This article investigates whether it is morally permissible to use performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs). It begins by raising the following questions:

Are we ethically justified in condemning athletes when they use performance-enhancing drugs in their efforts to achieve excellence in performance? Should taking PEDs solely for the purpose of enhancing performance be regarded as morally impermissible? Why shouldn’t athletes simply be allowed to pursue athletic success by means of taking drugs?

Simon begins answering this question by making a few assumptions:

A1: PEDs have negative health effects that are serious in nature
A2: Athletes do not take these drugs for therapeutic reasons
A3: The use of PEDs does enhance athletic performance.

1 What is a Performance-Enhancing Drug?

There are several difficulties associated with defining what is a PED:

1. some things clearly count as PEDS (e.g. steroids) while others are iffy, e.g. coffee or blood doping.
2. we cannot define PEDs by saying that they are artificial as "testosterone is natural and blood is natural.
3. what counts as a PED varies, e.g. drinking in boxing vs. drinking in rifle

Nevertheless, there are some paradigm cases of substances that clearly count as "PEDs" in certain sports, e.g. steroids, amphetamines, blood doping. In addition, the use of PEDs tend to meet some of the following conditions:
1. The user takes the substance because s/he believes it will enhance performance and s/he wouldn’t take it otherwise.

2. The user believes that taking the substance involves some risk to the user.

3. The substance is not prescribed as medication to treat an illness or injury.

2 Performance-Enhancing Drugs, Coercion, and the Harm Principle

One way that we might argue for the moral permissibility of taking PEDs is as follows:

P1: The "harm principle" is the principle that it is permissible to interfere with the behavior of competent adults only in order to prevent harm to others. That is, it is not permissible to interfere with their behavior only if their behavior hurts others.

P2: If professional athletes in general prefer the potential gains of taking PEDs over the risks, they are not harming others.

P3: From P1 and P2, it would be morally wrong to prevent them from taking PEDs.

C: Therefore, since professional athletes do prefer these gains, it is not morally permissible to prevent them from taking PEDs.

There are two objections to this view.

2.1 Objection #1: Informed Consent

The first objection goes something like this:

Assume that we allow PEDs. If an individual wants to be a professional athlete, then s/he must take PEDs as his/her ability to compete professionally requires it. It is no longer a free choice to take PEDs or not. The choice then is between being a professional athlete and taking PEDs or not being a professional athlete. In other words, professional athletes do not freely consent to using PEDs, but are coerced into taking PEDs.

Simon replies to this objection by saying that individuals are not coerced into taking PEDs as they are free to not be professional athletes. Simon (p.9) writes:

I would suggest that talk of coercion is problematic as long as the athlete has an acceptable alternative to continued participation in
highly competitive sport. While coercion may indeed be a real problem in special cases, the burden of proof would seem to be on those who deny that top athletes generally are in a position to consent to practices affecting performance.

Do you agree with Simon’s claim above?

2.2 Objection #2: Harm to Others

Returning to the harm principle, we object to P2 and say that by allowing PEDs, people are being harmed. The argument for this claim would go something like this:

P1: Making PEDs permissible would force some individuals to take PEDs who would not have taken PEDs.

P2: PEDs cause harm as they have serious health consequences.

C: Therefore, making PEDs permissible would harm others (and so violate the harm principle).

Simon asks us to think of the following analogy. Suppose that an athlete decides to undergo a rigorous (and potentially dangerous) heavy weight lifting program. If you wish to be a professional athlete, it seems that you too must now engage in an equally rigorous (and dangerous) program. So, just as in the case of PEDs where you are forced to take risk your health by taking drugs to stay competitive, in the weightlifting case, you are forced into the rigorous (and potentially dangerous) lifting program to stay competitive.

2.3 Objection #3: Harm to Young People

A third objection is that if PEDs were permissible, this would have negative effects on young people. The general idea is that if star athletes use PEDs, so would young people who are strongly impressed by superstar athletes.

Simon’s reply to this objection is similar to the above. The objection simply points out some risk that PEDs pose to others but does not justify why this risk is morally impermissible while the risk posed by rigorous (and potentially dangerous) training is not impermissible.

