DYING TO BE STRONG

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

BY ELIZABETH FOY LARSEN

Taylor 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—
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.
Muscle Mania

Just a few decades ago, ultra-muscled 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. “[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. Food and Drug Administration. That means that supplement manufacturers don’t have to prove that their health claims are accurate.

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.”