

4 Things Pro Sports Should Embrace About Cannabis

Professional sports is undoubtedly a unique line of work. Games we fell in love with as children are making grown men and women millions of dollars annually. Millions of people watch religiously, and wear the colors of their favorite team proudly for the world (and Jets fans) to see every Sunday. But a harsh reality in the world of professional sports is that our entertainment, at times, comes at the cost of another human being's health and well-being.

Occasionally, I have to look away from the game. Especially when I hear words like those of Kevin Harlan during the Celtics and Cavaliers game on October 17, 2017. The definitive, "Gordon Hayward has broken his leg" call that came twice from commentary was a tough pill to swallow.

Many professional athletes deal with chronic pain their entire playing careers. The wear and tear of playing physical sports such as football, hockey, basketball, and mixed martial arts means tens of thousands of professional athletes must take additional care of their body on a regular basis while they play. Being proactive, however, does not guarantee physical immunity long term. To address the need for healthcare, most professional sports organizations have continually provided athletes with the conventional supply of painkillers and prescription opioids to mitigate pain.

As a consequence, many professional athletes deal with pain sustained during their playing career long after they have retired. Even worse is that some athletes end up addicted to pain pills and opioids, and eventually lose their well-being and life in the process.

If professional sports embraced a non-conventional stance on

player safety and wellness, specifically one that allows players to consume cannabis freely, it would be a tremendously beneficial step for the safety of professional athletes.

Here are 4 Things Pro Sports Should Embrace About Weed:

#1- Many athletes consume it!

According to former UFC Heavyweight Champion Bas Rutten, nearly 80% of the UFC consumes cannabis to recover. Interestingly, this did not stop Nick Diaz from being suspended by the UFC for 5 years due to testing positive for cannabis. Additionally, former NFL player Eben Britton says at least 50% of football players use weed, despite the NFL's harsh punishments for cannabis users; such as Josh Gordon's league ban. The NBA has been thought to employ many cannabis users as well, as former player Jay Williams estimated 80% of players self-medicate.

(https://www.huffingtonpost.com/alex-thiersch/professional-athletes-call_b_9567716.html)

In fact, this past summer, ESPN's Brian Windhorst reported smelling burning marijuana in the Cleveland Cavaliers' locker room following an NBA finals game against the Golden State Warriors. Other well known cannabis users throughout NBA history include hall of fame coach Phil Jackson and current Sacramento Kings player Zach Randolph; who recently faced charges for possession of marijuana.

With the exception of the NFL, professional sports organizations do not typically suspend players for solely consuming weed. More often than not, athletes are suspended for violating the performance enhancing element of a league's wellness policy. The NHL and MLB are known as being fairly lenient when it comes to cannabis, as they focus the distribution of suspensions on athletes that use substances like steroids and amphetamines to gain a competitive edge on the field. Rather than crack down on guys using weed to deal with general wear and tear, professional sports organizations

care more about influencing how the public perceive their players and product.

Organizations such as the NFL care more about 'protecting the shield'. If a particular story might negatively impact reputation, ratings and earnings, the league will do what it can to bury the lead. This means that stigma attached to cannabis is leading pro sports organizations to either avoid cannabis discussions among players (such as the MLB, NHL, NBA, and UFC) or aggressively prohibit weed altogether (the NFL).

Ironically, the number of athletes that consume cannabis would suggest professional sports organizations could do a lot more work on removing cannabis stigma simply by letting it be up to the players to decide if they consume it or not. Especially since a majority of professional sports already concede cannabis doesn't enhance physical performance. So why not embrace giving the players an informed choice on consuming cannabis, rather than continuing to pump them with pain pills?

#2- Cannabis is a safer, more effective treatment for chronic pain, and many athletes struggle with prescription opioids and pain pills.

Professional sports organizations in America follow the precedent set by the pharmaceutical company in regards to treating athletes. Like millions of other Americans, these athletes must consult with team and personal doctors about specific ailments they deal with on the job, and as a result they are given prescriptions to pharmaceutical drugs. Like millions of other Americans, there are athletes who have legitimate health concerns that must be addressed, and it is far too easy for these people to be given opiate prescriptions for them to grow dependent on. And when the pain is chronic, the dependency levels for these drugs go up with time.

