

MUSCLEBOUND: A Novel

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By

Daniel Yetman

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Coordinator,
MFA in Writing
University of Saskatchewan
Department of English
Room 509
9 Campus Drive Saskatoon,
Saskatchewan
S7N 5A5

OR

Dean
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
University of Saskatchewan
116 Thorvaldson Building, 110 Science Place
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5C9 Canada

ABSTRACT

Athletes have been taking performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) since the ancient Olympics in Greece, but in the last thirty years, doping in sport has become a frequent topic in the media. *Musclebound* is a novel that explores the moral implications of athletes using PEDs to recover from injuries. The story follows Tyler Horton, a twenty-three-year-old sprinter who is close to qualifying for the Olympics. He tears his Achilles tendon and takes Human Growth Hormone (HGH) to recover in time to qualify. Even though he is healing at an inhuman rate, he begins to doubt if he made an ethical decision. Tyler is influenced by the opinions of his girlfriend, whose brother died in a PEDs related overdose, and his best friend who begins selling PEDs as a way to fund the drugs he is taking to become a professional bodybuilder. Tyler confesses to his PED usage when he realizes that even if HGH will help him heal quicker from his injury, he's getting an unfair advantage. *Musclebound* also explores the inability of athletes to cope with the ending of their careers as well as the fragility of the male ego in sport by following the careers of athletes through a range of sports.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

In Western society, athletes are idolized for their physical abilities. *Musclebound* explores the ethics of athletes using Human Growth Hormone (HGH) or other Performance-Enhancing Drugs (PEDs) to recover from injury. By presenting an argument for and against the usage of PEDs in a creative dissertation, I hoped to reach a broader audience than if I had written the project as a strictly academic text.

The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) has deemed HGH a banned substance due to its ergonomic effects and potential to increase athletic performance (“Human Growth Hormone (HGH) Testing”). However, research on the benefits and side effects of HGH have been poorly researched.

Whereas anabolic steroids are synthetic drugs that replicate testosterone in the human body, HGH is a naturally produced substance produced by the anterior pituitary gland. It has the following effects in humans: increased calcium retention, increased lean muscle mass, increased fat breakdown, increased protein synthesis, organ growth, and increased glucose uptake in the liver. Athletes are most concerned with the anabolic (tissue building) effects of the hormone, and because it is produced naturally in the body, it is difficult for WADA to catch athletes using it. Although new technologies are being developed that are becoming more efficient at testing for the hormone, as of yet, the most common way doping agencies catch athletes with HGH is by finding their names through their suppliers. For example, Major League Baseball caught Alex Rodriguez and other players for HGH usage through a rejuvenation clinic called Biogenesis.

My intent in *Musclebound* isn't to argue for or against the usage of PEDs in sport, but to bring awareness to the debate. PED usage is an ethical topic discussed widely in the media. Pros

of allowing athletes to use PEDs include enabling athletes to recover from injuries quicker, better monitoring of the administration of drugs, and getting rid of PED related cheating. However, if athletes took PEDs, they would be exposing their bodies to drugs that may have negative consequences on their health as they age. Many drugs are expensive as well. HGH can cost between \$400-\$2000 a month, and athletes often use it alongside other drugs. Allowing PEDs in sport could lead to sports becoming reduced to who can afford the best drugs.

The people in my novel argue for and against PED usage in sports and expose readers to the research on drugs use in sport in a way that allows readers to make their own decisions. Jung, Mike, and other minor characters believe in using HGH to increase athletic performance. Delilah and Peter rally against PED usage. All these characters influence Tyler's decision to confess to PED use. His confession contrasts with the antagonizing character Blake, who lies about not taking PEDs for years before getting caught.

A second theme throughout the novel is the inability of athletes to cope with the transience of their careers and retirement. High-performance athletes focus on a narrow, sport-specific goal throughout their careers. After retiring, the loss of this goal often causes a struggle to fill the void in their lives. Blinde and Stratta found that when college athletes were forced to retire, they equated their feelings to dying (3). Multiple studies have reproduced the same results. An example is David Lester and John Gunn's *Suicide in Amateur and Professional Athletes*. The research team interviewed thirty-nine athletes from the 1986 Cincinnati Bengals football team twenty years after the players' retirement. One had committed suicide, one was in prison, over ninety-five percent reported living with daily pain (230).

Not only do athletes often develop depression after their careers but they often play through it. Athletes live in the high-stress environment of competition, but physical stress from

training can trigger stress reactions in the body that lead to lethargy, depression, and decreased performance (MacArdle et al. 121).

As Verkhoshansky describes in his book *Supertraining*, athletes have to expose themselves to physical stress to stimulate physiological, sport-specific improvements. Unfortunately, an athlete may overtrain (expose themselves to more stress than their body can recover from). Overtraining can worsen already present mental illness and increase risk of injury. Injuries remove athletes from their sport and catalyze the same adverse effects as retirement. In my novel, I used Peter as the primary vessel to carry the theme of depression in athletes. At the start of the novel, he is in a hopeless mindset brought from the premature ending of his NHL career due to concussions. At the end of the novel, he is able to stay connected to his sport in other ways like coaching.

In the writing of this novel, I had a particular interest in track and field athletes since I have been a track athlete myself for the past ten years. I have witnessed many of the aforementioned mental health issues that athletes face in my teammates, and I have battled with overtraining myself for much of the last five years. In sports where athletes compete alone, like track and field, athletes have reported higher rates of depression than in than athletes in team sports (Nixdorg et al., 1).

