Girls Gone Wild: Girls as the Next Target Market for Sports Dietary Supplements

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Article:

A new twist on an old problem. Sports supplements are hard to miss right now. In fact, never has the sports world been more enmeshed in media coverage and debate. Much of the emphasis is on male athletes, as it has been for decades. Males are clearly the largest population of users and live and play in a culture that supports use. That culture however is shifting over into the evolving but as yet undefined culture of the female athlete and cannot be ignored.

Supplement ad found on internet

FEMME CREATINE--

- **The only Creatine supplement specifically designed for female athletes.**
- **Contains ComplexT, a stable, soluble and completely bioavailable form of Creatine**
- **All the ingredients in Femme Advantage are easily absorbed by the body**
- **Femme Advantage will not cause cramping and bloating, or any other side effects women may experience with Creatine monohydrate powder**
- **Completely safe for both short and long-term usage**
- **Energy-boosting, without the risk of bulking up**
- **Achieve optimum results safely**

You Go Girl

It's a great time to be a female athlete. Never in the history of sports and athletics have females and especially young girls had the opportunity to participate at every level of sport. In 2003, more than 7 million young athletes played sports at the high school level, the highest number ever seen. The largest percentage of new participants was young girls with over 49,000 girls going out for sports over the previous year, as opposed to 28,000 new male participants. The first surveys, begun in 1971, showed over 3 million boys played organized sports as opposed to only 294,000 for girls; today, current totals equal almost 4 million for boys and almost 3 million for girls!

An Evolving Culture

If you were a male born after 1950, you knew exactly what was expected of you as you entered your first few years in Little League, Pee wee hockey, and youth soccer. The male sports culture in American has been firmly established for half a century, and expectations for little boys growing up are woven into every community and

neighborhood from coast to coast. Not so for little girls. Clearly from a sports perspective, girls born today have tremendous opportunities that their mom's did not have. As a girl you can grow up and play professional football, soccer, basketball, baseball, and ice hockey. You can wrestle. You can box. But while the culture of girls and women in sport is evolving, it has not yet engrained itself into being a "norm". As such, influences other than established ones are playing a huge role in guiding the mindset of the female athlete. Influences such as Nike, Reebok, and other entities are being allowed to shape the notion of what a girl athlete looks like. Entering that marketplace, with millions of new female athletes to target, are the sport dietary supplement companies.

The sources of information that college women report as most popular only exacerbate this marketing scheme. Magazines and product labels (17.1% and 14.7% respectively) were two of the top sources of information reported. Additionally, friends (19.9%) and parents (16.4%) were the other top sources of information of which neither group is probably consulting the professional research for their information but are also getting their information from the popular media. Friends were also reported to be who recommended supplement use the most (18%; Bartee, Winnail, & Padilla, 2001). It is frightening but not unexpected to think that messages created to sell products are shaping the sports culture for female athletes of today and the future.

Current headlines today are report on cheating in baseball, track and field, and other sports by athletes who have supposedly taken a performance enhancer such as Androstendione (Andro) or similar sport supplement products. Legal and easily obtainable, sport dietary supplements fall under the guidelines established by the 1994 US Congress when they passed the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA). The DSHEA effectively states that dietary supplement products cannot be removed from the marketplace unless they are proven to be a health hazard. In essence, the federal government has to show that these products are dangerous, not the maker of the product. This recently happened with the banning of Ephedra, which took seven years and multiple deaths to achieve. Unfortunately, there are 2999 more products still on the market. Similar, but not as drastic steps have recently been taken with Andro as a number of manufacturers of products containing this ingredient have been requested to stop distribution due to its potential negative side effects. It is important to note however that although Andro is now considered a "steroid precursor" it still remains an unregulated dietary supplement.

Just Do It

So, are young female athletes taking purported performance enhancing supplements such as Andro and Creatine? You bet. Survey data suggests that the current focus in research on young male athletes may be ignoring a population that is emerging as a huge consumer base. More than 40% of female athletes in grades 9-12 reported ever using sport supplements (Bartee, 2000), while 18% reported current use (Bartee, et al., in press). They also tend to take sport supplements for more than sports performance. Data collected with high school female student-athletes suggest that the most popular reasons reported for using sport supplements were for better health and to increase energy levels (47.3%). Other popular reasons for use were to lose weight (37.2%), look better (21.4%), and play sports better (19.4%; Bartee, 2000). Interestingly, data collected with female college students suggested that as students get older their main reasons for using supplements may change to gaining muscle size (47.7%). Other reasons reported were similar to responses given by high school female athletes including increasing energy (46.6%), general health (44.4%) and losing weight (29.1%; Bartee, et al., 2001). In addition to assessing the reasons for use, it is equally important to assess the influencing power of significant mentors. It has been reported that parents are a stronger influence compared to athletic trainers and coaches among female athletics (Dunn, et al, 2001). As such, parents may influence their daughter's use of a supplement by suggesting that the product will give one a competitive edge in athletics and that they will be proud if their daughter is on the team. This can result in dangerous consequences (i.e., kidney failure, hypertension, heart condition, death) since parents usually have low amounts of knowledge of supplements and quite possibly are not consulting any professional source for their information but using what they hear from the media to influence their daughter's intentions to use supplements.

The question is: Do we care that parents and coaches are promoting the use of supplements to female athletes as early as 10 years of age? Do we care that none of these supplements have been tested on adolescents or children? Do we care whether or not young women may grow up with a "winning is everything" attitude or an attitude that supports enjoyment, camaraderie, fair-play, and hard work? Do we want young people to look for unjustified short-cuts and magic bullets to increase sport performance and look better? Or do we want young people to value the true benefits of effective training techniques, proper nutrition, and making the most of their abilities?

There has never been a better time to discuss these products than in the current environment. Unfortunately, most of the conversations will revolve around the male use of supplements. Let's start the conversation here about females.

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