

The Sweet Science

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Steroids Kayoed Bob Hazelton

by Tim Graham



The asterisk is an explicit sticker.

That's why, in the steroid era, it can be stamped on any number of dubious records. The asterisk would set those marks aside, invalidate them, ostracize them.

Bob Hazelton doesn't want an asterisk affixed to his life.

He longs to feel a sense of purpose, fearful his life has been wasted because steroids have ravaged his body, leaving him a literal fraction of his former self.

Hazelton wants his life to stand for something, even though he hasn't stood for 18 years.

He was a blond-haired, blue-eyed Adonis. He stood 6-foot-6 and flaunted a physique that could've been chiseled by a renaissance sculptor. He was a heavyweight fringe contender who battled a young George Foreman and ended Bob Foster's career.

Hazelton is about 4 feet tall today. The steroids that made him a freak of stature caused both of his legs to be amputated. His livelihood was cut short, too.

He has two nubs just below his trunk. He's stuck in a wheelchair because his bones are too soft for prosthetics. He has been unable to locate meaningful work since his last leg was taken in 1987, and at 57-years-old his professional prospects are slim.

He can handle not having legs a lot easier than not having a vocation.

"I don't know why they look at me as though I'm nothing just because I don't have legs," Hazelton said, his deep, raspy voice wavering. "I am something. I know I can do something."

He gives the strong impression he would be willing to wash jock straps if he could just feel the camaraderie of a locker room, be part of a team.

"They don't want me around," Hazelton said. "It breaks my heart to think they would think so little of me. I would work with any professional team or league at any level, doing anything they asked of me, just to get involved again. But nobody wants me. There must be some job out there, but without legs it will just never happen."

Hazelton, who lives in Howard Lake, Minn., has made a few bucks from public speaking. He lectures kids on the wickedness of doping, using himself as Exhibit A. He was warning young athletes and their parents across the country long before steroids became a cause celebre.

That's why it makes him sick to see steroids in screaming headlines lately. He has been screaming for years, but apparently his message fell on deaf ears. He believed he was redeeming the life he messed up. He thought he was stopping athletes from following the path that cut him down.

Now he's afraid his voice is too faint in a world too big and too filthy. He fears he has been wasting his energy.

"I'm wondering how concerned people are," Hazelton said. "I know parents are, and I know schools are, but what about everyday people? Should I keep doing this or should I stop? I need to know if the public is really behind what I'm doing."

On March 16, Hazelton hoped to make an impact when he spoke before the most significant audience of his life: U.S. Congress. Steroids had become a hot-button topic on Capitol Hill mostly because of the intensifying BALCO lab scandal, which had ensnared baseball stars Barry Bonds and Jason Giambi. Retired slugger Jose Canseco's salacious tell-all book was close to being released.

Suddenly it was popular to care about steroids, and important people finally wanted to know what Hazelton had to say - or so he thought.

He cried before the House subcommittee that day, an emotional release from the sheer magnitude of the moment. But when he was done he might as well have heard crickets chirping. It was a Congressional hearing, but he felt nobody was listening.

"I know they brought me there to make a case," Hazelton said with disgust. "I'm an example for everybody. 'You used steroids. We need to tell them they're bad. Now move along."

"I'm sick of being used. I'm totally sick of it. I'm mad because I do what they need me to do and keep educating and speaking, but when it comes to anything important, they want to take the ball and run with it: Bob Hazelton, thank you, but sit there and watch us work."

So sit there he does - he has little choice - and he casts a skeptical glance at what will be done to curtail steroids in sports.

"They didn't want to believe it before," Hazelton said. "Now they see I was right."

A disclaimer about Bob Hazelton: He has a propensity to exaggerate. Research for this story uncovered many inconsistencies about his age, his past, his boxing career. He seems easily tempted to embellish for the sake of a good yarn, and many sportswriters have been all too willing to go along for the ride, relaying his colorful narratives unchecked.

None of that is necessary. His story is compelling in its most basic, verifiable form.

