

# Pumping Irons

Gary Player claims pro golfers are doping. The PGA insists the sport is clean. Who's right?

**G**ary Player doesn't need controversy, but for months now he has hardly been able to get a break from it.

A manageable one appears to be brewing at the present moment.

"Okay, my darling," he says, indicating that he'll just be a few moments longer on the call. "Here is what I suggest: Listen to your mother. Yes, yes...I love you, too. Just remember what I tell you: Listen to your mother."

He smiles when he hangs up. "I have six children and 19 grandchildren," he says. "Number 20 is on the way. It's a great blessing."

The 72-year-old South African has indeed had a blessed existence. *Golf Digest*, *Golf* and *Asian Golf* all rate him as one of the top-ten players ever, a legacy etched in the trophies of 163 championships, including nine majors and golf's grand slam. Known as the Black Knight for the dark clothes he preferred in competition, he parlayed renown into riches with golf-related licensing arrangements and businesses.

I visited him at a house he and a small staff use as an office in a real estate development he has created called Blair Atholl, 40 minutes north of Johannesburg. Floor-to-ceiling windows look out on a landscape of bushveld and horse paddocks, with an inconspicuous golf course threading through pitched-roofed, earth-colored homes that start around \$2 million. The sun is sinking below a ridge on a mild winter evening in August. The seasons are reversed in the southern hemisphere, and Player is hoping to get his world right-side-up again with a brief holiday at home.

It all started back in July at the British Open when Player told reporters that he knew of "at least one" pro golfer taking steroids, and that he had heard of other



players using a range of performance-enhancing drugs.

How did he know this? In confidence, Player said, two golfers had spoken to him about using drugs, telling him that they knew other players were using as well. Player refused to name names, but he speculated that the number of golfers using substances such as creatine, human growth hormone and steroids could be as

“Very few [golfers] come straight out and ask. They say, ‘Hey, doc, what’s all this talk about this HGH stuff?’”

many as ten or even “a hell of a lot more.”

The golfing community bunkered down in denials, with many deriding Player.

“Just how Gary has this particular piece of information that nobody else seems to have is a bit of a mystery to me,” said Peter Dawson, secretary of the R&A, golf’s ruling body in Scotland. “It goes down as another one of the smallest of unsubstantiated rumors about performance-enhancing substances in golf.”

Tiger Woods, who has supported testing and subsequently added that he’d support harsh penalties for offenders, said, “If anything, probably out here it would be testing positive for maybe being hungover a little bit. But that’s about it...I really don’t see anybody doing anything, or have heard of anybody doing anything.” Paul Azinger said, “Gary may have put his foot in his mouth a little bit.” Others, among them Phil Mickelson and Colin Montgomerie, piled on.

Player, an apostle of fitness and nutrition back when a “six pack” described what golfers drank, not sculpted abs, withstood the fallout.

Sitting with me in his home office in Blair Atholl, he seems at once piqued and hurt, and maybe even a little naive. He says simply, “I have to tell the truth.”

For golfers, from duffers to professionals, honor is a matter of pride. This is, after all, the only major sport where players keep their own score and are expected to own up if they do something wrong. Except for blatant violations, the umpire’s role is

only to clarify, not enforce, rules. The idea that golfers are cheating with drugs goes against everything the game stands for.

Even so, the World Golf Foundation, an association of the sport’s major organizations, including the R&A, America’s PGA, the LPGA, the European Tour and others, had been working on an anti-doping policy even before Player’s comments caused so much controversy.

This past fall, the Foundation announced the first phase of a program, including a list of banned substances similar to those outlawed by the World Anti-Doping Agency (a group founded in 1999 by the International Olympic Committee), and a period of education for players. The second phase would establish testing protocols, penalties and appeals procedures for violators.

But golf’s position is that it is now and always has been clean. Golf, said PGA Commissioner Tim Finchem at a teleconference announcing the anti-doping policy, had arrived at “a day where we are going to be proactive in light of the realities of what’s happening...But for the problems in other sports, I doubt we would be at this point.”