2.4 Summary

According to Simon, we are left with three options:

Option 1: We should treat the risks of PEDs and the dangerous weight-lifting program alike and say that both are impermissible

Option 2: We should allow both PEDs and dangerous training activities and leave the choice up to the individual.
Option 3: We need to justify the claim that allowing PEDs *improperly* imposes risk on individuals while other forms of risk are accepted. In other words, we need an account of professional sport that distinguishes between acceptable and non-acceptable risk.

3 Drugs and the Ideal of Competitive Sport

Suppose we define "competition" as "a mutual quest for excellence through challenge" and these challenges are presented to individuals within the rules that govern the sport (see p.10-11). Relying on this definition, Simon (p.11) claims that a sports contest is "a competition between *persons*". What this implies then is that a sports contest is not a contest between robots or an event where one individual attempts to overcome another individual. Rather, the goal of a sporting event is to test the athletic ability of other persons. Simon considers this the *ideal of competitive sport*.

When PEDs are allowed, we navigate away from the ideal of sport because we are no longer testing the dedication, motivation, innate and developed abilities of persons, but are (in part) testing how the bodies of persons react to drugs.

However, there are two objections to this view:

**Objection #1:** PEDs don’t change the goal of athletic competition as it still tests the physical and psychological characteristics of competitors. We are still testing the physical-psychological qualities of athletes.

**Objection #2:** The original goal of competition is flawed. We ought to change it to accommodate PEDs.

3.1 Drugs and Tests of Ability

Let’s consider **Objection #1**. This objection states that we haven’t navigated away from the goal of competition by allowing PEDs as we are still testing the physical-psychological properties of individuals. Not only are we interested in an athlete’s ability to respond to physical training and diet, but we are also interested in how well that athlete’s body responds to drugs. The best athletes are the ones whose psychological and physiological characteristics best respond to training, diet, and drug use.

In response, Simon claims that this objection misses the point of athletic competition is to "select those who do run the fastest, swing the hardest, or jump the farthest" but where "the differences in outcome [...] correlate with difference in ability and motivation", not in differences relating to a body’s capacity to react to drugs.

Here is another way of putting Simon’s point. Suppose two bicycle racers: LA and GL. If GL and LA are two individuals who are equal in terms of their innate abilities and do the same kind of training, but LA uses PEDs but GL doesn’t. We wouldn’t say that LA is a better athlete than GL. Even further,
suppose that GL and LA are not equal in terms of their athletic abilities. Instead, suppose that GL has more innate ability, trains harder and smarter than LA. But suppose that LA routinely beats GL in races. It is counterintuitive to say that LA is a better athlete than GL precisely because we think that the point of an athletic competition is not to measure performance (and that’s it). Rather, the game is set up so that differences in the outcome (who wins) corresponds to differences in ability and and motivation.

3.2 Competition and Respect for Persons

Let’s consider Objection #2. This objection says that those that contend that the point of an athletic competition is simply to test ability and motivation and not to also test the capacity of individuals to react to PEDs are wrong. To put this in a different way, consider the following proposal:

Let’s allow for two different kinds of activities. First, we have sporting activities that do not allow PEDs (for the reasons mentioned above). Second, we have activities that allow PEDs.

Simon contends that if our primary concern is to test the capacity to shoot hoops, run, or hit a golf ball, then we are just testing bodies. But, if all we care about are testing the performance of bodies, we should use better bodies than our own, e.g. robots, animals, etc. But, the reason we would reject this proposal is because we see athletics as a way of testing persons. We want to test the mental resolve, the innate ability, the training and developed abilities of individuals, and not performance for performance’s sake.

From this, Simon concludes that the traditional idea of sport as competition between persons is better from a moral point of view (see p.13).

4 Reading Questions

1. What is at least one thing that Simon assumes at the outset about PEDs

2. What is the "principle of harm"?

3. Give at least one reason why Simon thinks that that foc

4. What would Simon say to the proposal that we ought to change our conception of the point of sports and allow PEDs?

5. Is Simon for or against the use of PED?