

## In focus

# Some supplements have hidden risks

Products with steroids, illegal stimulants put more than just careers at stake

By A.J. Perez  
USA TODAY

Obafemi Ayanbadejo went through a list of ingredients when he shopped for supplements last January and found nothing objectionable. An NFL drug test later that month proved otherwise.

"A failed drug test is a bigger black eye than a DUI," says Ayanbadejo, a fullback and special teams player who tested positive for a form of the steroid nandrolone and received a four-game suspension. "In my case, people ran away from me saying, 'He failed a test for performance-enhancing drugs. He's cheating. He's really trying to get an advantage on the field.'"

Ayanbadejo, released by the Arizona Cardinals soon after the failed tests and still searching for a club after a stint with the Chicago Bears, isn't the first athlete to say a positive drug test could be traced to a contaminated supplement. Tampa Bay outfielder Alex Sanchez in 2005 and San Diego Chargers linebacker Shawne Merriman in 2006 said the same after positive tests.

"It became answer 1-A in the textbook for athletes who got pinched in a drug test: Point the finger at a dietary supplement company," says Daniel Fabricant, vice president of scientific and regulatory affairs for the Natural Products Association. "It's gotten to where it's become ludicrous."

Maybe not. A study set to be released today, obtained by USA TODAY and commissioned by Informed-Choice, a non-profit coalition of U.S. supplements companies, shows 13 of 52 supplements tested between July 2006 and January 2007 at a British lab had small amounts of steroids banned by the World Anti-Doping Agency and all major sports leagues.

Six supplements had measurable amounts of ephedrine, a stimulant banished from the market after it was thought to be a factor in the deaths of Minnesota Vikings offensive lineman Korey Stringer and Baltimore Orioles minor league pitcher Steve Bechler this decade.

"This is very eye-opening," says New York-based internist Gary Wadler, a member of WADA's Prohibited List and Methods Sub-Committee. "Clearly, the data suggests things aren't fine. Either the laws are not there or they're not being enforced."

The real danger, beyond athlete suspensions, is the harm that could come from the steroids and stimulants found in the supplements.

"Everything is a factor of dosage and duration," Wadler says. "If you're not being drug-tested, you could be consuming these supplements without knowing you're taking anabolic steroids. The risk to your health is real."

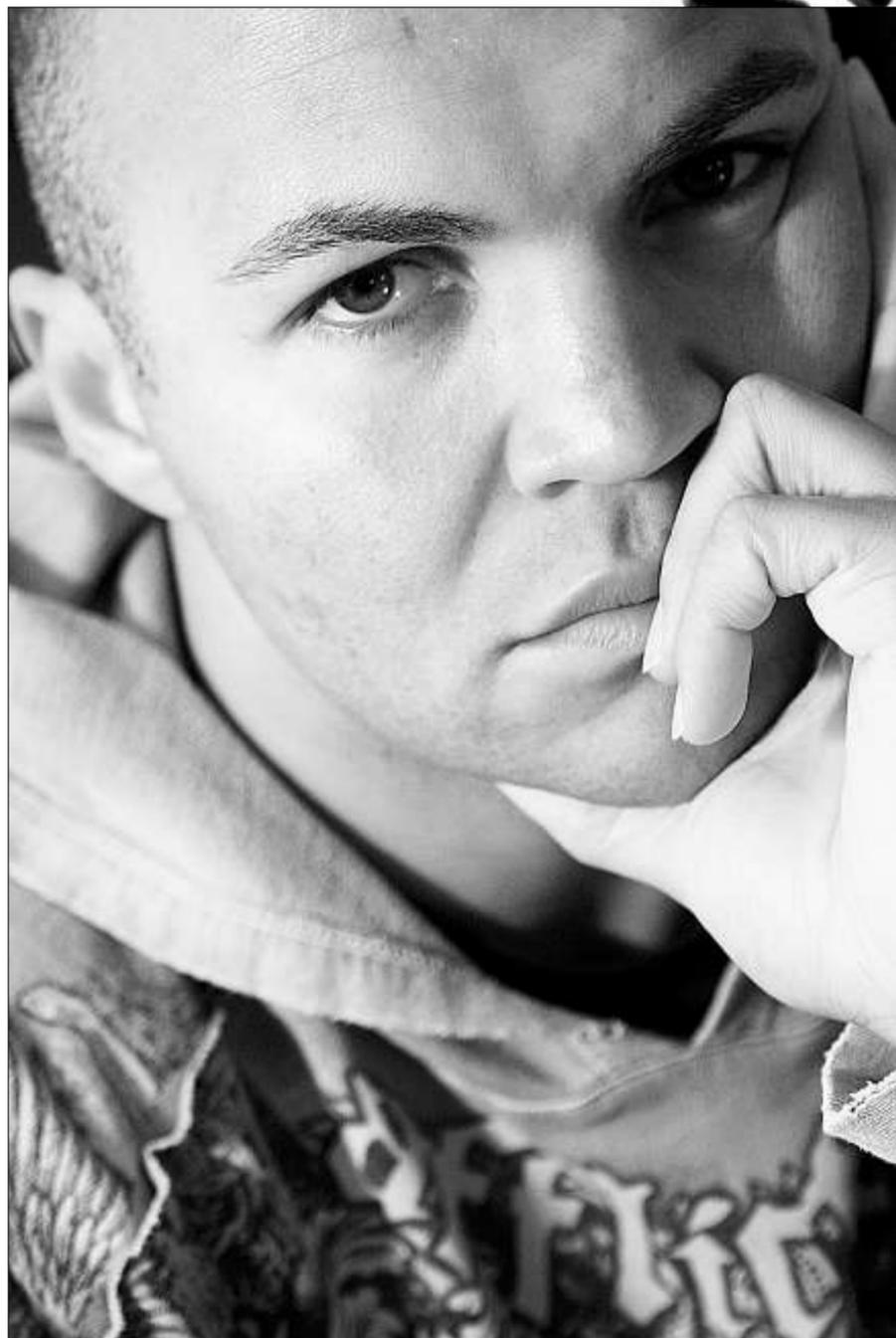
Under the U.S. Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994, supplements do not fall under the same Food and Drug Administration approval process as prescription drugs. The FDA can take action only if a supplement is found to be unsafe after it reaches the market, as happened with the supplements containing ephedrine.

