



*Original Research*

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## **From Crisis to De-escalation: An Examination of Politics in a U.S. High School Steroid Testing Program**

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### ABSTRACT

*International Journal of Exercise Science 10(6): 890-899, 2017.* Preventing the use of performance enhancing drugs in sport has long been a concern for policymakers. In the United States, amidst national attention the state of Texas constructed the country's largest steroid testing program for high school athletes. However, resource allocation steadily declined until the program was defunded in 2015. Using escalation of commitment theory as a framework, this conceptual paper examines the critical, but less studied, role of politics and de-escalation behavior that directed this distinct sport situation. By combining policy and media documents with the academic literature, this paper allows for a greater understanding of how the steroid testing program was formulated and implemented, which may influence how policymakers address steroids among amateur athletes in the future. This paper also offers new opportunities for future research by highlighting a new sport context in which escalation of commitment theory applies and specifically noting the significant role politics can play in escalation or de-escalation decision making.

**KEY WORDS:** Sport policy, escalation of commitment theory, de-escalation of commitment, performance enhancing drugs, interscholastic athletics, doping

### INTRODUCTION

Within the sport industry, many sport governing bodies (e.g., International Olympic Committee, National Football League, National Collegiate Athletic Association) continue to be concerned with the use of performance enhancing drugs, specifically steroids. However, in the United States there can often be disagreement among relevant stakeholders in regards to the prevalence of this problem at the high school, or secondary school, level and the best manner to address it (18). Multiple studies have reported that 3-5.4% of high school males in the United States admitted to using steroids at some point in their life (11). Furthermore, it is at the

high school level that students are significantly at risk to initiate steroid use, and those who do are more prone to use other illicit drugs, alcohol, and tobacco (41).

Using the context of steroid testing in Texas high school athletics, we will examine the influence of politics on de-escalation of commitment behavior. The formulation of the steroid testing program in Texas was facilitated by a political climate that needs to be understood first. However, soon after the implementation of the program divergent views in the political discourse began to emerge over such issues as the seriousness of the steroid problem in Texas versus other illicit substances, the effectiveness of the testing protocols, the efficient use of state resources to test for steroids, and the difference between capturing versus deterring steroid use. As a result, there is a lack of clear explanation of why a program that began with such impetus, resources, and certainty was not only closed, but also experienced a gradual decline in allocated funds in a relatively short time period. With the program not achieving its desired outcome—that of reducing prevalent performance enhancing substance consumption by student-athletes—it seems that a de-escalation of commitment scenario existed that was clearly triggered by complex political considerations.

Examination of the decisions to create and then conclude the steroid testing program is first needed due to the unprecedented nature of the program. It is also crucial due to the influence these decisions could potentially have on other governing bodies throughout, and perhaps outside, the United States. Policymakers routinely survey the actions of other governing bodies to generate ideas or justify new policy approaches (28). This is a form of policy learning where policymakers borrow from one another as an issue progresses – a practice that has been shown to apply particularly to policymaking for sport in multiple national contexts (13). Further, American states often compete against each other and compare themselves with one another on various health topics, such as the prevention of childhood obesity (8), and health care reform (37). This practice of comparison leads to the systematic searching of the external environment for best practice ideas and to determine whether a policy solution is adaptable to a particular state's circumstances (4). Political considerations are one of many factors that will provide a mediated relationship between external influences and the adaptability of the internal policy system (12).

This paper may stimulate significant contributions to escalation of commitment theory by accentuating opportunities for further empirical study on the role of politics in this behavior while highlighting critical considerations for a more effective steroid testing approach towards high school or amateur athletes. Thus, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we examine the role and impact of politics in escalation of commitment, which has received little empirical inquiry thus far, while specifically focusing on the less researched de-escalation of commitment behavior. Next, we seek to bring attention to the complex policy decisions that were made in a state attempting to test amateur athletes for performance enhancing drugs given what transpired in Texas will likely influence other states' approaches in the future. In order to do this, escalation of commitment theory must be understood in more detail.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Escalation of commitment theory describes circumstances in which individuals maintain and often increase commitment to a course of action despite prolonged and impartial evidence of ambiguous or negative outcomes (32, 33, 34, 35, 36). While context will vary for each situation, escalation scenarios normally generate comparable characteristics (5). Typical escalation behavior commences with an actor(s) allocating substantial resources to a course of action with the purpose of accomplishing a desired outcome or planned goal. After a phase of ineffectual or inefficient operation, instead of reversing course when indefinite or undesirable information is obtained indicating the endeavor is not working as intended, individuals will often instead justify initial investments and commit more resources in hopes of achieving preferred objectives (34). Such actions are likely to significantly affect the long-term viability of an organization, as this progression can result in what many researchers designate as a permanently failing organization (23, 26, 30). While the logical solution to an escalation scenario would be commitment reduction, research of escalation behavior has generally categorized four determinants provoking commitment to a failing course of action: project, psychological, social, and structural (35). These determinants explain the effect of several factors in organizational commitment decisions. These include finances and economics (project determinants such as salvage value, opportunity costs, closing costs), actor information processing (psychological determinants such as individual errors, biases, motivations), stakeholder behavior as the product of external and internal feedback (social determinants such as societal leadership norms, modelling, impression management), and non-individual level influences (structural determinants such as politics, side-bets, administrative inertia, institutionalization) (30, 32).

