

STERIOD ABUSE HOOKS IMAGE-CONSCIOUS TEENS

If the ultimate teen-age male fantasy exists, this may be it: A magic pill that turns a boy's body to instant beefcake, sends his popularity soaring and endows him with unimaginable fearsomeness.

To hundreds, perhaps thousands of South Florida youths, this magic pill is no mental fiction. For as little as \$15 a pop, the dream can be purchased on the streets, the campuses of junior highs and high schools, anywhere kids congregate.

Welcome to the world of anabolic steroid abuse.

This is not the kind increasingly reported among cheating young athletes shooting for a pennant of a college sports scholarship. No, this is steroid abuse involving skinny and gawky boys who ctave to win nothing more than notice from the girls and envy from the guys.

Let Pete tell you his story. Pete is 18, completing his senior year at an area high school. He started taking steroids at 16.

"Everyone was telling me how good it was [to use steroids], how much weight you gain, how strong you get," says Pete, who, like most of the kids interviewed for this article asked that his last name not be used.

"At first, I thought I don't want to take that stuff. Then I noticed a friend of mine, He used to be little. Next time I saw him, a couple of months later, he was all ripped. I couldn't believe it. I asked how him he got so big."

The answer was steroids. Pete stood agape at the revelation.

Slowly, over the weeks that followed, his initial reluctance melted. In the end, the lure proved irresistible.

"I started seeing more and more people getting big, like, overnight almost. So I just decided to get my money together and buy some."

Within three weeks of taking his first dose, Pete's body became noticeably muscular. The compliments soon began piling up. Girls flocked to his brawny sides. The ogled him, they showered him with wolf-whistles and coquettish attention—heady stuff for a boy caught in the emotional minefield separating childhood from mature adulthood.

But then, at some point last summer, Pete started having serious reservations. The drug did not perform its miracle of transfiguration without exacting a frightening toll.

"It made me aggressive. I started doing crazy things," he recalls. "I'd be sleeping and having a dream that I was hitting my head on a wall-and when I woke up I that's what I really was doing, hitting my head on the wall next to the bed. I'd get urges to throw punches at the air, just because it felt good to do it. One time I got into a fight with my dad, with fists. Another time, I was at the beach with a friend and there was this guy who wanted to fight my friend-when the guy got out of his car, I jumped in it and tried to run him down with it. Another time, I broke a bat across a guy's ribs."

Pete realized he was out of control and laid the blame on the drug. His festering malevolence spooked him enough to consider quitting steroids.

South Florida health and education leaders want to halt steroid abuse but find it difficult to get

kids to just say no. The reason: Powerful cultural incentives keep youngsters psychologically hooked on these physically non-habit-forming drugs.

How hooked? A University of Pennsylvania study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* offers some insights. Nationwide, as many as half a million high school seniors have tried or are taking steroids. At least 25 percent of them do so for vanity's sake, the study found.

Some local officials believe the number of steroid-abusing teens in South Florida is significantly higher than the national average reported in the study.

"If the problem involves over 6 percent of high school seniors in the rest of the country, here, it's got to be closer to 10 percent," says Dr. Robert Willix, a Fort Lauderdale physician recognized as a U.S. authority on steroids.

Agreeing is James Gard, a coach at Stranahan High School in Fort Lauderdale who was monitoring the problem locally long before a series of media stories brought it to public light in 1986. "Steroids have been a problem on our campuses for several years and, if anything, I think the [Pennsylvania] survey underestimated the problem," Gard says.

Youths themselves attest to the severity of abuse locally. Seventeen-year-old Ron of Fort Lauderdale claims that about a fourth of the boys with whom he associates are on steroids. George, a senior at Ron's school, says it's even worse among his clique. "Half the guys at the gym I go to take them," he says. "They just want to look good."

Not every adult is convinced, however, that steroid abuse is rampant.

"It's all speculative—I haven't seen any hard data to support [claims of extensive abuse]," says Donald Dobbs, principal of Western High School in Fort Lauderdale. According to Eugene McAllister, director of Dade County Public Schools' investigative unit: "We haven't had any incidences of steroid problems this year."

Adds Hollywood High School Principal Mike Kinghorn: "I'm not naive enough to believe there are no steroids out there, but I'm not aware of any specific problems with steroids among our students."

Steroids—naturally occurring hormones found in humans and other mammals—can be synthesized. Anabolic steroids are derivatives of testosterone, which, in males, stimulates muscle development. The anabolic variety can be taken orally or by injection.

Anabolic steroids taken in sufficient quantity induce noticeable muscle growth in a matter of a few weeks, according to Willix.

The downside to this drug: it can pose serious long-term health risks for abusers. Topping the list is increased chances of early death; not far behind is heightened potential for liver, spleen and bone damage.

"To be honest, we don't really know what the dangers are over time," says Willix. "Research that's been done on these steroids only involved normal medicinal doses."

"No studies have been done at doses anywhere near what these kids are using. There's no ethical way to subject humans to doses that high for research purposes."

What most alarms the health community is the psychological, not

THE ARMS RACE

BY RICH SMITH

PHOTOS BY BILL WAX