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## NCAA Drug Testing for Cannabis – Why Does It Matter?

BY DR. JEFF KONIN

In 1986, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) adopted a drug testing policy that included testing for cannabis, or as it was labeled at the time, marijuana. The policy stated that a positive test would result in one full year suspension from athletic eligibility and the suspension would follow a student athlete if he or she opted to transfer schools. For a majority of the time, the threshold for a positive test was 5 nanograms per milliliter. In June of 2019, the THC threshold used for NCAA drug testing was increased from 15 to 35 nanograms per milliliter, and the penalty for a positive test was adjusted to a 6-month suspension, or essentially 50% of participation. The increased threshold was supported by “wanting to be fair and to eliminate penalizing students who test positive as the result of passive inhalation of smoke.”

The official banned language states: Cannabinoids - Marijuana, Synthetic cannabinoids (Spice; K2; JWH-018; JWH-073), Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). According to the NCAA Drug-Testing Program 2020-2021 all cannabinoids are banned with no allowed medical exception request. The language further reads as follows: “Cannabinoids include cannabis and cannabidiol (CBD). Cannabis use is linked to anxiety, panic reactions, respiratory damage, short-term memory impairment and a decreased focus on goals and personal achievement. Cannabinoids are banned by the NCAA and can result in suspension.”

The changes in policy coincide with an increased acceptance within our society of cannabis use and a relaxation of policy within other organizations such as Major League Baseball (MLB), National Football League (NFL), and the National Basketball Association (NBA). What remains puzzling is the language being used that bans all cannabinoids, especially CBD, since there is not a specific test sensitive to detecting anything other than THC in the urine samples. Since CBD is now legally sold over the counter almost everywhere and has been reclassified as a federally scheduled 5 drug, it is a mystery why it remains banned by the NCAA.

Despite the elevated threshold and reduced penalty, the NCAA



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made it very clear that these changes are not an endorsement of cannabis use. The Association also didn't want to place the threshold too high and imply that the NCAA condones cannabis use and did not cite any performance enhancing effects of any cannabinoid.

It is estimated that there are nearly 500,000 student athletes playing an NCAA sport each year. The purpose of the drug testing program is to ensure equitable competition among the participants so the playing field is even and undo any enhanced supplementation that would benefit one's performance above and beyond natural training practices and habits. At the recreational level, the estimated 1/5 million NCAA athletes come from a pool of millions of athletes. Therefore, the policies that the NCAA embraces will be essentially adhered to by many others in preparation for their next steps in sport participation.

It is essential for the NCAA to address this topic sooner versus later so that they apply best practices and standards that are in line with the federal and state (as well as International) legislation and guidelines, clarify their language to accurately test for and ban what is intended to be screened for, and update their stances based upon the current literature relative to what the different cannabinoids function to do and if/how testing is used for detection. Any penalties that remain in place should reflect a reasonable rationale that would support unfair play. Otherwise, testing need no longer be performed for such a purpose, and if testing is continued it should be done for the sole purpose of detecting cannabis use disorders and left to the respective medical staffs of each school to intervene with a student-athlete's health and wellbeing.

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