Given extensive investigation of escalation behavior, less research has empirically examined both theoretical and practical applications of de-escalation of commitment to a variety of disciplines, including those related to sport (21). Keil and Robey (19) defined de-escalation of commitment as “the reversal of escalating commitment to failing courses of action, either through project termination or redirection”. As the definition denotes, de-escalation is not evident only when course termination or abandonment occur; rather, it is more extensive to comprise redirection as “a radical rescopeing or redefining of the project” (26). Although initially acknowledged as withdrawal or abandonment from a failing course of action (35), de-escalation behavior also manifests in a reduction of commitment by considering alternative courses of action (26). Therefore, de-escalation of commitment can be defined as the process of breaking an escalation cycle by reducing or redirecting the originally favored course of action. The study of de-escalation of commitment in the context of sport is limited. Thus far, only a handful of investigations exploring de-escalation actions have been conducted and these have specifically examined university athletic departments (14, 15, 16). These studies have aimed to understand factor-oriented (striving to explain a particular phenomenon) and process-oriented (striving to analyze the evolution of events over time) characteristics of de-escalating commitment. While informative, the aforementioned studies provide a limited analysis of de-escalation within the context of sport as they do not account for the importance of politics in

decision-making. In circumstances involving increasing or decreasing commitment to a course of action, scholars, such as Ross (29), speak to the importance of politics in decision making. However, there is a noticeable dearth of research pertaining to the role of politics in both escalation and de-escalation of commitment, as explained by Slesman and colleagues (32). Therefore, this paper seeks to investigate the role of politics in de-escalating commitment to a previously favored course of action.

## CASE BACKGROUND

At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, steroid use among high school students was on an upward trajectory from its reported prevalence in the 1990s (24). During his 2004 State of the Union Address, President George W. Bush brought increased attention to steroid use when he called on team owners, union representatives, coaches, and athletes to confront the practice and its influence on younger generations. The following year, additional concern was cultivated when the United States Congress held well-publicized hearings to address steroid use in Major League Baseball. The political discourse became more localized in Texas by a series of investigative reports in the *Dallas Morning News* and other media outlets depicting the ease by which high school athletes in the state had obtained the substances (17, 18). As a result of the discourse nationally and locally that created a fertile political climate to formulate new policy solutions, in 2008 the state government of Texas along with the state's governing body for high school athletics formulated and implemented the largest high school steroid testing program in the United States. Between 2008 and 2013, over 62,000 high school athletes were tested. Of those tested, only 190 were positive (38).

The results were open to ambiguous interpretation by various stakeholders. Many of the supporters of the initial steroid testing program championed the cause by proclaiming that it would act as a deterrent against the usage of the drugs in high schools. The possibility that athletes could be tested for performance enhancing drugs and suspended from their sports, if caught, was intended to motivate them to abstain from using the illegal substances (2). One of the key champions of the program was Texas Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst, who stated "It will save lives. That's the whole purpose. I'm convinced steroid use in high schools is greater than people want to admit... You can't put a price tag on a young person's life" (2). Safety advocates, such as Don Hooten, testified in support of the testing program before the Texas State Legislature and hoped the Texas program would be the model for other states across the country. Hooten founded the Taylor Hooten Foundation, in remembrance of his son, in order to promote non-usage and provide educational outreach on appearance and performance enhancing drugs. Even when few high school athletes tested positive for steroids, some stakeholders publicly praised the low test numbers as an indication that the resources expended on the program were well spent and had deterred usage among high school students. Such support aided elected officials who championed the distinctive approach in Texas. Further, the National Center for Drug Free Sport was the private organization that administered the testing program in Texas. Its president, Frank Uryasz, described the testing procedures as a deterrent and not a surveillance program seeking to find positive test results (1).