In an interview, Ty Votaw, a PGA spokesman, told me, “There has never been any cheating in golf. Until [now] there was no policy. Therefore there couldn’t have been any cheating.”

This might seem like a technicality-based defense. Common sense says that juicing is cheating, even without a stated policy prohibiting it. The real question is how steroids and other drugs that build muscle would help golfers at all.

Anabolic steroids add strength and speed. There are hundreds of varieties on the market, according to Michael Bahrke, coeditor of *Performance Enhancing Substances in Sport and Exercise*, all outlawed by professional sports and the International Olympic Committee. But golf, even as

courses have stretched out like taffy, isn’t really a game of muscle. The adage that you drive for show and putt for dough is backed by the fact that only 2 of the 20 best distance drivers, Woods and Adam Scott, are also ranked in the top-20 money list.

But the tee shot sets up the approach, and strength matters. Moreover, there are other performance-enhancing drugs. Beta-blockers, which slow down the heart rate (and appear on the World Golf Foundation’s list of banned substances), are popular among athletes who have to deal with focused, high-pressure situations. The drug of choice among golfers, some insiders say, is human

growth hormone, a naturally occurring chemical in the body. A synthetic version of HGH is touted for regenerating tissue, increasing lean muscle and reducing fat.

Critics who oppose the use of synthetic HGH, which is banned by both the International Olympic Committee and the World Anti-Doping Agency, say side effects could include chronic fatigue, carpal tunnel syndrome and liver damage. Other doctors swear by it. “It’s the fountain of youth,” says Daniel Cosgrove, M.D., the medical director of the WellMax Center for Preventative Medicine, a resort wellness clinic at La Quinta Resort & Spa in California.

Unlike anabolic steroids, HGH hasn’t been proven to add bulk or speed. Instead, proponents say, it helps the body recover faster.

Every athlete gets injured, and those injuries interfere with training, which has to be progressive if you’re going to improve. The fewer injuries you have, the more continuity you have in training. In other words, HGH’s benefit is durability, which in turn enables you to benefit from training. It may not help you drive the ball or sink a putt, but it can take care of a back strain that would have kept you on the sideline.

Former Los Angeles Dodgers general manager and vice president Kevin Malone says you can’t underestimate the allure to athletes of anything that would prevent injuries or boost energy. He puts it in baseball terms: “It’s not about how you show up on Opening Day. It’s what happens in game 138. The balls that you were hitting

out are only getting to the warning track.”

By the end of the 2008 season, the golf establishment may well be able to announce that no golfers tested positive for any banned drug. Those who criticized Gary Player this summer will tout this as a testament to the sport’s purity.

In fact, critics say, test results may not prove anything at all. That’s because a lot of performance-enhancing drugs are all but impossible to detect.

There is no reliable test for HGH; its alleged popularity among golfers is due to its benefits and its undetectability. Indeed, even with anabolic steroids, the masking agents are difficult to identify and detectable only with a blood test, which athletes in other sports have successfully opposed as too invasive. Urine tests are expedient—and unreliable.

“The new policy is a joke,” says Vic Naumov, a chiropractor specializing in sports medicine who founded the New Milford, N.J.-based National Coalition for the Advancement of Drug-Free Athletics. “These designer drugs are so sophisticated and are designed to supersede any test. Only a very sloppy person would get caught.” He’s been trying to rally pro athletes to speak up—with limited success.

Former professional wrestler Marc Mero appeared as Johnny B. Badd during a career that lasted from 1991 to 1995. The double-murder-suicide by his colleague Chris Benoit earlier this year was a turning point for Mero, who began Champion of Choices and speaks to schoolchildren about the dangers of steroids and drugs.

“There’s a code of silence that goes along with [drug use],” Mero says. “Who is going to be the first golfer to say it? The guy will be ostracized. I’m the most hated guy in wrestling right now. No one’s going to snitch.”

