

Researcher looks for link between steroids and team conflict in major league baseball

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Major League Baseball's ongoing steroid controversy is threatening the legacy of the sport and the validity of its well-respected history, but what kind of impact is it having behind teams' closed clubhouse doors?

A Rutgers–Camden management scholar who specializes in workplace conflict is taking a closer look.

"You would expect employees working in an environment where there is conflict to have poor [psychological health](#), but we wanted to see if it is also true in professional sports," says Chester Spell, an associate professor of management at the Rutgers School of Business–Camden.

Spell and a research colleague, Katerina Bezrukova, an assistant professor of psychology at Santa Clara University, collected detailed media reports of performance enhancing drug (PED) use and [substance abuse](#) among Major League Baseball [players](#) from 2004-08. They hoped to find a link between the role of drugs and conflict or psychological health on baseball teams.

The years the researchers examined coincide with the time baseball's steroid scandal and subsequent investigation into PED use reached its tipping point.

"Baseball's PED issue had peaked," Spell says. "The Mitchell Report (a U.S. Senate investigation into the use of [anabolic steroids](#) and [human growth hormone](#) in baseball) was published in 2007. We wanted to see if

that activity had an effect on the relationship between conflict and health on baseball teams."

The results were surprising.

"On teams where there was a lot of reported substance abuse, the relationship between conflict and psychological health disappeared," Spell says.

In other words, Spell determined that the psychological well-being of players went unchanged in instances where a teammate was accused of steroid or substance abuse.

There is evidence that substance abusers are more likely to have higher rates or [absenteeism](#) and cause more conflict in the workplace, the Rutgers–Camden scholar explains, so one might expect the psychological well-being of a group of people in the workplace to be affected by the level of substance abuse within a group.

Spell's research suggests baseball teams are affected differently.

"Why are players driven to use performance enhancing drugs?" Spell asks. "We've accepted that it's to gain an advantage or help players quickly overcome an injury. If that's the case, and players are performing well or staying physically healthy—thus staying on the field—then there is less conflict among the players on the team. It sounds politically incorrect, but it makes sense."

"I wasn't sure if we'd find anything when we decided to look into this on baseball teams," Spell continues. "Players stick closely together and they support each other, so they're supportive of each other when these issues arise."

Spell and Bezrukova recorded their findings in the article, "Can [conflict](#) make you sick? The role of drugs and other people in baseball teams" and presented their research at the annual conference of the International Association for Conflict Management in Tacoma, Wash. in June.

A Georgia native and Camden resident, Spell's research focuses on employee health and wellness and how organizations respond to those issues. He is the author of numerous published articles including, "Here Today, Gone Tomorrow: Baseball Players, Shocks to the System, and the Unfolding Model of Faultlines and Employee Turnover," which focuses on employee turnover on Major League Baseball teams.

Provided by Rutgers University

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