With Greenies Banned, Up for a Cup of Coffee?

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Published: April 1, 2006

For perhaps half a century, amphetamines have been accessible to major league baseball players. If players were weary after a late night out, a long trip or a streak of tiring games, they could find the pep pills almost as readily as they could sip coffee or swig soda.

The use of amphetamines to increase energy levels throughout a draining season has, over the decades, been one of baseball's dirty little secrets, although gradually it was not much of a secret anymore. Many owners, managers and reporters knew that some players were using "greenies" or "beans," the common names for these stimulants in clubhouses.

But a practice that was essentially winked at will no longer go unpunished now that Major League Baseball has rules banning the use of amphetamines. For the first time, baseball will test for them, meaning that any number of players will have to adjust. Amid the uproar over baseball's tangled relationship with steroids, greenies have been tossed out of the game. Those who try to keep using them could soon
find themselves facing suspensions.

"Anybody who thinks you can go through the season normally and your body can just respond normally, after what we go through, is unreasonable," said Eric Chavez, the third baseman for the Oakland Athletics. "I'm not saying taking away greenies isn't a good thing, but guys are definitely going to look for something as a replacement."

What will those replacements be? Anything that comes close to doing what greenies did, so anything with caffeine. Several players said they thought coffee, lots of it and no decaf, please, could become as standard as water in dugouts. Others said energy drinks, which are already baseball staples, would grow in popularity. Some teams are also offering energizing jellybeans, with emphasis on the jelly.

Observing players this spring was a sign of what to expect. Barry Bonds of the San Francisco Giants held a coffee cup an hour before a game. Derek Jeter of the Yankees favored Red Bull, the energy drink. Ron Villone, another Yankee, brewed green tea. Jay Payton of the Athletics drank soda, even though it was 9:30 in the morning.

"I guarantee guys are trying to find something simply because it's a grind going out there every single night," said Tom Glavine, a pitcher for the Mets. "Someone needs to put a Starbucks or a Dunkin' Donuts, or both, right by Shea."

Chavez echoed Glavine's theme, with an investor's twist.

"I know they put in a new Starbucks near here," Chavez said, referring to Phoenix Municipal Stadium, the Athletics' spring-training home. "Everybody was saying, 'Go buy stock in Starbucks.' "

Since 1970, using amphetamines without a prescription has been a federal crime. Still, that never deterred certain players, who used them to fight fatigue and to sharpen their focus. One reason amphetamines are popular is because they arouse the central nervous system, making users feel more alert.

Dr. Gary I. Wadler, a New York University medical professor who is a steroid expert, said amphetamines could cause heart attacks, hypertension, heat illness and convulsions. Wadler said amphetamines were particularly
effective in fatigued people because they camouflage their discomfort and help their concentration.

"Do they work?" Wadler said. "Yes, they work. Do they work differently than steroids? Yes, they work differently. But we're not talking about degrees of cheating. We're talking about cheating."

Rather than seeking replacements for amphetamines, some baseball people have prescribed increased rest.

"You can't be out in those bars with any regularity anymore because you ain't got help now," said Ron Washington, the third-base coach for the Athletics.

Payton said, "Guys who are 25 are going to have to treat themselves like they're 35."

Omar Vizquel, the Giants' shortstop, was adamant about his disdain for something others around him have apparently used.

"I don't believe a simple drug or a simple pill can get you through 162 games," Vizquel said. "I never believe in stuff like that."

It is impossible to know the percentage of major leaguers who were using amphetamines. Players and team executives speculated that anywhere from a few to more than half of the players on a given 25-man roster have been users.

Phil Garner, the manager of the Houston Astros, said that he used greenies as a player and was disturbed by the side effects. Garner said he was irritable, experienced weight loss and slept unevenly. While the greenies sometimes worked, Garner said his body built up a tolerance, and he quit using them.

"It becomes a psychological addiction," Garner said. "You think you can't play through it."

How players will adapt without amphetamines is one of the more intriguing questions surrounding this season. Will there be a difference in the total games played by individual players? Will players be listless without a greenie boost? Will there be a drop-off in the quality of play?

Frank Thomas, Oakland's designated hitter, said some players might drag in the steamy days of August and
estimated that players who used to start 150 games might start 135. Jason Grimsley, a pitcher for the Arizona Diamondbacks, said it might be sensible to boost rosters to 30 from 25.

Thomas was one of several players who said the teams with the most depth would benefit from a world without amphetamines because players are going to need more games off.

Glavine and Al Leiter, who recently retired from the Yankees, said they did not condone using greenies, but both gave lengthy discourses on why players reached for them: Players tried to combat difficult hours, handle the endless travel and make a weary body come to life.

Grimsley said that greenies have "been part of the game" at least since Jim Bouton wrote about them in "Ball Four," his landmark book in 1970. Commissioner Bud Selig has said he first heard about greenies in the Milwaukee Braves' clubhouse in 1958. All these years later, he is adamant about eradicating them in baseball, citing the health risk.

Others, like Grimsley, do not seem quite as concerned. "There are some things that don't need to be in the game, but there are things that have been in it for a long time," Grimsley said. "It's almost like they're trying to change everything about baseball. It's become sterilized."

Or clean, which, Wadler stressed, is how it is supposed to be.

"They are against the law," Wadler said. "Their use violates federal law. I've maintained they should have violated baseball law, too."

Players have often had the choice of two types of coffee at the ballpark, one regular and one with stimulants. That will no longer be the case.

Mickey Hatcher, the batting coach for the Los Angeles Angels, said he never noticed two variations of coffee while he played.

"There were a couple of times where I was good and wired," Hatcher said, laughing. "I might have gotten the wrong coffee."

Unlike steroid use, which carries a 50-game ban for the first offense and leads to a lifetime suspension for the third offense, amphetamine use is not being punished as
severely.

Every player will be tested at least twice for amphetamines during 2006. Players whose urine test includes evidence of amphetamines will face mandatory evaluation and follow-up testing after the first offense. The second positive test will lead to a 25-game suspension and the third will be 80 games. Selig will decide the penalty for a fourth offense.

Chavez said he was happy that the Athletics have an espresso machine. Miguel Batista said some players on the Diamondbacks wondered if cola will be banished next. Leiter said that some players would keep searching for a boost and, since greenies are forbidden, they would choose the next best option.

"Guys will always find something," Leiter said. "Even if they have to go to the local truck stop to get some No-Doz, they'll find something to get them through."
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