The Powerful Allure Of Steroids
By Adam Reilly

The public image of steroids and steroid users has taken some big hits lately, from the humiliation of sports stars like Alex Rodriguez and Lance Armstrong to the horrific murder committed by steroid user Jared Remy.

For a surprisingly large number of people, though, the use of steroids and other banned substances still holds a powerful allure.

Total Performance Sports in Everett is a gym for serious weightlifters—the type of people who compete nationally, and hoist weights that would make casual lifters quail. And when you're that motivated, gym owner CJ Murphy says, substances like anabolic steroids and human growth hormone have a natural appeal.

"Athletes are always going to look to get an edge," Murphy says. "One of the things people report who are using them is that they feel better…. Their mindset’s a little bit different. You feel more on, more able to focus on your workout."

Murphy doesn’t condone the use of banned substances to build muscle and burn fat. But he points out that, in other contexts, those same substances are perfectly legal.

"A lot of progressive doctors are now prescribing very mild doses of these things, and people are reporting they’re sleeping better, they’re looking younger, their skin is tightening up," he says. "Their joints don’t hurt as much. They’re able to run around and play with their grandkids."

And Murphy scoffs at the idea that steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs make users go haywire—an explanation that's been invoked to explain Remy’s horrific murder of his girlfriend, Jennifer Martel.

"If you take some, you’re gonna turn into this wild raving maniac that’s gonna go out on axe-murdering spree and kill everyone in front of you”—that’s simply not true," Murphy says.

According to McLean Hospital psychiatrist Harrison Pope, who’s researched steroid use for years, that skepticism is valid, but only to a point.

"Ninety percent of guys who take steroids have very few behavioral affects, but a small minority of guys have severe behavioral effects," Pope says.

Those adverse effects can include increased aggression, depression, and even suicidality, Pope adds—and there’s no way of telling beforehand who will or won’t suffer them.

What’s more, Pope says, the long-term physical risk of steroid use is considerable, with cardiovascular problems topping the list. And the scope of the problem is surprisingly large.
“Between 2.9 and 4 million American men have used steroids at some point in their lives,” Pope says. “That would mean about one million men have experienced steroid dependence”—i.e., chronic use.

“That’s comparable to the number of American men who are positive for HIV, or who have Type 1 diabetes.”

In part, Pope says, that’s because steroids are remarkably effective—something previous public-relations campaigns have attempted to deny.

“A guy who goes to the gym on a rather lackadaisical basis, who smokes cigarettes and drinks too much, can take steroids and exceed the most dedicated, gifted, hardworking athlete who doesn’t,” Pope says. “It is a simple fact of biology.”

In addition, Pope notes, there’s a longstanding fetishization of muscularity in American and Western European culture—a dynamic that’s lacking in Asia, where anabolic steroid use is almost nonexistent.

On that point, gym owner CJ Murphy agrees. When people choose to use steroids, they’re taking their cues from society at large.

“The public would love to see someone doing a 40-yard dash in three seconds,” Murphy says. “They’d love to see someone 5’2 dunking a basketball… Everybody wants to see the leather knocked off the baseball.”

And until that desire changes, the widespread use of steroids probably won’t.