interviewed in the 2003 study reported having used Andro within the past 12 months. One in seven used creatine, a nutritional product that promotes muscle growth, even though doctors recommend that it be taken under strict medical supervision.

"The thing that continues to concern me is the number of compounds that are being introduced into the market as dietary supplements that are clearly fairly potent androgenic-anabolic steroids," says Larry Bowers, senior managing director of the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, an independent organization that tests and enforces drug violations by Olympic athletes. "Access is relatively easy until the time we get some control over some of these substances."

### High cost, mixed results

Even with the authority to test, districts face high costs if they want to move beyond the "traditional workplace model," which tests for marijuana, cocaine, opiates, amphetamines, and PCP. Customized drug screens that look for alcohol or steroids can cost \$50 to \$125 per test.

The Northwestern School Corporation near Kokomo, Ind., has had a drug-testing policy since 1998. Established after reports of increased drug use among Northwestern's teens, the

policy allows for random tests of athletes, students in extracurricular activities, and those who drive cars to school. But Superintendent Ryan Snoddy says the 1,700-student district has no plans to test students for steroid use.

"It's cost, mostly," Snoddy says. "The testing agency we work with will allow us to select so many students to be tested for steroids, but it does have to be random, and we run the risk of paying for a test on a student driver. That's another reason why we haven't gone in that direction."

Cost has not deterred the Paradise Valley Unified School District in Phoenix. Since 1992, the district has randomly tested up to 24 student athletes each month for steroids and other drugs. The cost: \$22,000 a year, paid with funds from a federal drug-prevention grant.

Jim Lee, director of student services, says the district is so large—enrollment averages 2,000 at each of its five high schools—that the cost is "a drop in the bucket." Lee says the random testing resulted in only six positives—two for alcohol and four for prescription medications the students were using—in 2003-04. No students tested positive for steroids.

Paradise Valley's policy, like Northwestern's, has survived

court challenges. It also requires students and parents to sign consent forms before the start of the athletic season.

"Common sense tells us that if kids know and consent to the process prior to the season, then you can clearly decrease usage," Lee says. "It's fair, it's confidential, and I think it's effective based on the results we have."

### **Policy but no testing**

For some districts, drug testing of athletes is seen not as a deterrent but as an ineffective use of scant resources.

California's Arcadia Unified School District, located 20 miles outside Los Angeles, approved a policy in April 2003 that specifically addresses students who use steroids and performance-enhancing drugs. The policy, which does not provide for testing, requires that students in grades 7-12 receive lessons on the effects of steroids. Coaches must also supply information to students and parents on the district's policy and the dangers of using performance-enhancing drugs.

The district had a voluntary drug-testing program at the high schools in the mid 1980s, says Arcadia school board member Joann Steinmeier, but the policy "had diminishing returns" and

## **LOOKING TO GET AN EDGE**

COMPETITIVE ATHLETES—especially boys—are always looking for ways to become stronger and faster. Coaches tell a student athlete to "bulk up" or "hit the weights" during the off-season. And if that doesn't work, research shows that students increasingly are turning to supplements and performance-enhancing drugs to speed up the process.

"All of these kids are looking for something to get an edge, whether it's to enhance performance or get bigger or stronger," says Warren Moon, a certain future Hall of Fame quarterback who played professional football for 23 seasons. "We're living in a society where kids don't have patience. They don't want to wait. They want the quickest result, and steroids get the quickest results out there."

Boys are by far the largest steroid users, University of Michigan researcher Lloyd Johnston says, noting that they play the sports—baseball, football, track and field, and wrestling—where the drug provides the most obvious performance benefits.

And risks. Steroids increase the risk of heart attacks, liver disease, sterility, and high cholesterol. Users are subject to "roid rages"—sudden shifts in mood that can leave you angry one minute and weeping the next. Those who try to get off the drugs risk severe depression or even suicide, as in the case of Texas student athlete Taylor Hooton.

"Part of the difficulty is that athletes tend to be in a state of denial about their physical health," says Leigh Steinberg, a California-based agent who has represented NFL players for three decades. "Young people believe they're omnipotent, and long-term health for them is an abstraction. The combina-

tion of these is lethal when it comes to the attitudes they form toward something like steroids."

Complicating matters is the training regimen for today's high school athlete, who increasingly specializes in one sport rather than two or three. For the top athletes pursuing scholarships, year-round work on conditioning and training in a single sport is now the norm, not the exception.

"The pressure to perform at such an elite level used to be limited to college and beyond, but now it has been moved down to the high schools," says Greg Schwab, assistant principal at Shorewood High School in Shoreline, Wash., and a former steroid user. "Athletes have an in season and an out of season, where they lift weights, attend camps, and focus on getting better and better. Always better."

"Kids are not allowed to be kids anymore. I keep wondering: When do they get to be kids?"

Schwab used steroids to bulk up to 310 pounds while playing on the offensive line at the University of Oregon in the mid 1980s, a period in which the drug was widely used both in colleges and in the NFL. Now carrying 220 pounds on his 6-foot, 8-inch frame, Schwab talks to parents and students about the drug's negative effects and worries about today's athletes.

