



Research Paper

Defining and defending drug-free bodybuilding: A current perspective from organisations and their key figures

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ABSTRACT

The use of performance- and image-enhancing drugs in the past seventy years or so has sparked a number of responses, including heated public debates, the creation of dedicated organisations and drug policies, as well as the emergence of communities of practice and belief in support of or in opposition to the phenomenon. Drug-free, known in the field as ‘natural’, bodybuilding has been developing since the 1970s as a response to a dominant bodybuilding culture where the use of performance- and image-enhancing drugs has become normalised. Recent years have seen a multiplication of national and international governing bodies, competitions, and participants in drug-free bodybuilding in different parts of the globe. As the field grows, the questions of what constitutes natural bodybuilding and who can authentically represent it become central. Adopting a multi-method, qualitative approach, this article explores the ways organisations and their key figures define and defend their versions of drug-free bodybuilding. The discussion focus is on the policies, meanings and identities embedded in these different versions, and how their production and negotiation makes sense in light of antagonisms between players in the field of natural bodybuilding as well as their relation to drug-enhanced bodybuilding and the wider world of sport. In examining this previously uncharted body culture, the article explores how the use of performance- and image-enhancing drugs provokes responses and processes of contestation and differentiation. In the process, what becomes apparent is the designation and negotiation of drug-free, natural bodies as an ongoing, dynamic, social process.

Introduction

Organisations for drug-free, known in the field as ‘natural’, bodybuilding have existed since the late 1970s. Their initial emergence can be seen as an early reaction to a model of practising and competing in bodybuilding where the use of performance- and image-enhancing drugs (henceforth PIEDs) was becoming increasingly normalised. Building on the development of a so-called ‘natural movement’ inside bodybuilding in the late 1980s and early 1990s, recent years have seen a multiplication of governing bodies, competitions, and participants in drug-free bodybuilding in different parts of the globe. Their activities receive coverage in bodybuilding media, some of which are devoted to natural bodybuilding, or even mainstream media that approach natural bodybuilding as something of an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms.

The question of what really constitutes ‘natural’ has been posed and debated since the early days of natural bodybuilding. Its significance has become even more central as more players enter the field and as the use of PIEDs is perceived to be spreading in both bodybuilding and the wider gym culture. Following this line of investigation, natural bodybuilding can be analytically approached as a case study in the wider

phenomenon of human enhancement drugs and the debates it has provoked. Ideas of the natural body that become central in these debates are articulated in light of the introduction of new and/or the popularisation of existing drugs. Equally significantly, they are moulded and remoulded through the emergence and operation of different groups that may have competing standpoints and interests. Although essentialist notions and universalist values pertaining to natural bodies can dominate public discourse and policy, a closer examination of such case studies can help illuminate some of the social and cultural parameters in these processes and place them in historical perspective.

Focusing on the present moment, this article will examine how the concept of the drug-free, natural body is defined and defended by natural bodybuilding organisations and their key figures. As I will argue, the latter are an influential yet under-researched group of social actors that influence PIED-related policies and opinions. What are the policies, meanings and identities embedded in the different versions of ‘natural’ put forth by such organisations and individuals? How are these produced and negotiated? And how to make sense of them in light of antagonisms between players inside the field of natural bodybuilding as

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well as their relation to drug-enhanced bodybuilding and the wider world of sport and exercise?

In pursuing the above questions, this article aims to contribute to an examination of the previously uncharted body culture of natural bodybuilding and the ways it has developed as a field. In doing that, light is also shed on the dynamics of other relevant fields, more specifically on the anti-doping field and the ways its policies and discourses are reproduced on a global terrain. Illuminating how the use of PIEDS provokes processes of contestation and differentiation, the article will hopefully demonstrate how the concept of natural bodies is an object of ongoing social negotiation.

Background

The concept of the natural body has received sustained attention in the social science literature on bodybuilding. Important contributions on the early stages of this body culture have looked at the place of natural bodies in articulations of gender, class, racial, and imperial projects and identities (Hau, 2003; Kimmel, 1996; Mullins, 1992; Segel, 1998). Of even greater interest seem to have been the reformulations and contestations of the natural body that have taken place with the onset and popularisation of PIEDS in bodybuilding in the last sixty years or so. The effects of these processes have been investigated particularly with reference to the sexed/gendered body (see, for example, Balsamo, 1996; Heywood, 1998; Ian, 1995; Wesley, 2001), as well as to sub-cultural identity and the self as project (Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 2001; Richardson, 2010). Similarly to broader debates surrounding human enhancement through pharmacological or other means, notions of the natural body are directly linked to the problematic of artificiality and authenticity (Parens, 2005).