When I interviewed him for the Las Vegas Sun eight years ago he told me his career record was 26-5 with 25 knockouts. A major newspaper once listed him at 25-6 and another at 19-7. His ledger according to www.BoxRec.com is 20-11 with 18 KOs.

BoxRec says Hazelton made his pro debut in 1966 and lost five of his first six bouts. In December 1969 he became fodder for George Foreman at the old International Hotel in Las Vegas. The 1968 Olympic gold medalist, making his 11th pro appearance, dropped Hazelton twice and ended the fight in 82 seconds.

Hazelton has claimed that fight was pivotal in his decision to start taking steroids. He has said in many articles Foreman outweighed him by 40 pounds, but Big George's official weight that night was only 214.

Regardless, Hazelton had some decisions to make. He was 3-7 and had just discovered he had no shot to compete with the sport's elite - not without some help.

"After Foreman I was totally confused," Hazelton told *Knight-Ridder* in 1988. "I felt I embarrassed myself."

He said he began taking steroids in 1971, dianabol tablets at first, and his weight climbed to 230 pounds as he concentrated more on weightlifting than boxing.

He didn't fight again for three years, getting stopped in the seventh round by Ray White. So he shied away from the ring for two more years and returned to sculpting his body with the help of those magic pills.

In 1975 he decided to rededicate himself to boxing. How could he not? He was a tightly wound bundle of rage and testosterone, full of fury and force.

"I think there was a lot of anger," said Hazelton's third wife, Valerie, who didn't know him before the amputations. "I can't imagine him the way he explains himself before he lost his legs. He used to tell me about he would go into bars and just beat people up. He was just so angry, and it didn't take much for him to get into a fight."

Hazelton evidently channeled that emotion in the ring. He lost to the respectable Jose Luis Garcia but rebounded to win his next 10 bouts, nine of them by KO before the end of the second round. The streak lasted deep into the summer of 1977 and got him a date with Foster in Curacao.

Hazelton took the future Hall of Famer into the 10th round before getting stopped. One year and three victories later he got a rematch and scored the biggest triumph of his career, recording a second-round technical knockout and sending the light heavyweight legend into retirement.

Hazelton had won 15 of his past 16 bouts. He was on the verge of breaking out, claiming an oft-scrapped match with Duane Bobick could lead to a title shot. And in May 1979, he took on Lucien Rodriguez, a former European heavyweight champ.

Rodriguez easily won via third-round stoppage. Hazelton blamed the loss on a painful, steroid-related groin infection.

"My leg had turned gray on me," Hazelton was quoted by the *Omaha World-Herald* in 1993. "I called a doctor in Nevada, flew out there and tests showed I had a three-foot blood clot in my left leg . . . My leg was so big I couldn't even box. He knocked me down three times, but I wasn't even hurt. The ref kneeled down and said 'Bob, the fight's over tonight.' I knew the fight was over for the rest of my life."

He fought once more, according to BoxRec, scoring a quick win in 1980 over a pug making his pro debut. And that was that.

Hazelton, however, didn't stop doping or lifting weights. He fell in love with the cut appearance of his gargantuan body, and his vanity wasn't affected by emerging vascular problems. In 1981 he said he had the first of three heart attacks, and the blood clots in his left leg became so horrible he required bypass surgery.

By 1985 he said he was spending \$200-\$300 a week on black-market steroids, mostly Deca-Durabolin. He estimated he took as much as 1,400 milligrams of Deca-Durabolin, whereas a prescription for the drug might call for a patient to take five or 10 milligrams a day.

In 1986, with his weight hovering around 320 pounds, his body started to disintegrate. Operations on his left leg stopped working. One triple bypass was rendered moot after three weeks because of additional clots. Gangrene emerged.

"His calf would look like an elephant's leg," Liz Hazelton, his wife at the time, said in the 1989 *Knight-Ridder* article. "Then he had open ulcers on his ankle and foot. His leg was dead."

