Doping and Dietary Supplements: How to Avoid Spiking

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How the NSF Certified for Sport program can help athletes avoid unintentional doping.

Lance Armstrong is the latest sports luminary to see his medals evaporate and his reputation crash on the shoals of doping accusations. On August 23, the seven-time Tour de France winner stated that he would not continue to contest charges levied against him by the United States Anti-Doping Agency. Although the case against Armstrong is mired in controversy, and Armstrong never tested positive for any banned substance, the athlete’s surrender made front-page news. Instead of going into sports’ all-time hall of fame, Armstrong now joins too many talented but tainted competitors in a hall of infamy. But at least Armstrong didn’t blame his troubles on use of so-called supplements, as so many have.

“Unfortunately, supplements are an easy target for the initial blame of a failed banned-substance test,” says Ed Wyszumiala, general manager of NSF International’s Dietary Supplement Certification Program. Nevertheless, he acknowledges, there also are instances in which contaminated products have caused a positive test.

As one of the largest testing organizations in the world, NSF International certifies more than 600 dietary supplements and sports nutrition products. In addition, it developed the NSF/ANSI Standard 173, which it says is the only official American national standard for supplements. This standard is critical in helping protect consumers by testing for contaminants and certifying that supplement labels are correct.

In the sports arena, says Wyszumiala, the best way for a supplement company to protect both the athletes and its brand is to have products certified to the NSF Certified for Sport program, which screens supplements and sports nutrition products for more than 170 prohibited/banned substances. Among the leading athletic organizations utilizing this program are the National Football League, Major League Baseball, Professional Golfers Association, Ladies Professional Golfers Association, and the Canadian Center for Ethics in Sport.

In general, says Wyszumiala, NSF finds very few problems. On the other hand, “For testing projects where NSF is contracted to perform market surveillance screening of a particular product category, such as bodybuilding supplements or weight loss products, we have found a fair number of products that could cause a positive doping test.”

In Wyszumiala’s judgment, the NSF Certified for Sport program can help athletes avoid unintentional doping. It is a “great win for athletes, consumers, and the supplement industry, as it would enhance the industry’s credibility among athletes and consumers and allow them to take supplements with trust and confidence.”

And perhaps it would keep us from enduring sad, embarrassing situations such as the Armstrong case.

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