As the natural product industry ballooned to an estimated \$22.5 billion in annual sales, according to trade journal *Natural Foods Merchandiser*, the laws remained largely untouched. But over the last year, federal lawmakers have mandated closer monitoring of the industry that should, the FDA says, lead to safer supplements.

Starting Dec. 22, supplement companies are required to report "serious" adverse effects of their products to the FDA, including resulting hospitalization, disability and death.

More stringent "good manufacturing practices" began to roll out in August "so that consumers can be confident that the products they purchase contain what is on the label," FDA Commissioner Andrew C. von Eschenbach said in a statement in June. All supplements companies must comply by June 2010.

The FDA "is always concerned about products that may put the public health at risk," spokeswoman Kimberly Rawlings said. "When FDA learns of a product that is adulterated or misbranded, including a dietary supplement, we will take the appropriate action to protect the public health."



By Steve Perez, The Detroit News

**Dubious distinction:** In 2005, Alex Sanchez became the first major leaguer suspended under baseball's doping policy.

#### Popular retailers involved

It wasn't the fringe elements of the supplements industry that Informed-Choice and its lab targeted. Their representatives traveled to various retail stores around the USA and a couple of popular online stores — and purchased supplements they thought a high school athlete would be interested in, according to Dave Hall, chief executive of HFL, the UK-based, WADA-approved lab that conducted the study.

Names of the specific supplements and where they were purchased weren't revealed, but Hall says some of the best-selling supplements were purchased from popular retailers. Informed-Choice awards a seal to supplement makers whose products are tested through HFL. Executive director Kelly Hoffman says the goal is to get more companies involved in the move-

ment, not to single out any one company.

"Naturally, no reputable company wants even trace elements of an unsafe substance in its products," Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, a longtime advocate for the supplements industry, said in a statement today. "By law, supplements cannot contain steroids. It's illegal and that product is no longer considered a nutritional supplement, it's an adulterated product."

Contamination or tainted raw materials could be one culprit, but there could be a more nefarious explanation. "It's very possible a few companies could be putting steroids into their products" intentionally, says Jeffrey Stout, director of the University of Oklahoma's Metabolic and Human Body Composition Laboratories. "People get phenomenal results and then word spreads. Suddenly, the product becomes a big deal and it's flying off the shelves."



By Robert Hanashiro, USA TODAY

**Benched:** Chargers linebacker Shawne Merriman served a four-game suspension after testing positive for a banned substance.

"I don't think it's a large problem at all," says David Seckman, executive director and CEO of the Natural Products Association. "Organizations like ours have standards. There are going to be people out there with their own Internet site that don't want to be part of an organization like ours. That's a very small percentage."

#### Ayanbadejo considers lawsuit

It's not known whether ALRI Industries' Max LMG, the supplement Ayanbadejo says he took, was tested. Ayanbadejo says he took the supplement with the words "Muscle Strength Hardness" emblazoned on the bottle for three weeks in January.