Literary sources that influenced the writing of *Musclebound* include biographies of famous athletes with depression, such as Clara Hughes' *Open Heart, Open Mind*, and Suzy Favor Hamilton's *Fast Girl*. These are just two of many athlete biographies available dealing with mental health issues.

There are also many nonfiction books available about PEDs in sport. *Game of Shadows: Barry Bonds, BALCO, and the Steroids Scandal that Rocked Professional Sports* is about the

usage of steroids in Major League Baseball in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Jose Canseco's memoir *Juiced* is an account of PEDs in baseball that was under criticism by members of the baseball community when it was released in 2005 for exposing secrets of what some players were illegally doing.

Although sports biographies have been a popular selling genre for many years, recently there has been a surge of fictional books written about sports and athletes. Much of the sports literature written in Canada is about hockey. Three examples are *The Good Body* by Bill Gaston, *King Leary* by Paul Quarrington, and *Indian Horse* by Richard Wagamese. Angie Abdou's *Bone Cage* tackles the topics of athletes having to face the ending of their careers. David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* examines themes of addiction and suicide at a tennis academy, and Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding* analyses a baseball player's interpersonal relationships. John Updike's *Run, Rabbit* explores the struggles of a former high-school basketball star. Dan Millman's roman à clef novel *The Way of the Peaceful Warrior* is a story of perseverance, following a young gymnast faced with a potentially career-ending injury.

There are novels written about steroid use in sport, but they are aimed at young adult audiences. Both the novels *Gym Candy* and *Crackback* are young adult novels with themes of steroid use in high-school football.

Most of the track and field novels published are about long-distance running opposed to sprinting. Novels include John L. Parker's *Once a Runner*, Naomi Benaron's *Running the Rift*, and Mark Slouka's *Brewster*. The mentalities and physiology needed to be an elite sprinter compared to an elite distance runner are no more similar than the attributes needed to be an elite Olympic weightlifter compared to a triathlete. I wanted to write this novel from a power-speed athlete's perspective to fill that gap in the literature.

Even before starting the writing *Musclebound*, I had an image of where I wanted the novel to be set. In the summer of 2014, I worked at a varsity weight room. I was also training as a competitive Olympic weightlifter and worked four to twelve hours a day in the weight room. I became fascinated with some of the people who would work out there and social dynamic where many guys there organized themselves into a hierarchy-based primary on how experienced they were lifting. While working, I began making notes of potential characters for future writing. I based many of the characters in this novel on people I met, but I twisted them to the point of unrecognition, exaggerated them, combined them, and changed them to fit the story best.

Few women worked out at this particular weight room. I believe the reason was guys working out there would persistently ask them out or act inappropriately. As part of the research for this project, I interviewed various women about their experiences in weight rooms. The level of uncomfortableness they experienced seemed to vary depending on the weight room. I also interviewed retired athletes in a variety of sports including bodybuilding, track and field, soccer, and rugby. I was primarily interested in their experiences of leaving their sports and how they dealt with it. The interviews helped in the construction of realistic characters.

For the first two months of this project, I made an outline of the novel's plot. I also spent this time to brainstorm people who could make interesting characters in a weight room. Throughout the novel, rumours arise about the characters, and I wanted to show how quickly rumours can circulate through a weight room or university campus. Each of the significant supporting characters defeat expectations. Delilah is rumoured to be promiscuous but is later revealed to be body-conscious and relatively conservative. Jung is introduced as a heartless playboy and is later shown to be motivated by his love for his ex-girlfriend. I introduce Peter as the weird guy who always lifts alone but turns out to be an ex-NHL player.

A novel that I read several years before beginning this MFA program inspired the structure of my subplots. Patrick deWitt's *Ablutions* is about a bartender in Hollywood who battles with an alcohol addiction. The novel is not centralized around the protagonist as much as it is with the protagonist's relationships with the regulars at the bar. I structured most of the major subplots in *Musclebound* using this structure. For example, the characters Delilah, Peter, Jung, and Blake all would only exist in isolation without any interaction between them if Tyler wasn't in the weight room. In this way, Tyler is the hub of the wheel of plotlines.

With respect to the writing style, I kept the prose simple to match the simple language that the characters use. Since the point of view character is a twenty-three-year-old university student, Tyler limited the vocabulary I could use. Often, I would want to use a larger more descriptive word, but they sounded out of place, especially where the prose is meant to be written tight to Tyler. The exception to this was with words related to kinesiology or physiology since it is logical that Tyler, a kinesiology student, would both use these words in his thoughts and dialogue.

A challenge I faced in writing this novel was creating a realistic setting of a weight room and capturing the misogyny that sometimes exists in this male dominant setting without the piece of writing as a whole becoming misogynistic. I circumnavigated this through Tyler, by having him act differently than the other guys in the gym and challenge the rumours that circulate in the weight room.

Another challenge was the use of real location names throughout the novel. In the first draft, I didn't name the city that the novel took place in (Halifax) and talked around it by making allusions to the city's distance from neighbouring cities like Moncton or Yarmouth. In the second draft, I decided to include the name of the city to write a more descriptive setting.

However, I did not name the university that the novel takes place in. I withheld the name of the university for two reasons. First, so I could modify the campus and layout of the weight room to the needs of the plot, and second, so I wouldn't be liable for writing about a university negatively. I did the same thing with the bars and cafés. I made up the names but used real street names and reference points in Halifax.

Overall, *Musclebound* allowed me to explore the usage of performance-enhancing drugs in sports creatively. By writing *Musclebound* as a novel, I am able to reach a wider audience than if I wrote *Musclebound* as a traditional research study.

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