

Written by Maury Brown
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As sports, politics, and zero-tolerance drug policies intersect, athletes are dealing with a culture shift in how they approach physical conditioning. In under 10-years, sports leagues have shifted their focus from curbing street-drug use to performance-enhancing substances.

That has created a dynamic that sees culture change in the ultra-competitive world of professional sports where every player seeks to gain advantage over their fellow athlete fighting for a roster position. Before, most anything was permissible, as long as someone didn't get caught red handed. Now, with strict policies that use suspensions as a means of discouraging PED use, careers can be dashed, depending on the star level the athlete is at.

When athletes look to gain maximum performance, the use of dietary supplements are employed.

As [reported last week](#) , Phillies reliever J.C. Romero and Yankees pitcher Sergio Mitre, who is currently with the Triple-A Scranton/Wilkes-Barre Yankees, have each been suspended 50 games for being in violation of MLB's drug policy after testing positive for banned substance. Both suspensions will begin at the beginning of the season.

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According to comments by Romero, and confirmed through statement by the MLB Players Association, the two players unknowingly ingested the banned substances through the use of supplements, purchased over the counter in the U.S.

The case was challenged by the players, and the MLBPA before an arbitrator who cited player negligence – they should have been more careful as to the supplements they were ingesting as MLB and the MLBPA have an 800 number that players can call, and are given a “safe list” of nutritional supplements, certified by Ann Arbor, MI based NSF International, a not-for-profit, non-governmental organization that, according to NSF, “develops national standards, provides learning opportunities through its Center for Public Health Education, and provides third-party conformity assessment services while representing the interests of all stakeholders,” many including the largest of U.S. sports leagues ([see the NSF list](#) that is [linked to from the MLB Players Association website](#)).

In the wake of the Romero and Mitre suspensions, we caught up with Edward Wyszumiala, General Manager of [NSF International](#) to get a better understanding of what is involved in the certification process, the leagues that NSF has agreements with, the possible risks associated with players purchasing supplements over-the-counter, the specter of “super-cafeinated” products, and their associated health risks as players in MLB are faced with stimulants as a banned substance, and the educational process that is on-going for the professional athletes that fall under the drug testing policies for their respective leagues. –

Maury Brown

Select [Read More](#) to see the interview with Edward Wyszumiala

Maury Brown for the Business of Sports Network: *For those that may not know about NSF, what service do you provide sports leagues?*

Edward Wyszumiala: NSF performs the testing and certification, as well as provides educational programs for dietary supplements for many professional sports leagues. The certification program has four key components, including:

1. GMP auditing of the manufacturing facility,
2. a toxicological review of the product’s formulation and substantiation of any product

claims,

3. an annual label claim test to ensure the product is meeting its declared nutritional values and is free from microbial and heavy metal contamination, and

4. the banned substance screening for batches of product that are being sent to professional and elite athletes.

The NSF Mark is only placed on products that meet all four of these components. Ongoing monitoring helps ensure continued compliance with these requirements.

Bizball: *What leagues currently work with NSF?*

"NSF currently has programs with MLB/MLBPA, NFL/NFLPA, CCES - Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport."

Wyszumiala: NSF currently has programs with MLB/MLBPA, NFL/NFLPA, CCES – Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport. We also provide educational resources on supplement matters to other organizations, such as PGA, LPGA and the NBA.

Bizball: *There were recently two suspensions in MLB (J.C. Romero and Sergio Mitre) after testing positive for a banned substance. What are some of the risks involved with some of the over-the-counter supplements that athletes may purchase?*

Wyszumiala: There are risks associated with dietary supplements leading to athletes testing positive. In many cases, poor manufacturing and cross contamination can be a root cause for trace levels of an undeclared banned substances finding its way into a supplement.

One area that we have recently seen as problematic relates to compounds that are designed to mimic a banned substance. The compounds are being used as the active ingredient in sports supplements. These products formulations are evaluated during the toxicological review and

excluded for NSF's certification program, as their similar structure could potentially lead to a positive doping result.