"Adolescents are such short-term thinkers. They just don't think 10 to 20 years down the road," Schwab says. "I hate to sound like a hypocrite, but I don't want kids to go down the same road. I was lucky. I know people whose lives were ruined."

People just like Taylor Hooton.—G.C.

no longer was cost-effective.

"We know that we can't expel kids for using legal drugs, so what do we do if we test students and find out they're using a legal herbal supplement? What can we do with that?" Steinmeier says. "It's not going to help the situation, and it's going to make us look silly."

Steinmeier says the board "batted around" the policy at six different meetings and decided that "coaches were the way to go." Coaches who knowingly allow a student to use steroids or a performance-enhancing supplement face disciplinary measures, including termination.

Bill Walsh, the former San Francisco 49ers and Stanford University coach and one of the most respected minds in football, agrees with Steinmeier, even though he thinks testing should be part of the equation. Walsh says districts should educate coaches on the effects of steroids and hold the staff accountable if a student is caught using performance-enhancing drugs.

"Some coaches are totally irresponsible, and because they're not very bright they'll do anything to win," Walsh says. "Kids are dying and destroying themselves, and this has got to stop from the top down. The state superintendent has to go to the district superintendent, and then down to the principals. Coaches need to be approached and directed on this, educated if necessary, or terminated if necessary. It's that severe."

### Competition and pressure

Plano, where Taylor Hooton went to school, is similar to Arcadia and Paradise Valley in several ways. All are large suburban school districts with high-achieving students and well-regarded athletic programs. Many of the students come from mid- to high-income families.

"This is a competitive town," Don Hooton says. "It is competitive among the adults, who are trying to do better than the Joneses do, and that flows over very, very visibly into the kids. It shows up in their possessions. It flows over onto the athletic field. There's competition to make the teams, to make the starting lineup. It's very visible and very open."

Hooton describes Taylor as a child who wanted to be part of the in-crowd. And he wanted to be as successful on the mound as his older brother, who received a four-year scholarship to pitch at Gwinnett-Mercy College in Pennsylvania.

"Anytime you have a suicide, you go through 100 what-ifs," Hooton says. "I hate to use the word pressure, because where do you draw the line between encouragement and pushing kids to succeed vs. pressuring them to succeed? I really don't think we pressured our sons, but we got caught up in wanting them to succeed and be winners. Did we push Taylor? Yes, we did, but we needed someone to help educate him, too."

Plano has twice been rocked by a series of student deaths, first in a rash of teen suicides in the early 1980s, then by a large number of heroin overdoses by high schoolers in 1997. The district does not have a specific drug-testing policy in place for students, however, and is not likely to have one soon, says Larry Guinn, the district's former director of student services.

"I'm for drug testing," says Guinn, who retired June 30. "I re-

ally don't know people who are against it. But parents can go get a child tested anytime they want to. Is it the place of the school district to do that?"

Guinn says the district has worked closely with the city's police department and public and private service providers to help curb drug use, both in the schools and in the community.

"This is not just a school problem," he says. "This is a societal problem, a community problem. Until all the different entities are willing to get together and say 'Enough's enough,' we're pretty limited in what we can do with the student population."

### Speaking out, speaking up

Hooton has made several presentations to Plano students on the dangers of steroids and performance-enhancing drugs, and Guinn says he is welcome to return. But that's where much of the common ground between the two ends.

Steroid use among the district's athletes is more widespread than Plano school officials admit, Hooton says, and he believes coaches have turned a blind eye to it. Guinn says the district has planned education programs for coaches during the summer months, but he does not believe steroid use is as big an issue as Hooton does.

"If we've got one kid abusing steroids, there's a problem," Guinn says. "But cocaine use, marijuana use, alcohol use—we've got to hit them all. If we put our efforts only on one thing, it would be a bit simpler, but we're dealing with problems all over."

After Taylor died, more than 3,000 people attended his funeral. In the ensuing days, Hooton says his son's teammates and friends told him numerous stories of students who were using performance-enhancing drugs.

"For the two weeks following his funeral, the kids opened up to us in a way that kids don't normally open up," Hooton says. "We got a window into what was going on because of a unique set of circumstances."

"They told us where the steroids come from, how much they cost, how they used them, how many kids are using them. They had no reason at that point to be lying or bragging. They were ashamed of it. They were embarrassed."

Since Hooton started speaking out—he has been on "60 Minutes" and featured in *People* magazine over the past six months—he says Taylor's teammates and friends have stopped being so open. But he has no plans to stop talking.

"This stuff is happening, and our school administrators have got to, first, be aware of the problem, and second, have a plan to train these boys to help them make the right choices," says Hooton, who has formed a nonprofit foundation—[www.taylorhooton.org](http://www.taylorhooton.org)—to raise funds for steroid education.

"I'm going to keep on saying it until something happens across this nation. Taylor is my last child, and this has become our purpose in life here, to make sure he did not die without helping someone else."

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