

WHY PITCHERS USE

YES, STEROIDS CAN HELP INCREASE VELOCITY. BUT PITCHERS MAINLY TAKE THEM TO RECOVER FROM THE MOST UNNATURAL ACT IN SPORT: THROWING A BASEBALL.

BY BUSTER OLNEY

NOT LONG after he opened his eyes, the big league pitcher could tell this morning was different. Still lying in bed, he lifted his right shoulder, his arm bent at the elbow, and instinctively braced for the pain. But there wasn't any. For a moment, he was confused.

The mornings after were always the worst. That's the way it is when you're thirtysomething and you throw a baseball for a living. He had worked in the bullpen the day before, full bore, pumping fastballs, and of course there would be a price for this, paid out in pain. The pitcher's hangover.

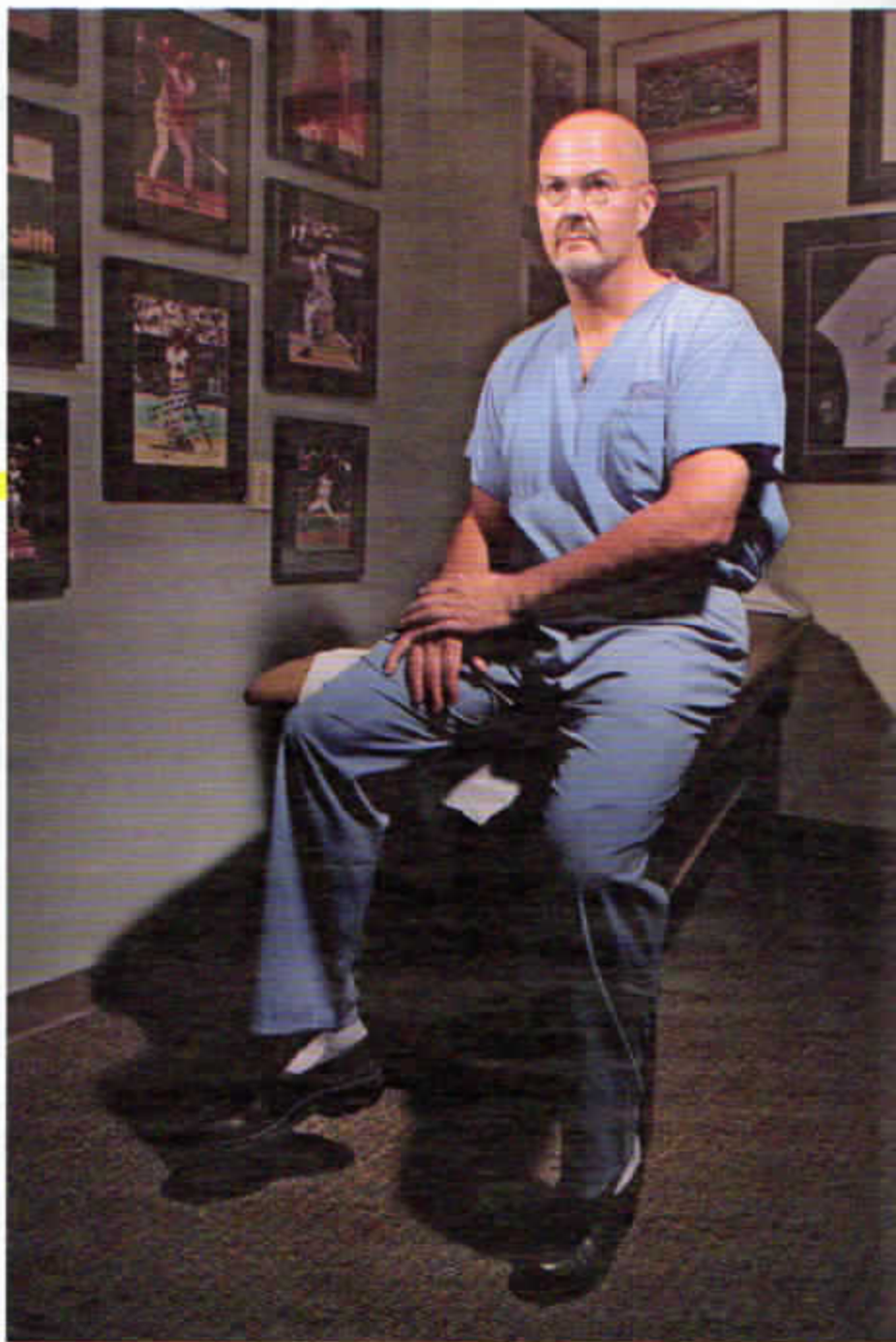
And then he remembered: He was on steroids. It was all aboveboard; his doctor had prescribed them because of a medical condition unrelated to baseball. With his arm in the air, the pitcher rotated his shoulder slightly. It felt great. His elbow felt great. He couldn't believe the difference. "It was like I hadn't even thrown the day before," he says now. "And the stuff I was taking wasn't even all that strong. The illegal stuff must be incredible."

IT SHOULD surprise no one that a middle reliever, Jason Grimsley, is at the center of baseball's latest drug scandal. For one thing, 11 of the 14 players who've been suspended for performance-enhancing substances in the majors and minors this season have been pitchers. And most close observers of the game say that's nothing new. "I've thought for years that more pitchers were using than hitters," says one longtime scout.

