Donald M. Hooton - Oral Testimony

House Government Reform Committee

March 17, 2005

20 short months ago, our youngest son Taylor took his own life. He was just 2 weeks away from beginning his senior year in high school. He was carrying a 3.8 average, had made an excellent score on his SAT test, and we were preparing to make college visits. Taylor was well liked by all who knew him – adults tell us he was one of the most well mannered young men that they ever met – he was always smiling! His friends tell us that he was one of the nicest kids on campus, a ladies man who was a real charmer.

This past spring, he would have been a starting pitcher on his varsity baseball team. During the fall of his junior year, his JV coach told this 6'3"/175 pound young man that he needed to "get bigger" to improve his chances of making varsity. Taylor resorted to using anabolic steroids as a short cut to reach his objective.

I am convinced that Taylor's secret use of anabolic steroids played a significant role in causing the severe depression that resulted in his suicide. I have learned that what happened to Taylor – the events leading up to and including his suicide – are right out of the medical textbook on steroids.

Experts put the steroid usage rate at about 5-6% of the total US High School population – about a million kids. I am convinced that those numbers understate the problem. Some studies have put the use of steroids at about 11-12% of the junior/senior high male school population in some parts of the country. To put these numbers into perspective, the kids I've spoken with estimate that at least a third of the high school players that show up to play football under the lights on Friday nights in my part of the country are "juicing."

A number of factors are contributing to the increase in steroid usage amongst our kids – you have invited me to discuss one of them.

I believe the poor example being set by professional athletes is a major catalyst fueling the high usage of steroids amongst our kids. Our kids look up these guys – they want to do those things that the pros do to be successful. With this in mind, I have some messages for the players:

First, I am tired of hearing you tell us that kids should not look up to you as role models. If you haven't figured it out yet, let me break the news to you, you are role models whether you like it or not. And parents across America should hold you accountable for behavior that inspires our kids to do things that put their health at risk and teaches them that the ethics we try to teach them at home somehow don't apply to you.

Second, our kids know that the use of steroids is high amongst professional athletes. They don't need to read Mr. Canseco's new book to know that something other than natural physical ability is providing many of you with the ability to break so many performance records that provide you the opportunity to earn those millions of dollars.

With respect to the sacred home run record, I think Reggie Jackson's comments on this subject are instructional: "Somebody is definitely guilty of taking steroids. You can't break records hitting 200 home runs in 3 or 4 seasons. The greatest hitters in the history of the game didn't do that. Henry Aaron never hit 50 in a season, so you're going to tell me that you're a greater hitter than Henry Aaron? Bonds hit 73 in 2001, and he would have hit 100 if they had pitched to him. I mean, come on now."

Our youngsters hear the message: it's loud, it's clear, and it's wrong – "if you want to achieve your goals, it is okay to use steroids to get you there because the pros are doing it." It is a real challenge for today's parents to overpower the strong messages being sent to our kids by your behavior.

Third, players that are guilty of taking steroids are not only cheaters but you are also cowards. You are afraid to step onto the field, compete for your positions, and play the game without the aid of substances that are a felony to possess without a legitimate prescription; substances that have been banned from competition at all levels of athletics.

Not only that, you are cowards when it comes to facing your fans and the kids. Why don't you behave like we try to teach our kids to behave? Show our kids that you are man enough to face authority, tell the truth, and face the consequences. Instead, you hide behind the skirts of your union and now, with the help of management and your lawyers, you have made every effort to resist facing the public today. What message are you sending our sons and daughters? That you are above the law? That you can continue to lie, deny your behavior, and get away with it? That somehow you are not a cheater unless you get caught?

Your attorneys say they are worried about how your public testimony will play in a court of law – but, how do you think your refusals to talk are playing in the court of public opinion? The national jury of young people has already judged your actions and concluded that many of you are guilty of using illegal performance enhancing drugs. But instead of convicting you, they have decided to follow your lead. And in tens of thousands of homes across this country, our 16 and 17-year-old children are injecting themselves with steroids – just like big leaguers do.

Your union leaders want us to be sensitive to your right to privacy. Right to privacy? What about our rights as parents - our rights to expect that the adults that our kids all look up to will be held to a standard that does not include behavior that is dangerous, felonious and is cheating?

Now, a message for management: Major League Baseball and other sports need to take serious steps to stop the use of steroids. Slapping a player on the wrist with a 10-day suspension sends just one more signal to the kids that you are not serious about ridding the game of this junk. Forcing a pro to miss just 6% of the season is equivalent to forcing a high school kid to sit the bench for less than one of his games! And, we shouldn't be talking about whether to put an asterisk next to these guys' records! We're missing the whole point. You should be throwing them out of the big leagues.

Why don't you implement a real program that's closer to the Olympic program where cheaters are unable to compete for two years after their first offense and banned for life following their second? Do that and the kids may begin to get the impression that you are taking this issue seriously!

Let me add that this whole discussion is not about a collective bargaining agreement. We are way past that – steroid usage has become a serious public health issue. The behavior of our major league athletes is affecting the lives and the health of our kids, and I encourage members of Congress to deal with it in such a manner.