Other stakeholders argued the problem of steroids was not nearly as significant as first believed and, therefore, the testing program was never necessary. Two years after signing the legislation that enabled the testing program to commence, Texas Governor Rick Perry concluded ““Our kids aren't anywhere near as enthralled with these enhancing drugs as some people seemed to think two years ago.”” (27). While national data showed that steroid use among high school students was trending upward in the late 1990s and peaked in the early 2000s, by the time the Texas program was implemented in early 2008 steroid use among high school students across the United States had been declining for several years (24). Before the program was crafted, other stakeholders, such as high school coaches and administrators, publicly expressed doubt about the prevalence of steroid use and explained that illegal use of other substances (e.g., alcohol, marijuana) was a larger problem among Texas high school students (18). For instance, D. W. Rutledge, serving as the executive director of the Texas High School Coaches Association, stated ““If they're going to test for steroids, it would make sense to test for everything”” (31). Furthermore, it was noted in the early political discourse that the cost of each steroid test was over 10 times the cost of a test for recreational drugs (17). As the years progressed, doubt began to spread as the testing of thousands of students brought about only a small percentage yielding positive results (38, 40). Low positive numbers became the norm. During the 2011-2012 school year, 3,311 tests were given to only find 11 students who tested positive. The next year, 3,351 tests were given to discover again just 11 students using steroids (38). The ineffectiveness of the program led one Texas state senator to proclaim in frustration that the program was ““a colossal waste of taxpayer money”” (1). Stakeholders who had emphasized recreational drugs as more common used the low positive test results to bolster their argument that preventing other substance use was more of a public health concern and more cost efficient to test for compared to the per test costs for steroids.

A final key contention was that the testing protocols were inadequate. Don Catlin, founder of the Olympic Analytical Laboratory, explained that the poorly formulated program led people to assume that there was not a problem with steroid use among high school athletes (25). ““The numbers are nowhere near what they should be for a bona fide program”” Catlin noted (25). According to Catlin, a legitimate test would need to be able to test for at least 40 steroids and the 10 steroids tested for in Texas were not the most pervasive among high school users. Thus, the testing protocols lessened the reliability of the tests results and, therefore, the program as a whole. Hooten, an initial advocate of the program, later agreed that the testing procedures were inadequate and bolstered the argument of those who believed there was not a steroid problem in Texas originally (3, 40).

Beyond the positive test results, the resource allocations offered a clear demonstration of de-escalation of commitment in Texas. As the political discourse in Texas and across the United States fostered a window of opportunity to formulate a new policy approach (20), \$3 million were allocated for each of the first two years of the testing program, which commenced in 2008. During the life of the Texas program, only a few other states tested for steroids among high school athletes and the resource allocation in Texas, along with the program's scope, was far greater than any other state (38). However, with lower than expected positive tests and divergent interpretations of those results, in subsequent years the testing program received



fewer and fewer resources. For the third and fourth year of the program, \$1 million were allocated each year. Once the fifth and sixth year of the program arrived, only \$650,000 were allocated to the high school steroid testing program that began with so much impetus and was the largest high school program of its kind in U.S. history. Although legislation was not passed in Texas to terminate the testing program, by 2015 it was discontinued due to not receiving any budget allocation.

In addition to the declining resources appropriated for the testing program, other political issues in Texas likely contributed to the de-escalation of commitment as well. When the testing program was initially crafted and allocated resources, the state government of Texas enjoyed a budget surplus. However, as the economic struggle across the United States eventually affected Texas, the state was faced with a budget deficit starting in 2011, which necessitated significant resource reductions to programs in various policy areas (25). With many stakeholders questioning the effectiveness of the testing program to achieve its desired outcome, increased consideration was given to whether continued appropriations towards the program were prudent with the budget situation. These reductions in resource allocation were not simply financial, but political as well given that certain programs in the state had to be prioritized over others. Subsequently, in 2014, Dewhurst was not reelected as lieutenant governor. Thus, one of the most influential proponents of the steroid testing program no longer held public office. The following year the state legislature elected to no longer fund the program. National data showing that steroid use had been trending downward since 2005 was another factor that resulted in the Texas Sunset Advisory Commission recommending that the testing program be discontinued (38). Additionally, a critical shift steadily occurred in the political discourse concerning public health and sport. The attention on performance enhancing drug usage was reduced while the awareness of brain trauma and concussions through sport became a critical issue even for high school athletes (22).