A juiced-up hitter still has to apply his other

skills to take advantage of the additional strength. But for pitchers, the link between enhancers and on-field performance is more direct: Whether you work out hard or not, you'll almost certainly feel more capable the next day. Hitters use steroids and human growth hormone to build a more powerful weapon: their swing. Pitchers use the stuff to reload—rearm, in fact—the weapon they already have. Days of recovery are squeezed into hours.

There are risks, no doubt. Doctors warn that performance-enhancing drugs can wither ligaments



DR. KREMCHek WORRIES ABOUT THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF TAKING STEROIDS.

and tendons. Anecdotally, there seems to have been a spike in elbow ligament reconstruction surgeries, from high school to the major leagues. And nobody fully knows the long-term health ramifications for the users. "There are significant ill effects that scare me," says Dr. Timothy Kremchek, the Reds' medical director and an orthopedic surgeon whose attention is increasingly coveted by injured players.

AS A Double-A prospect with the Dodgers in the early 1980s, Orel Hershiser watched along with the other San Antonio Missions as a visiting physical

therapist demonstrated baseball's cutting-edge weight training regimen for pitchers. The guy held out two- and four-pound weights, then showed the pitchers how to lift the weights at particular angles to strengthen their shoulder muscles, focusing on precise repetition. "He didn't believe in big muscles," Hershiser recalls. A current major league conditioning coach echoes the point: "The reality is that baseball was way behind the times—20 years behind football. Guys are always going to be looking for an edge, and there wasn't any information in baseball. So when there's an information void, they're going to find answers for themselves."

that every time a pitcher throws an 80 mph fastball, "the strain on the ulnar collateral ligament is redlining," says Dr. Tracy Ray, who works alongside another star baseball surgeon, Dr. James Andrews. That means the ligament is on the verge of the breaking point. And on any game day, a starting pitcher might throw 200 pitches in that range, from warmups to high-stress fastballs in a late-inning jam. A reliever might throw 40 to 50 per outing.

"If you take a tissue to the point of tearing," Ray explains, "there probably will be some micro-ruptures of fibers, or components of fibers."

Each time a pitcher throws a baseball, the

of performance-enhancing drugs feel better the morning after, and the next day, and the day after that. There may be some placebo effect, Ray believes: Users might feel better because they think they should. But the most popular steroids, as well as human growth hormone, are designed to aid in tissue repair—"to the point," Ray says, "where you might actually be overusing the tissue, and still not having injury."

"A 32-YEAR-OLD PITCHER USING STEROIDS CAN JUMP BACK 10 YEARS IN TIME," HERSHISER SAYS.

Hershiser, who won 204 games in 18 years and spent three-plus seasons as a pitching coach, remembers when hitters started piling muscles on top of their muscles, and how pitchers scrambled to catch up. Some moved far beyond the weight room. With the help of shadowy personal trainers,

arm is launched away from the body, and the natural response of the body is to retrieve it, to prevent the arm from being thrown out of the shoulder socket, meaning the muscles around the rotator cuff retract. The arm fights the body on every pitch. "These muscles are

BY THE late '90s, about 15 years after Hershiser learned to work out with the two-pound weights, an increasing number of pitchers were arriving at spring training looking like Jose Canseco. One veteran hurler cut off the sleeves of his undershirt to show off his new biceps, which some former teammates believe came from steroid use. "Don't be so obvious about it," a coach told the pitcher.

The longtime scout, the one who caught on early, jotted notes about the sudden potency of middle relievers. "Little guys who had been clocked with fastballs at 87, 88 mph were throwing 92, 93," he says. "You might see them two or three days in a row, and they'd maintain their velocity. There was no drop-off."

When Grimsley joined the Yankees in 1999, he consistently threw 91 to 93 mph. He allegedly told federal agents he began using performance-enhancing drugs the following year, and in 2001 one team clocked him at 96 to 98 mph. "Far beyond anything we had seen when he was with the Yankees," says one executive. "How do you think that happened?"

About 10 years ago, a major league pitcher visited Kremchek for an exam and began asking questions about steroids. Kremchek was taken aback. "His questions were along the lines of, 'Can I throw harder? Does it make me better? How will it affect my pitching?'" he recalls. "I was kind of non-plussed about the whole thing. I was always of the thought that steroids couldn't help a pitcher. It made me start looking at things, and try to understand."

Now his eyes are open. Now all our eyes are open.



82%

In an open letter to fans, Bud Selig said he was "disappointed and angered" to learn that Jason Grimsley had used HGH and pledged to catch rulebreakers. But SportsNation is unimpressed: Asked if MLB is doing everything it can, 82% of 48,877 voters said no.

they figured out how to benefit from performance-enhancing drugs: The stuff healed them.

"A 32-year-old pitcher using steroids can jump back 10 years in time," says Hershiser, now an ESPN analyst. "A 32-year-old becomes like a 22-year-old, because of the recovery. Plus, he gets the benefit of recovering fast enough to be able to lift weights, so he's got additional strength and improved recovery between starts."

The weights are a lot heavier now.

DOCTORS AT the American Sports Medicine Institute in Birmingham, Ala., have determined

trying to hold your arm in place," Ray says. "They're grabbing your arm. You have this strain, and this unbelievable contracting of the muscle."

Throwing a ball, Kremchek says, "is the most unnatural act in sport." Every outing means more tearing, more rupturing. A shoulder capsule that rotated freely on a Monday afternoon might be encumbered by inflammation on Tuesday morning; the tissue is damaged. It's the pitcher's hangover. "Your body can repair itself," Ray says. "It just needs time."

But, some pitchers reason, why wait? Users