Hazelton's left leg was taken off below the knee in November 1986.

That should have been enough to dissuade him from steroids. Yet it wasn't. He was back on them by September of 1987, and three weeks later excruciating pain developed in his right leg. In a matter of days, that one had to be amputated below the knee, too. His legs have been cut back much farther over the years because of recurring infections.

The physical changes weren't the most painful.

"Steroids was the breakdown to my body and the destruction, but what it did to me mentally took me to a whole new world," Hazelton said. "It was like living in hell. There was never a happy focus."

So he took up the cause of speaking out about steroids and the damage they can cause, but he never really felt his - or anyone else's - message was given its due.

He watched All-Pro defensive lineman Lyle Alzado make useless pleas before dying of brain cancer (at age 42) in 1992 and noted the contempt MVP Ken Caminiti and Chad Curtis received after they told *Sports Illustrated* three years ago steroids were rampant in baseball.

Today's furor is reminiscent of Capt. Louis Renault, the Claude Rains character in "Casablanca." The world is now shocked - *shocked!* - to learn steroids are being used in major U.S. sports.

Doping has become a sexy topic as baseball's home run records continue to fall. Mark McGwire walloped 70 homers in 1998 to obliterate Roger Maris' 37-year-old single-season record. Three years later Bonds hit 73 homers, and he's 42 shy of Hank Aaron's hallowed career mark of 755.

Asterisks anyone?

"I've been upset because I think of all my heroes from childhood - Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris, Whitey Ford - and I knew some of these guys were breaking their records with steroids," Hazelton said. "I saw these celebrations for McGwire and (Sammy) Sosa and Bonds and anybody that was breaking records because of drugs.

"They can lie all they want, but they can't lie to me. What irritated me was that everybody accepted it. Bonds, Canseco and McGwire - and I've had people tell me I'm full of (crap) - but I could tell by their bodies and their faces and their puffiness. You don't get that body without steroids.

"I've been told I'm jealous. Jealousy went out a long time ago. The records they broke, that's fine. You had to be a great athlete to do what you've done. Let the records stand. But when they die young, they paid a helluva price. And that bothers me because of all the time I've done this, I'd like to think I did something. But all these guys just want to turn their back on it."

Hazelton doesn't want to name anybody, but he has strong suspicions boxing is rife with steroids, too.

"There's steroid use in boxing. I have no doubt," Hazelton said. "You look at the neck or the face or the shoulders, the cut in their muscle . . . I see it in basketball, too."

And that's what upsets him about not having a career, not having a purpose, not being taken more seriously. It's why you can tell he's on the verge of tears when he talks about getting a chance to attack the problem, not just speak at high schools here and there.

Hazelton said he tried to contact Major League Baseball commissioner Bud Selig earlier this year to offer his assistance. Perhaps, Hazelton thought, he could visit clubhouses in spring training and speak to players face-to-face about the dangers of doping.

Hazelton claimed he was passed off to an underling and then given the brushoff.

"These kids are seeing it, that steroids work," Hazelton warned. "If you enhance your life with steroids, unless you die off the bat, it will turn you into an aggressive power hitter or power runner.

"But my answer to kids is 'Steroids is like a credit card. You go to the store and buy all the things you want, but there comes a time you want to pay the bill. Are you ready to pay the bill?'"

Hazelton's still a religious weightlifter. He admits his vanity won't allow him to stop. His biceps are 21 inches, his chest 52½ inches.

Even though he can't walk on them, he wears prosthetic legs sometimes when he sits in his wheelchair because he likes the way they look.

"Sometimes I dream about having legs," Hazelton said. "I wonder what I would be like right now if I still had legs and what I'd be doing with my life. I've woken up two times in the past few years and thought I had legs. You sit up and reality quickly comes back to you."

(Bob Hazelton is soliciting feedback regarding steroids and whether speakers like him can truly make a difference in cleaning up sports. He can be reached at P.O. Box 1015, Howard Lake, MN 55349.)

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