## **DISCUSSION**

This paper signifies an important call to attention for understanding the role of politics in escalation or de-escalation of commitment decision making, which has received little empirical inquiry thus far in sport or non-sport disciplines. While in most contexts decisions to escalate or de-escalate commitment to a course of action are multifaceted, the complex role of politics alone, as a structural determinant, can be significant in many cases. In the Texas high school steroid testing program, it is evident that politics cultivated the initial escalation of commitment towards the issue and creation of the program, but later influenced the gradual de-escalation of commitment after recognition that the desired outcome was not being met. This included how politically relevant steroids were nationally during the escalation phase and later less relevant during the de-escalation phase. Further, politics appeared to be such an essential aspect of increasing and attempting to maintain commitment to a course of action to the extent that the absence of politics may have resulted in the testing program never existing. In addition, the political nature of the decisions made toward the program and the prevalence of steroid use among high school athletes, which involved multiple stakeholder groups, was certainly influenced by how public those decisions were made. Similar to how leaders of

publicly traded companies are legally obligated to justify their resource allocation decisions in the interests of the organization, elected officials are often compelled to publicly explain the appropriations decisions for a limited public treasury. The allocation for the steroid testing program was rather insignificant relative to the overall Texas budget and could have been easily overlooked by stakeholders. However, in this case, public justification was necessary due to the publicized, political nature of how the program was crafted, its unparalleled scope, and the lower than expected positive tests results that brought additional statewide and national attention.

By using the steroid testing of high school athletes in Texas as the featured case, this project specifically represents an additional example of sport's relevance to escalation of commitment theory and an opportunity for sport to contribute to theoretical development in the broader organizational behavior literature (7). By highlighting a new sport context in which de-escalation behavior was evident, the wider application of escalation of commitment theory to sport can be understood. As a result, there are likely numerous other sport contexts in which policy decision making can be empirically examined through an escalation or de-escalation of commitment lens.

From a practical standpoint, given the many examples of policy learning towards sport and non-sport issues, a more detailed examination of the testing program may inform future governing bodies confronting similar challenges elsewhere. Typically, policymakers will borrow ideas from other governing bodies when a program has been perceived to work well in other settings. Policymakers can still learn from policy approaches deemed to be unsuccessful or unsustainable, which the testing program in Texas could be perceived as given its discontinuation. However, it is critical that other policymakers are mindful of contextual differences and have a more comprehensive understanding for why an external policy did or did not work. This is why new policies should be carefully considered and justified beyond the fact that a policy has or has not worked elsewhere. For instance, while there was a clear political impetus to address steroid use among high school athletes when the program was formulated, missing from the discourse were acknowledgements of how high per test costs would be for a comprehensive steroid test, especially compared to the costs of a recreational drug test. Likewise, annual national data indicating that steroid use among high school students was declining at the time of the discourse was also not taken into account (24). The political momentum that was generated for the program's creation may have resulted in critical data being overlooked. However, the acknowledgement of such data several years later supported discontinuation, or the final phase of de-escalation (38). Even with the modern abundance of information on approaches tried elsewhere, to effectively address a health issue like the prevention of performance enhancing drug use in the long-term policymakers will have to customize programs and strategies that take into account the unique circumstances of a specific population or place (9). The divergent interpretations of the limited positive test results indicate that it is critical to not only define a problem, but also reach consensus on what the goals of a program are, which influences how evaluation data are viewed, and what approach will serve as the program's framework. It was noticeably ambiguous how the issue was originally framed in Texas, which significantly influences the strategies and objectives of

the crafted program (6). How a problem is framed will also affect whether certain individuals and organizations will concur with program goals and maintain their commitment toward lessening the problem (9). Furthermore, it is reasonable for stakeholders to expect policymakers to be able to articulate what coherent and comprehensive framework serves as the foundation for the formulated program, and thus how and why a program will succeed (10). In numerous contexts, a program is more likely to succeed if developed with a clear framework serving as its foundation from the outset (39).

This paper has demonstrated how a theoretical framework is practically applicable to real-world conduct. Not only has the key role of politics in escalation or de-escalation behavior been demonstrated, but the case of the Texas high school steroid testing program also offers another sport context in which escalation of commitment theory is relevant. This suggests that there are likely many additional sport and political contexts in which escalation or de-escalation of commitment can be researched to advance both theory and sport management practice.

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