The third area of concern is if a company is adulterating their product in order for it to achieve a desired effect, or in order to gain market share. A product can be placed on the market with a false label that is spiked with a banned substance for effect. Unfortunately, these products are not detected until someone finds out that the product is tainted and tests positive as a result. This is why certification is so crucial. Certification creates a level playing field for athletes committed to fair play by certifying sports supplements that have the appropriate guidelines and provides key preventive measures to:

- Protect against adulteration of products
- Verify label claims with product contents
- Identify inappropriate substances in the finished product

Bodybuilding supplements as a category is very broad, as any supplement could be considered useful in the category. NSF has tested and certified several products that have good corroborating science to substantiate their claims, such as amino acids, protein powders and creatine. Other products, such as testosterone boosters and aromatase inhibitors are more problematic and would be product categories that NSF would not certify.

Bizball: *Can the same be said of diuretics, such as we saw in the Starcaps case?*

Wyszumiala: Diuretic contamination can also cause a positive test, as well as steroids, since many are banned by the specific leagues and by WADA. There are exceptions if an athlete has a therapeutic exemption to take a particular substance.

As a product category, NSF does not certify weight loss supplements, due to the category's problem with adulterants and undeclared pharmaceutical ingredients. Just last week, the FDA has issued a report stating that they have found 41 new products that were adulterated with a pharmaceutical undeclared active ingredient, one of which was StarCaps, bringing the total number of weight loss products found to be adulterated by the FDA to near 70.

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Bizball: *MLB and the MLBPA just released the annual report from the Independent Program Administrator for MLB's Joint Drug Prevention and Treatment Program, and it sees a continuing increase in the number of therapeutic use exemptions for ADHD. With the banning of stimulants in MLB, is your lab seeing any substances that could be considered a stimulant along the lines of Ephedrine?*

Wyszumiala: Issues that deal with the prescriptions and exemptions for players whom have been diagnosed with ADHD or other medical issues do not fall within the scope of NSF's Athletic Banned Substances Certification Program. Rather, NSF strongly encourages athletes to check with their health care providers before taking any supplements NSF does not have a position as we are not the medical doctor or advisor dealing with health of the player. NSF's role is to test and certify dietary supplements that will reduce the risk of a player testing positive from taking a certified supplement.

"There is a serious health concern regarding supplements are that contain extreme dosages of stimulants, creating a similar effect to Ephedrine."

Bizball: *What are some of the health risks associated to these new substances?*

Wyszumiala: There is a serious health concern regarding supplements are that contain extreme dosages of stimulants, creating a similar effect to Ephedrine. Many of these products contain toxic or close to toxic levels of caffeine, along with other herbal stimulants that can lead to severe health effects, such as heart palpitations and arrhythmia, tachycardia, hypertension and muscle tremors to mention a few. These negative health effects should be taken seriously by a player or coach before consuming a stimulant-based dietary supplement. Again, NSF highly recommends the consultation with a physician before use of any of these products.

Bizball: *Finally, how important is it for professional athletes that are under these drug testing policies to be informed, and why?*

Interview - Edward Wyszumiala, NSF Int'l on Supplement Certification for Athletes

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Wyszumiala: It is extremely important for all athletes to be informed about supplements they are taking, and that these products could potentially lead to a positive doping test. Athletes have to consider what is at stake when choosing a dietary supplement, especially with the history of adulteration and contamination that has been reported. At the end of the day, the only person who is responsible for taking a product, is the person who ingests it.

The supplement category can provide many benefits for athletes in helping to balance their overall diet and aiding in replenishment of nutrients, recovery after working out and building of lean muscle mass.

The NSF program is designed to help build a bridge between the athletic community and supplement industry, where independent evaluation and testing allows responsible companies to provide tested and certified products to athletes with confidence that the product he/or she is taking has been screened for banned substances and manufactured in a facility that does not manufacture, process, warehouse or distribute any of the listed prohibited substances.

Interview conducted by Maury Brown