A critical weapon that we need to use in this fight is education coupled with a random testing program.

Students need to understand that these drugs can seriously harm them. But warning a 16-year-old about the dangers of having a heart attack or developing liver problems when he is 35 or 40 will probably fall on deaf ears. That's why I believe that parents and coaches are our most important targets for education. Parents need to know the dangers of this drug, how to recognize warning signs, and understand the importance of supervising their children in this area.

Our coaches must be more responsible & accountable for supervising this situation with their teams. Coaches across the country need to be:

a) Certified and credentialed – to have to pass a test to prove they are competent to supervise our kids. As part of their certification, they need to be trained to recognize the symptoms of steroid and other performance enhancing abuse and trained to know what to do about it when they find it, and
b) Held accountable for insuring that their teams are steroid-free. They should enforce a true zero tolerance policy against steroid abuse.

To help fill the education void, working in conjunction with experts like Dr. Gary Wadler, we have formed a non-profit foundation – the Taylor Hooton Foundation for Fighting Steroid Abuse, the only private group organizing to help fight this battle. We would like to explore ways to work with you make our Foundation part of your efforts moving forward.

On behalf of Taylor Hooton, Rob Garibaldi, Efrain Marrero and other kids around the country who have lost their lives to steroids, let me implore you to take steps to clean this mess up. Please help us to see that our children's lives were not lost in vain. You have the power to do something about this problem, and we are counting on you to do so.

Donald M. Hooton, Sr.

Just 20 months ago, Don Hootons' youngest son Taylor committed suicide. After conducting research and consulting with a number of the world's experts, Mr. Hooton developed the knowledge that it is highly likely that his son's secret use of anabolic steroids resulted in depression that was serious enough to cause Taylor to take his own life. Furthermore, he learned that the use of steroids amongst our youth is very high - much higher than most people realize!

Prior to losing Taylor, the Hootons were unaware of the dangers of anabolic steroids. They now realize that most parents that travel to football stadiums, baseball fields and other sports venues around this country every week to watch their kids play sports are just as ignorant as they were about steroids before their tragedy. Instinctively, they have reached out to parents and coaches to share their family's story with the hope that if others are armed with their knowledge, that they can avoid the tragedy that has devastated their family.

In order to help get their message out, the Hootons have formed the Taylor Hooton Foundation for Fighting Steroid Abuse. The organization is incorporated in Washington, DC and is the nation's first private organization dedicated to educating coaches, parents and students about the dangers of anabolic steroids. Mr. Hooton has spoken to high school audiences around the country on this subject. He is serving in a volunteer capacity as the Foundation's Chairman and President and sits on the Board with two other distinguished volunteers.

Mr. Hooton's testimony will introduce you to Taylor, discuss how widespread the use of steroids are amongst our nation's youth, provide you with his perspective on what influence professional athletes are having on our youth, and provide you with his recommendations on what role education plays in curbing the growth in usage of this dangerous drug.

Don Hooton is a Marketing Executive with HP. He is responsible for developing business for highly specialized telecom software products that are sold into the world-wide telecom market. Don has performed various roles within several telecommunications companies during his 30+ year career - including several senior executive assignments.

The story of Taylor Hooton and the Foundation that has been formed in his name has captured the media's attention. Mr. Hooton's appearance before the US Congress is at the pinnacle of a series of appearances that he has made over the past year as part of ringing the warning bell about the dangers of steroid abuse amongst our nation's youth.

National Coverage

- New York Times, Sports Page Cover Story
- CBS 60 Minutes II –"The Kid Next Door", 48 Hours Investigates, and The Early Show
- Jane Pauley Show
- ABC Good Morning America
- NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw
- Fox News Network: John Gibson and "The Big Story", a one-hour Special on Steroid Abuse – "Breaking Point"
- CNN has run several stories including Aaron Brown's News Program
- ESPN live interviews on "Outside the Lines Nightly" on "Sports Center"
- People Magazine feature article
- Newsweek – two stories
- Readers' Digest feature article
- Story in Weekly Reader Magazine
- Cover story in American School Board Journal – distributed to 35,000 school board members across the US
- One-hour special on Connecting with Kids Network
- Live interview on Family Net's "At Home" Program
- KRON-TV (San Francisco)
- WB TV (Boston)
- Radio interviews on Dallas (multiple), Detroit, Odessa, Tampa, and San Francisco stations as well as Bloomberg Radio, Sporting News Radio, and the Canadian Broadcasting Network

Local Coverage

- Multiple articles in Dallas Morning News – plus supporting editorials
- Multiple articles in Plano Star Courier and the Dallas Observer
- Coverage on all Dallas TV stations
- Story on Texas High School Sports TV Network – aired across Texas
- Story in Dallas Teen Magazine

International Coverage

- Two Japanese TV stations have covered this story
- Mainichi News (a major national daily Japanese newspaper)
- Swedish TV (Stockholm)
- Story in Spot-On, a German teen magazine

Legislative

- Testified before the US Senate Caucus on International Narcotics in July 2004
- Testified before the House Energy and Commerce Committee in March 2005
- Mr. Hooton was the lead witness at California State Senate hearing in April 2004