



©TIM TADDER/CORBIS (BACKGROUND); COURTESY OF THE HOOTON FAMILY (INSET)



**NARRATIVE  
NONFICTION**  
Reads like fiction—  
but it's all true

# DYING TO BE STRONG

One young athlete's story shows how the pressure for bigger muscles can lead to tragedy

BY ELIZABETH FOY LARSEN



**AS YOU READ,  
THINK ABOUT:**

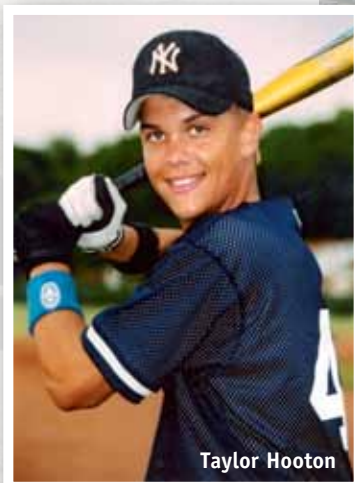
What are the causes and effects of steroid abuse?

**T**aylor Hooton had everything going for him. Popular, with an impressive 3.8 GPA, the 17-year-old loved relaxing with friends and cruising around in his truck with his girlfriend. He was the kind of guy who had a friendly word for everyone. And he was a talented baseball

pitcher who dreamed of going pro.

Then, the summer before his senior year of high school, Taylor went upstairs to his bedroom and hanged himself. In the tortured days that followed, his family wondered what could have compelled such a healthy and successful kid to take his own life. Their answer came after the police searched Taylor's bedroom and found a stash of anabolic steroids.

Anabolic-androgenic steroids—also called '*roids* and *juice*'—are illegal drugs unless prescribed by a doctor. These steroids mimic the effects of **testosterone** in the body, causing muscle cells to produce **protein** at a faster rate—



Taylor Hooton

which leads to bigger muscles.

Some athletes take anabolic steroids as **performance-enhancing drugs** to quickly build muscle and endurance. Using steroids this way, sometimes called doping, is banned in professional sports—and it's against the law. Still, hundreds of professional and Olympic athletes have been disgraced—some even stripped of their awards and medals—after admitting to doping. Yet even as steroid scandals continue to make headlines, young people continue to risk their health—and their lives—by using these drugs.

## Fits of Rage

In the months before Taylor's death, his parents noticed that he had seriously bulked up. In preparation for baseball tryouts, Taylor had been training hard, and his parents believed his new muscles were a result of an intense weight-lifting program and a strict regimen of protein shakes.

The real story, however, was that when Taylor was 16, a coach in his hometown of Plano, Texas, told him that if he wanted to make the varsity team, he'd need to get bigger. This advice still shocks his father, Don Hooton. "Taylor was already 6'1½" and 175 pounds," Hooton says. "We're still scratching our heads that a coach told a kid he needed to get bigger."

At least half the boys on Taylor's baseball team were using steroids, says Hooton. "Taylor didn't have to look far to see how the other

boys were getting bigger."

According to a 2012 study in the journal *Pediatrics*, 1 in 20 teenagers (ages 12-18) have used steroids in their quest to bulk up. Yet few realize what these drugs do to their bodies. In both boys and girls, steroids can cause extreme acne on the face, back, and chest; permanent baldness; stunted growth; liver damage; cancer; and heart disease. Steroid use can also lead to behavior changes, causing uncontrolled fits of rage and irrational thinking. And the solution isn't as simple as quitting. For those who stop taking steroids without the help of a doctor, the results can be catastrophic: deep depression and suicidal thoughts.

This, doctors explained to Taylor's parents, is what likely happened to their son. And in retrospect, the signs of steroid abuse were there: Taylor had developed severe acne and his parents had sent him to a psychiatrist because he had become moody and depressed. But at the time, no one put it all together.

## A Dangerous Quest

Athletes have been looking for ways to get a competitive edge since the dawn of time. In ancient Greece, some athletes took herb-and-mushroom supplements thought to make people faster and stronger. Others feasted on animal hearts or took stimulants to prevent fatigue. Some of these practices were against the rules; those who got caught lost their honor. Disgraced athletes were fined and the money was used to make statues of Zeus that were inscribed with names of the cheaters and how they had cheated.

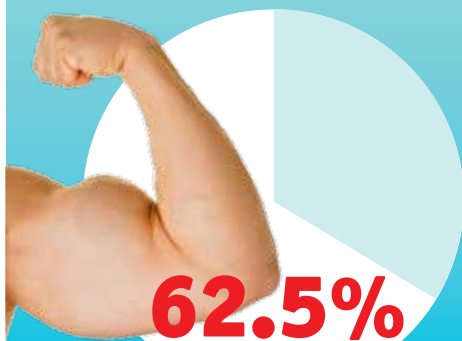
Lance Armstrong's doping destroyed his cycling career and cast a dark shadow on competitive sports.



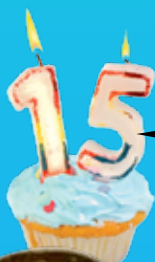
Weightlifting is an ancient activity, but it did not become an organized sport in the U.S. until the 1920s.