ALRI owner Author Rea says Max LMG stopped making the product in 2005, well before the study commenced. He said in an e-mail the product is still legal today, but he

#### At sports.usatoday.com

If you take supplements, how concerned are you that they contain steroids or illegal stimulants? Will you stop taking them? Share your thoughts in the online version of this story and read the complete HFL report.



By Mike Buscher  
for USA TODAY

**No team:** Obafemi Ayanbadejo, left, remains out of the NFL. Ayanbadejo, above leaping over the Seahawks' Kelly Herndon in a 2006 game, says a contaminated supplement caused him to test positive for a form of the steroid nandrolone.

## Supplement policies vary across leagues

The supplement policies of selected pro sports leagues:

**NFL:** Has official supplier (EAS); players told they can use other brands at their risk.

**MLB:** Has official supplier (NSF); players told they can use other brands at their risk.

**NBA:** No official supplier; discourages use of supplements.

**NHL:** No official supplier; players told to refer to U.S. Anti-Doping Agency website, which lists appropriate supplements.

**PGA:** No official supplier; golfers advised to scrutinize ingredients of supplements.

**LPGA:** No official supplier; players advised to be wary of supplements.

halted production because of "political hype demonizing (the) legal personal choice for non-competing individuals."

"I think the company was trying to be cute by creating something that mimics a banned substance," Ayanbadejo says. "It was labeled and nothing harmful was listed. A lot of companies tell you in one way or another that you should stay away from it if you're going to be tested."

Ayanbadejo says he's considering taking legal action against ALRI.

Rea says Ayanbadejo should have followed the NFL's supplement program, which steers players to products made by EAS. Baseball has a similar program with supplement maker NSF. Other leagues either dissuade their players from taking supplements or point players toward the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency for information.

"The response of the players to this program has been very positive," NFL spokesman Greg Aiello says. "The Players Association strongly endorses it and players on nearly every team have ordered products approved under the certification program. Most players appreciate the program."

Beyond Informed-Choice, other industry groups have offered a seal to show consumers a supplement has been tested and the company follows stricter manufacturing practices.

GNC, the nation's largest nutritional product chain, says it heavily tests its products and third-party companies need to provide certificates of analysis before their products can be sold, according to Gerald J. Stubenhofer Jr., senior vice president and chief legal counsel.

"GNC only deals with the most reputable vendors in the industry," Stubenhofer says. The Informed-Choice study, however, shows how tenuous that reliance can be.

Window on the web: Hot topics at [usatoday.com](http://usatoday.com)



#### Baseball beat: Pitchers on the market

Paul White reports from baseball's winter meetings in Nashville:

► "However the Johan Santana sweepstakes plays out, other prominent pitchers are beginning to bubble up as trade possibilities, both for whoever doesn't get Santana and a few other teams that might fight the price will be lower for the likes of Dan Haren and Erik Bedard. Don't bet on any discounts here."

Click on White's profile at [baseball.usatoday.com](http://baseball.usatoday.com) for the latest hot stove buzz.



By Gail Burton, AP

**Stifled:** Ravens' Chris McAlister vs. Pats' Randy Moss.

#### Readers: Refs too Patriotic?

Readers debated a defensive holding penalty against the Ravens on fourth down late in Monday night's game that led to the Patriots' winning score. The result also fired up the user posts of the day at [sports.usatoday.com](http://sports.usatoday.com):

► "It was a horribly officiated game that gave the Patriots several 'second chances.' If an official wants to find a penalty, he can find one on every play. The Ravens earned this one and the refs took it away. As a football fan, I know better: New England lost that game. So much for their perfect season. We all saw it and know what happened."

— Posted by **Ordinary Guy**

► "Can you smell it? It's the aroma of . . . sour grapes. The Pats didn't cheat. They may not have played the best game, but they won. There is no asterisk." — Posted by **Tim Schmal**

► "If the '72 mammals (Miami Dolphins) had the instant replay, I doubt they would have been undefeated."

— Posted by **NewsHoundDog**

#### Give Hawaii a chance

Since unbeaten Brigham Young won the national title in 1984, why not give 12-0 Hawaii a shot this season? Is it that impossible for Hawaii to beat Ohio State or LSU? Those are questions many people are asking.

Join the conversation at [sportscope.usatoday.com](http://sportscope.usatoday.com).

#### Today on tap

► **NBA chat:** Talk live with David DuPree at noon ET at [nba.usatoday.com](http://nba.usatoday.com)

► **NFL Rookie Focus:** Meet Colts wide receiver Anthony Gonzalez at [nfl.usatoday.com](http://nfl.usatoday.com)