In the context of bodybuilding as competition sport, the use of PIEDS and its effect on how bodies are materially and discursively formed are pivotal in the historical transformations the activity has undergone. Juxtaposed to an earlier model of amateur sport competition (2006, Fair, 1999), the drug-enhanced, extreme built body has become emblematic of the professionalisation of bodybuilding and the dominance of a sports entertainment paradigm in the way it is packaged as a cultural product (Liokaftos, 2017; Locks, 2012). As in the wider world of sport, doping and the debates it has sparked are directly or indirectly informed by underlying notions of the natural body and the true essence of sport (Dimeo, 2016; Tolleneer et al., 2012). Critical analyses of the anti-doping movement show how some of these fundamental assumptions come out of particular socio-cultural environments (Gleaves & Llewellyn, 2014) despite appearing imbued with transcendental, universalist values. The ways that drug-free, natural sporting bodies are defined and upheld can be interpreted vis-à-vis wider cultural attitudes towards certain forms of substance use and notions of purity (Henne, 2015). Equally importantly, they are central in the production, operation, and antagonisms between different organisations and authorities that cooperate or compete for influence, resources, and the power to define (Ritchie, 2015).

Throughout its early period in the late 19th and early 20th century, bodybuilding was ingrained with ideas and practices for restoring the natural body, often in opposition to what was seen as a drug-promoting medical orthodoxy (Budd, 1997; Hau, 2003; Wedemeyer, 2000). Yet, it is only in the last forty years that drug-free bodybuilding has emerged as an integrated alternative to a dominant bodybuilding culture that has usually been the default object of scientific and lay scrutiny (Fair, 2015). Although, as is the case with other activities, various ways of enhancing human traits exist and get differentially placed on the artificiality continuum, it is the use of PIEDS that has sparked and remained at the heart of natural bodybuilding throughout its development. Its initial emergence in the late 1970s can be seen precisely as a response to the introduction and popularisation of PIEDS in the family of strength sports, including weightlifting, powerlifting and bodybuilding (Fair, 1999; Todd & Todd, 2009).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a ‘natural movement’ became a clear trend within the bodybuilding industry, marked by the emergence of governing bodies with pronounced drug policies in different countries, publications devoted to natural bodybuilding, and products marketed to drug-free athletes. As I have explored in greater detail elsewhere (Liokaftos, 2018), this development can be situated in the context of: a) the contemporary debates and policies around PIEDS in elite sport and wider society, most notably well-known doping scandals and strict regulations such as the Anabolic Steroid Control Act (US, 1990); and, b) the radicalisation of dominant bodybuilding culture (Richardson, 2010). The latter has been exemplified in new kinds, greater amounts and complex combinations of drugs as well as novel ways of using them. At the same time, drug policies on the part of prominent governing bodies have been absent or only partially and/or sporadically implemented.

From the 2000s onwards, one observes the proliferation of national and international natural bodybuilding organisations, events, and participants. This cultural acceptance and expansion is in sync with a growing penetration of body practices, aesthetics, knowledges and philosophies originating in bodybuilding into wider gym and fitness culture (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014). The growing relevance of natural bodybuilding can also be interpreted in light of the developing use of PIEDS and the ensuing policy responses. In the wider world of sports, the spread of the anti-doping movement in the last twenty years has entailed increased regulation that often borrows elements from the war on drugs (Coomber, 2014; Henning & Dimeo, 2018). In addition to that, particular concerns exist over the spread of PIEDS in strength and fitness training environments. Therein, new populations with diverse motivations and trajectories get exposed to licit and illicit substances that were formerly the remit of an experimental subculture of bodybuilding insiders (Christiansen, Vinther, & Liokaftos, 2016; Cohen, Collins, Darkes, & Gwartney, 2007). Laws for regulating the globalised market and use of substances such as anabolic androgenic steroids, human growth hormone, insulin, DNP, diuretics, IGF, and SARMS vary greatly between countries (Paoli & Donati, 2015; Van de Ven & Mulrooney, 2016b).¹ Policy approaches in different national contexts are typically influenced by an anti-doping or public health paradigm and, thus, range from a prohibitionist focus on sanctions to a harm reduction focus for user populations (Christiansen, 2009; Van de Ven & Mulrooney, 2016a).

As in previous periods, natural bodybuilding today continues to be framed as a distinct, valuable and autonomous activity in juxtaposition to the established order of drug-enhanced bodybuilding. At the same time, antagonisms have developed within natural bodybuilding over leadership and authority. These typically revolve around the questions of what really constitutes natural bodybuilding and who is in a position to authentically represent it. Oriented by Bourdieu's (1994, 1999) sociological framework on the formation and transformation of fields, this paper will trace the ways that policies, meanings, and identities around drug-free, natural bodies are produced and negotiated. Looking at a series of spaces, discourses, and practices pertaining to the regulation of PIED use, I hope to demonstrate the latter's constitutive role in antagonisms amongst players inside the field of natural bodybuilding as well as their relation to drug-enhanced bodybuilding and the wider world of sport. Ultimately, what will become apparent is the ongoing, dynamic constitution of drug-free, natural bodies through social controls and juxtapositions to a series of key Others.

¹ Examples include the Anabolic Steroid Control Act of 2004 in the US that classified prohormones – a substance popular amongst bodybuilders and previously marketed as a nutritional supplement – in the same way as AAS, and more recently the Designer Anabolic Steroid Control Act (2014).

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