

Professional athletes who have been suspended for cannabis use include NFL Hall-of-Famer Randy Moss, star Steelers wideout Martavis Bryant, Milwaukee Bucks center Larry Sanders, and Michael Phelps -- the most decorated Olympian of all time.

This shortlist of those who have failed a drug test might make it seem like cannabis use in pro sports is a rare anomaly. But actually, about 80% of professional athletes are [said to use cannabis](#).

80% is a figure that at first seems like it must be a typo -- but it's not, and it's actually on the low end of estimation. A dozen former NBA and NFL players [interviewed by Bleacher Report](#) last year said that anywhere from 80-90% of the players they knew in the big leagues were cannabis users.

Some of them, incredibly, consumed before games (they must have favored sativa), and then turned in championship-level performances. Former Golden State Warriors small forward Matt Barnes won a ring in 2017 while "under the influence".

"All my best games, I was medicated," he says.

Shaun Smith, a nine-year NFL vet who played for the Dallas Cowboys, stated that he "smoked two blunts before every game."

Players like Barnes and Smith can be this forthcoming now that they're retired. American sports leagues list cannabis as a banned substance (putting it in the same category as PEDs and cocaine), and players who test positive for it can be forced to forfeit game checks, enter rehabilitation programs, and sit out entire seasons.

Players fight and bleed for their roster spots. So, if one draw from a vape pen is all it takes to violate policy and lose your golden ticket -- why risk it?

Here's why they think it's worth it to roll the dice.

When Your Business is Pain

Big-league games are battles, and NFL players absorb huge hits every Sunday. Quarterback Tom Brady calls getting tackled "a scheduled car crash."

But banged-up players do not currently have access to a full range of treatment options.

"Pain is constant in the game," former Denver Broncos wide receiver Nate Jackson wrote a 2014 *New York Times* [op-ed](#). "...and opioids are passed out for every injury. I think marijuana is a healthier alternative."

Opioid painkillers might do the magic work of short-term pain relief, but taking them “ruins your liver,” says retired tight end Martellus Bennett. “It starts to eat at your kidneys and things like that.” These pills are also ripe for abuse.

Cannabis, of course, is now prescribed as a remedy for chronic pain in 32 states, but the NFL does not currently allow their players a medicinal cannabis exemption, no matter where the team is based.

Many football players manage their pain with cannabis anyway -- because they can get away with it. The league randomly tests players in the summer, before the season actually begins. Fail, and you'll be scrutinized from that point on, tested as often as ten times a month throughout the rest of the season. But if you pass? You won't be tested again until the following year.

Eugene Monroe of the Baltimore Ravens is retiring at age 29 and calling for the NFL to lift its ban on medical cannabis. Read more [here](#).

Every athlete takes knocks, but there's one sport that's more savage than the rest.

MMA fighter Nate Diaz, his eye sockets bruised neon-blue after getting drilled by Conor McGregor, [hit a vape pen](#) at the UFC 202 press conference in 2016.

“It's CDB,” he explained to reporters. “It helps with the healing process and inflammation and stuff like that. So you want to get these for before and after the fights, training. It'll make your life a better place.”

An unapologetic consumer, Diaz was issued a public warning by the UFC -- but he was not suspended.

Go [here](#) to read a timeline of “Sports in the Age of Cannabis.”

A Cure for the Nerves

Don't forget the significance of going pro. Even getting signed by a “struggling” sports team signifies elite talent. (There are millions of competitive basketball players in the world, and only 435 slots in the NBA). Professional athletes are deemed by front offices to be worth million-dollar gambles.

And once you're on the mountaintop, you probably won't be there for long. Turnover rates are high in the pros. Players are fighting for their livelihood during games, and they're doing it on the national stage. One “off” night -- and sometimes even one bad play -- and they're off the roster and applying for a real estate license. Cue performance anxiety of the highest level.

Retired point guard and 2004 NBA champion Chauncey Billups wouldn't name names, but said that many of his teammates smoked cannabis, and that "They played better like that. Big-time anxiety... [marijuana] brought 'em down a bit. It helped them focus in a little bit on the game plan."

A player in the Billups era could use cannabis to level things out and find his zone. But this is no longer feasible in today's NBA. In 2015, the league began conducting random tests four times a season. MLB players, though, have more leeway; they're only drug tested on a "for-cause" basis.

Athletes also turn to cannabis to deal with bouts of insomnia. Can't sleep, and you need to get rested for a two-a-day practice session tomorrow? Well, there's a remedy for that.

The Cannabis Enhancement

"We are not just lonely runners pounding out the miles, but living creatures running on the Earth. When we acknowledge that, we feel alive. We do not have to fight our environment."

--Sakyong Mipham, "[*Running with the Mind of Meditation*](#)"

If you're reading this article in the first place, you're probably aware that cannabis works as a creative aid and enhances many life experiences -- including your workouts. Few people have more experience with the performance enhancements of cannabis than Colorado ultra-marathoner Avery Collins.

He commonly lights up or eats an edible before his 100- to 200-mile runs, and say it puts him in the moment. Collins says, "[It's a very spiritual thing to get high before a run](#). If you can find the right level, [marijuana] takes the stress out of running... you're more in tune with your body."

Collins also uses CDB topicals to soothe his muscles after trail runs (some of which can last up to 24 hours). It's become part of his post-workout ritual, along with stretching, massages, and ice baths.

Collins and his counterparts in the worlds of hiking, climbing, and cycling might count themselves as lucky that their athletic pursuits led them to a place where they don't have a league to answer to.

Read Greatist's breakdown of cannabis in the distance-running world [here](#).

Policy vs. Public Opinion

Cannabis suspensions are handed down by sports leagues that, like many power structures, operate on outdated rules that lag behind the will of the people. Today, 61% of Americans approve of medicinal cannabis, and 75% of them consider it to be less harmful than alcohol.

When will public opinion be reflected in league policy?

The NBA and NFL Players Associations are lobbying for a more urgent focus on medicinal cannabis research. And their respective leagues have responded with diplomatic responses that nonetheless show glimmers of promise.

“Marijuana is on our banned substance list,” said NBA commissioner Adam Silver. “We are, however, interested in better understanding the safety and efficacy of medical marijuana.”

NFL commissioner Roger Goodell’s spokesman said. “There is more to learn about cannabinoid compounds as they may relate to their potential treatment of acute and chronic pain.”

The door is open for change, and change begins with conversation. And fortunately, for athletes in the cannabis community, it’s a conversation that retired pros [have already started](#).