## KIDS\* AND STEROIDS: THE FACTS



of steroid users  
**DO IT TO IMPROVE  
THEIR APPEARANCE**



**MEDIAN AGE**  
for first-time  
steroid users

**1.5 MILLION  
TEENS**  
admit to using steroids



**TEEN GIRLS**  
are the fastest-  
growing group  
of new users

\*ages 12 to 19; Source: Taylor Hooton Foundation

But it wasn't until the 20th century that doping

became widespread, particularly among Olympians. Even after doping caused Danish cyclist Knud Jensen to collapse and die during the 1960 Rome Olympics, many athletes continued to dope. (The Olympics banned performance-enhancing drugs in 1968.) More recently, cyclist Lance Armstrong admitted to having doped for years. He was stripped of all his medals, including his seven Tour de France wins, and banned from cycling for life. Baseball stars like Alex Rodriguez and Ryan Braun

have also been implicated in doping scandals.

### Muscle Mania

Just a few decades ago, ultra-muscular bodies were seen mainly on circus performers and professional weight lifters. Not so today. Actors like Channing Tatum and Liam Hemsworth flaunt their muscular bare chests on magazine covers. Singers like Justin Bieber and Usher strut shirtless onstage, showing off their chiseled abs.

Of course, being fit is an important part of being healthy,

and for older teens, lifting weights can improve strength and athletic performance. (Doctors recommend that younger teens lift weights only under strict supervision, to avoid what could be serious injury to young muscles, tendons, and cartilage.) But in a University of Minnesota study of middle and high school students, 91 percent of boys said they had exercised over the past year for the single purpose of increasing their muscle mass, as opposed to just being healthy.

In online forums, teens chart their workout goals and share pictures of themselves. Photo galleries show boys who have undergone miraculous transformations from scrawny kids to Incredible Hulks. Are these pictures even real? It's unclear, since many of the faces are blocked out. Either way, these sites are popular with young people, and users post messages urging others to become as big as possible.



**Justin Bieber**  
spends a lot of  
time showing off  
his abs.

possible. "[Freshman year] I was such a beta, let girls walk all over me and let bigger boys bully me," writes an 18-year-old who goes by the name Maverickcrash. "[Now] I'm motivating the guys that were at my stage to get big and become real men."

This kind of thinking is a symptom of what Dr. Harrison Pope, an author and professor at Harvard



Medical School, calls “body obsession.” He says that the **black market** availability of anabolic steroids has created a new breed of bodies that set an unrealistically high bar for attractiveness. These unattainable standards can lead to a mental illness called **body dysmorphic** disorder. Sufferers of this illness can’t stop thinking about minor, or even imagined, flaws in their appearance. No matter how much they work out, some teens never feel like they’re “big enough.”

## No Miracles

Almost anyone can build muscles through exercise and diet, but just how big a person’s muscles can grow naturally is determined by **genetics**. So what about those guys you see in ads for bodybuilding supplements—the ones with massive biceps, carved abs, and turkey-drumstick calves?

“The message in these ads is that if you work hard and buy the right supplements, you’ll look this way,” says Pope. “But the vast majority of the people in these

images are taking steroids.”

Do the supplements and protein powders sold at fitness centers and health food stores do anything at all? Research shows that there is no benefit to consuming more protein than is recommended, and that most athletes get all the protein they need from food. Doctors dismiss the idea that supplements can build muscle at a miraculous rate. They also point out that though such supplements are legal, they are not **regulated** by the U.S.

In 1990, G.I. Joe action figures seriously beefed up. If Joe morphed into a human, he’d have a 29-inch waist and 16-inch biceps—awfully big arms for such a slender guy.



Many anabolic steroids that are obtained illegally are smuggled here from China. They are shipped in powder form then mixed with such substances as baby oil, peanut oil, and sometimes even horse urine before being sold.

In fact, experts at *Consumer Reports* caution that some nutritional supplements may contain dangerous substances, such as steroids, pesticides, and heavy metals that can be damaging to the body. They found similar **contaminants** in several brands of protein powders.

There is yet another risk to these types of products. For kids like Taylor Hooton, supplements can be a bridge to anabolic steroids.

## Permanent Decisions

It has been a decade since Taylor took his life. Today, his father is dedicating his life to educating young people about steroids. Along with friends and family, he started the Taylor Hooton Foundation, which works to prevent steroid abuse among middle and high school boys and girls. He travels the country, giving lectures and talking to kids, parents, and coaches, helping to educate others about what he wishes his son had known.

“Taylor didn’t understand that there are permanent decisions,” he says, “and he lost his life.” ●

## WRITING CONTEST

Imagine you are a blogger on a crusade to end steroid use among kids. Go back to the article and find at least three reasons young people take steroids. Then write a blog entry in which you explain why these are not good reasons for taking steroids. Send your response to **STERIODS CONTEST**. Five winners will receive a copy of *Gym Candy* by Carl Deuker. See page 2 for details.



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