Former NFL player Eben Britton spoke with three other former NFL players who advocate for cannabis during a video for

HERB.co. Some of the most striking comments of the 10 minute conversation came when Britton addressed the NFL's culture of players popping pills. Since players are legally prescribed pain medication by doctors, it becomes very easy for players to not only get themselves hooked on opioids, but for teammates to develop addictions as well.

"I mean they were doing little envelopes of vicodin on the plane, after the games, before the games. And you know for me, I realized I would take these pills and I'd just feel insane. You know my rage and my anger was like on a hair-trigger-right at the surface...especially after times when I was put on IR (injury reserve) with my back surgery or my shoulder surgery. I couldn't get dressed on my own. I couldn't tie my shoes. And then you're taking these pills that are exacerbating your state."

-Eben Britton (Herb.co
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=zMFEpkoZo-o @ 1:06)

While it is clear that there is a medical need for opiate prescriptions depending on the athlete's condition (such as Gordon Hayward's surgery), to suggest that preventing professional athletes from safely accessing alternative medicines such as cannabis is a better precedent for sports organizations to set is absurd. There is no fatal dosage of cannabis, and the side effects are far less dangerous than those of opioids. More importantly, if a patient and their doctor deems it is medically worth prescribing cannabis for health benefits that have been scientifically proven, why should a sports organization stop them from prescribing it? Why should sports organizations be allowed to say to their athletes, "its either our way or the high way." No pun intended.

#3-Cannabis offers CTE benefits.

According to Harvard professor Lester Grinspoon, cannabis

could make players more resistant to CTE, or chronic traumatic encephalopathy; a degenerative brain disease that affects many professional athletes. From confusion, rage, nausea, to self harm; CTE poses terrifying obstacles to professional athletes, organizations, and families. The Journal of the American Medical Association published a study earlier this year that found CTE in the brains of 110 of 111 deceased NFL players.

Even worse-the study found that CTE was found in nearly 20% of high school players, and in 90% of college players. As athletes play throughout their life, the risk of developing CTE becomes greater to the point where a diagnosis, which can only be made once the brain can be dissected, becomes almost inevitable.

(<https://www.civilized.life/articles/medical-marijuana-could-help-the-nfls-concussion-problem-percent-of-nfl-players-will-develop-degenerative-brain-disease-medical-marijuana-could-help/>)

While there is currently no cure for CTE nor a current method of detecting it in living people, science suggests that CBD (cannabidiol-the non psychoactive ingredient in cannabis) possesses neuroprotective properties that can protect athletes from CTE. Additionally, THC (the psychoactive ingredient in cannabis) stimulates parts of the brain that are involved in healing brain trauma. At this time, there is science that suggests cannabis could not only reduce the effects of CTE, but reverse them as well. During a time where few people understand CTE fully, an embrace of cannabis and cannabis research from sports organizations could potentially save the lives of many current and past professional athletes, and set an entirely new precedent for health and well being across the country.

#4-Cannabis offers financial incentives

A more obvious benefit to an acceptance of cannabis by professional sports would come financially. It is well

documented that states that have legalized cannabis have pulled in hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue in short time spans. An embrace of cannabis in pro sports would mean athletes would be able to become spokesmen for cannabis facilities around the country. Pro athletes and organizations already make money via partnerships with breweries, restaurants, and car dealers. So why can't Chong's Choice sponsor the starting left guard for the Los Angeles Rams? Why can't Snoop Dogg run a special line of vaporizers with the kicker for the Pittsburgh Steelers' face on it?

Wouldn't it make sense for the Raiders, upon moving to Las Vegas where recreational cannabis was just made legal, to seek partnerships with cannabis companies? As legalization hits more of the country, advertisers will be desperate to promote their product through popular culture. Companies will be dying to promote their product in the NFL, NBA, and NHL; whether it be through athlete endorsements, product placement, or stadium and event sponsorships. Professional sports could certainly capitalize financially if they were to allow teams and athletes to embrace cannabis.

To an objective audience, it may be clear that if professional sports embraced a stance on player safety and wellness that allowed players to consume cannabis freely, it would be a tremendously beneficial step for the safety of professional athletes. Due to the benefits cannabis offers people suffering from prescribed opioid addictions, chronic pain, and CTE symptoms, and the number of athletes currently self-medicating, professional sports organizations would be more effective with contributing toward the well being of athletes if they were to embrace cannabis as a whole.