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A father's heartfelt crusade

A Placentia weightlifter and his cardiologist campaign against youth steroid abuse.

By GREG HARDESTY
The Orange County Register

ORANGE – Mr. Anaheim. Mr. Orange County. Mr. Muscle Beach. Mr. Venice Beach.

Danny McDermott had been named all those things when in July 1989, the bodybuilder almost added a new designation to his growing collection of titles:

R.I.P.

McDermott had just finished a workout when he fell to his knees outside a gym, his chest radiating pain.

The 36-year-old father of one with another on the way crawled to his car and tried to drive to the hospital.

A friend drove him there, where doctors hooked him up to machines and told him the news: heart attack.

McDermott couldn't believe it. Then he remembered his former training partner, who had suffered a near fatal heart attack about eight years earlier.

Both weightlifters grew up in an era when steroid pushers would show up at gyms with tackle boxes full of needles and synthetic steroid hormones, asking, "What would you like today?"

Both had used anabolic steroids, which promote muscle growth. Now it was McDermott's time to pay the price.

Quadruple-bypass surgery saved him.

Today – sitting next to his son, Shaughnessy, a 19-year-old Olympic weightlifting hopeful, and across from his cardiologist, Dr. Lawrence J. Santora – McDermott, 53, hopes to get a message across: Steroids can kill.

His audience? Young athletes looking for an edge.

FIRST STUDY

Santora and his colleagues at the Orange County Heart Institute published results from the first study to document a link between steroid abuse and coronary-artery calcification, the potentially deadly buildup of plaque.

The report was published last fall in *Preventive Cardiology*, the peer-reviewed journal of the American Society of Preventive Cardiology. Before the study, evidence was sporadic and anecdotal, Santora says.

The study looked at 14 male professional bodybuilders. It's difficult to find subjects willing to admit they used steroids, Santora says, and he urged more large-scale research. But the results showed a link between steroid abuse and potential heart trouble, he says.

"Some of these bodybuilders in their 30s had hearts that looked like they belonged to 70-year-olds," says Santora, a cardiologist on staff at St. Joseph Hospital in Orange.

Santora and McDermott are working to urge young athletes to stay off "the sauce" or "juice" through talks to high school kids and other campaigns targeting youths.

National estimates put the number of teenage athletes who use steroids at 1 million, or about 5 percent to 6 percent of all high-school students.

Santora co-wrote a book, "The OC Cure for Heart Disease," with NFL Hall of Fame linebacker and heart patient Dick Butkus, who did not use steroids.

The book promotes noninvasive heart scans for the early detection of coronary calcification, regardless of whether one has used steroids.

The scans, which use electron beams, are a faster, newer generation of CAT scans. They cost about \$500 each through the heart institute's O.C. Vital Imaging office in Orange.

LESSONS

If such scanning technology had been available when McDermott had his heart attack, doctors may have seen a bomb waiting to explode.

Growing up in Whittier, McDermott took up weightlifting in high school to make up for his lack of size – 5 feet 5 inches and 120 pounds as a freshman.

When a weightlifting gym opened near his bus stop, he got hooked.

McDermott starting competing as a bodybuilder in his teens. He also started using steroids. He set several state and national records, including bench-pressing 429 pounds when he weighed 165.

As McDermott continued to win awards and acclaim, his heart slowly was weakening. He stopped using steroids after his training partner had a heart attack, but damage had been done.

These days, McDermott and his son work out in the garage of their Placentia home. Danny McDermott also trains neighborhood kids as young as 12.

Among the rules listed on the wall: "Drug-free gym. No steroids."

Shaughnessy, a Fullerton College student, started lifting weights when he was 12. He played football at Mater Dei and El Dorado high schools, but like his father embraced weightlifting. He's training to earn a spot on the U.S. Olympic team for the 2012 London Games.

He is also training for three national major competitions, including the national championships in May. A good showing may earn him a residency at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo. – the first step toward becoming an Olympian.

"He learned early on that he can become naturally stronger through proper training, discipline, nutrition and rest," McDermott says.

Shaughnessy, at 5 feet 10 inches and about 230 pounds, has lifted 368 pounds in the clean and jerk – lifting in two motions, to the shoulders and then over the head – and 291 pounds in the snatch, which is one continuous motion.

He listens to his father talk about the dangers of steroids and to Santora preaching the benefit of heart scans.

"I want to do it right – train hard and recover, without steroids," the teen says.

Many of the teens Danny McDermott trains ask him the same question:

"What do you think of steroids?"

McDermott lifts his shirt and shows them the scar on his chest.

"They're not a good idea," he says.

"Wow, what happened to you?" is the typical reaction.

Says McDermott, "That usually makes them think about it."

Shaughnessy says he often hears athletes his age discussing steroids. He's seen the telltale signs of possible steroid abuse, including sudden mood changes, aggressive behavior, acne outbreaks and a quick gain in strength.


He says he'll never do the stuff. His father, he says, is proof enough that steroids can kill. What's more, there's a history of heart disease in the McDermott family.

Shaughnessy and his father look at the object in the middle of the table in Santora's office.

It's a sculpture of a heart, four times the normal size.

"You only have one," Danny McDermott says. "Take care of it."

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excellent story about the dangers of steroid abuse.

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