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hGH frustrates congressman

Fla. Republican wants hearing; O's connections leave fans sour

By Jeff Barker
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A Florida congressman said yesterday that he wants to hold a hearing to find out how prevalent the use of human growth hormone is in baseball and other sports, and what can be done - soon - to deter its use.

Cliff Stearns, a north central Florida Republican who chairs a House Energy and Commerce subcommittee, suggested that his interest arose partly out of frustration. Just when baseball seemed to be clamping down on illegal steroids came the latest revelations indicating the sport has more work to do to ensure that some players aren't obtaining an unfair competitive advantage.

While hGH's use has long been a concern in Congress, questions about the substance have taken on greater urgency in light of former Oriole David Segui's statements over the weekend that he used the substance with a prescription. Two weeks ago, the Arizona home of Jason Grimsley - also a former Oriole - was raided, and a federal search warrant affidavit said the pitcher admitted he and other players used hGH.

"My interest is not limited to steroids - I am interested in getting all performance-enhancing drugs out of sports," Stearns said in an e-mail replying to a Sun query. "I would like to examine how to test for hGH and to learn about their use in sports. These drugs undermine the integrity of sports and adversely affect young people who emulate professional athletes."

The substance, first discovered 50 years ago, is produced by the pituitary gland in the brain. It can now be synthesized and is available legally only by prescription.

Human growth hormone is on Major League Baseball's banned substances list, but since it is not detectable through urine samples - the only collection procedure currently permitted by MLB and the players union's collective bargaining agreement - its inclusion is practically moot. MLB questions the reliability of a blood test for hGH that has been used on Olympic athletes.

Stearns has not yet formally scheduled his hearing or compiled a witness list. So it is too soon to tell whether the hearing may help resolve a puzzling question: Why have so many Orioles-connected players been linked to performance-enhancing drugs or supplements?

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Segui, who told ESPN he still takes hGH because he has a natural deficiency of the hormone, is the third former Oriole, along with Grimsley and Rafael Palmeiro, to be connected to steroids or hGH. Palmeiro was suspended by baseball last year after a positive steroid test that he said may have been triggered by a tainted vitamin B-12 shot from teammate [Miguel Tejada](#). In November, a House Government Reform Committee report depicted an Orioles clubhouse where players seemed to routinely pass around vials of the vitamin supplement obtained from the Dominican Republic.

A congressional aide who has been involved in investigating baseball said yesterday that it's unclear whether the Orioles' drug issues are disproportionate, or whether the team's problems only seem worse than others' because the public knows more about them. "No one knows [the answer]," the aide said.

Not as shocking

Some Orioles fans interviewed at the [Inner Harbor](#) yesterday suggested the experience of the past year has left them jaded about their team's off-the-field activities.

"Palmeiro really shocked me, that he was in the middle of all that," said Joe Prucha of Perry Hall. "But I'm not so shocked anymore about anything."

Justin Hillman of Baltimore said he too wasn't surprised by Grimsley's statements that many players - most of the names have not been released - used illegal substances.

But Hillman admitted to a certain frustration. "A lot of finger-pointing is going to the Orioles, which makes me kind of disappointed that they were on all these drugs and they've been losing for the past eight years. Why wasn't it helping them at all?" Hillman said.

Segui, who finished his career with the Orioles in 2004, does not appear to be a typical user.

The Food and Drug Administration allows hGH use for specific ailments. Doctors may prescribe it to excessively short children to help them reach normal height and to adults who have a growth hormone deficiency. Most experts say that true growth hormone deficiency is extremely uncommon.

But dozens of doctors around the country also prescribe it to aging men and women who hope growth hormone will give them energy, increased strength and a higher libido.

It is not clear whether hGH can improve athletic performance. Dr. Harrison Pope, a Harvard professor who is an expert on the use of steroids and other illegal substances by athletes, said he gets conflicting information. "I see bodybuilders [all the time] who report that they use hGH," he said. "Some give it rave reviews, but others express complete disappointment."

He noted that the issue is further clouded because black-market hGH is often counterfeit, and as a result presumably has no physiological effect.

Experts disagree about how difficult it might be to get a prescription for human growth hormone. "There are clinics where doctors will pretty much prescribe it by request," said Dr. Mitch Harman, director of the Kronos Longevity Research Institute in Phoenix, and an expert on

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hGH.

But he also pointed out that many of these doctors might be reluctant to prescribe growth hormone to an elite athlete, because of concern over legality. "The last thing they want to do is get fried for giving it to an athlete," Harman said.

Baseball's collective bargaining agreement is set to expire Dec. 19. Because neither baseball nor the players union believes there is a reliable blood test for hGH, the issue is not expected to be debated during coming negotiations. Representatives of both the union and baseball declined to comment yesterday.

Too invasive?

The players union has argued in the past that blood tests are too invasive, especially in random drug testing in which one player could be subjected to needle punctures as many as seven or eight times in a season. That bargaining position is unlikely to change without a full polling of its membership, something that has not occurred and is not planned, according to one union source.

The union also is concerned about the potential of blood storing and who would have access to its members' vials.

The Sun reported this month that Congress quietly pressured baseball months ago to save players' urine specimens so they could be analyzed when a urine test for hGH becomes available. The idea was to make certain a deterrent existed so that players could not use the growth hormone with impunity while a screening procedure was still in development. But baseball balked at the request.

It is unclear whether Stearns' committee would attempt to summon Grimsley to testify about drug use. Congressional aides say the Justice Department would likely object to his presence on grounds that he is an important figure in an ongoing investigation.

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