Gary Player, well-liked throughout his five-decade-long career, may have that label now—though some PGA Tour players and sportswriters in the media have criticized him for not going further and outing his sources. The physicians writing prescriptions cannot give information on patients and would in any case be incriminating themselves if they did.

But doctors I interviewed who had turned away athletes, including Tour golfers, suggest that Player’s estimate of

“at least ten” rogue Tour players could be conservative indeed.

“I see golfers on a weekly basis,” says Dr. Johnny Benjamin, chairman of the orthopedics department at the Indian River Medical Center in Vero Beach, Florida. “Very few come straight out and ask. They take your temperature. They say, ‘Hey, doc, what’s all this talk about this HGH stuff?’ If you’re responsive, they say, ‘What do you think of me using it?’”

How often does that happen?

“Seventy-five percent of the time. I can tell you that 9 of the last 12 golfers I’ve seen queried me.”

“If a person has a medical condition, it’s ethical [to use the drug],” he adds. “If it’s for enhancement, that’s unethical. But you get a gray zone. They come up with a bogus diagnosis, and you’re ‘treating’ it.”

And why would any doctor go along?

“It’s really good for your practice to say you have a professional athlete as a patient. If you go along with it, you get a call that this guy is sending one of his buddies in. The next thing you know, you’re one of the guys. You have the pictures on the office walls, you get tickets to the events. It’s a huge drug for the physicians, just to be able to say they’re friends with this one or that one.”

Cosgrove, the California wellness expert, is a big believer in HGH where use is legitimately indicated—in people middle-aged and older. “But there’s no way a young, healthy guy has a reason to be using it,” he says.

As for steroids and golf, he has some direct experience to relate. The same week that the World Golf Foundation announced its new policy, Cosgrove was approached by an internationally known golf figure who had consulted with him before.

“He wanted me to write a prescription for Winstrol for his son,” Cosgrove recounts. (Winstrol is an anabolic steroid that promotes leanness.) “He’s like, ‘Look, it’s safe, everybody’s using it. Every player on his college team is using it.’ He’s sending me material from websites and giving me phone numbers of other coaches to call whose kids are on it. I said, ‘Look, man, you need to be reining your kid in, not giving him the green light with this stuff.’ He’s still trying to convince me, and I tell him, ‘Listen, there’s no way you’re

going to convince me. Your son should not be injecting himself!”

**G**ary Player is old-school. *You listen to your mother.* But what about parents, blinded by vicarious ambition for their kids, giving evil counsel?

The broader trends here are troubling. Studies by the Centers for Disease Control show steroid use among American 9th- to 12th-graders has increased in the past decade, with the sharpest spike among girls. Related studies also say steroids and other performance-related drugs are not only being used for sports but even just to improve looks.

Malone, the former Dodgers executive, blames professional athletes for what he calls locker room ethics. “You see it in all kinds of ways,” he says. “They’re ‘not married’ when they’re on the road. Or you get, ‘I know it’s not right, but I have to feed my family.’ It’s a debate on ethics, but when money’s a motivating factor, it’s easier to justify what you’re doing. I think the mentality runs through the entire society, and you see cheating in business and college. There’s a view that it doesn’t matter how you get there as long as you get there.”

“I don’t see how you can eliminate doping in sport,” says Bahrke. “It’s like terrorism—you just want to keep it at a minimal level that people can live with.”

He shrugs at golfdom’s *who, us?* posture, wondering why golfers would be any less susceptible than other athletes, or even society in general.

**D**espite his irritation at those who derided him, Gary Player says he has received far more support than criticism.

“You can’t please everybody,” he says. “But we’ve had our heads in the sand on this issue. And what I want to do is maintain this beautiful, clean sport. I’ve got nothing to lose. I’m not a competitor against them anymore. Nobody can say, ‘Well, Gary’s worried because they’re beating him.’”

The ethics are unambiguous and fundamental to the sport that made him.

“I have no regrets about speaking out,” he says. “Golf has been good to me. If I can help the game, I owe it to the game.” •