Major League Baseball to Begin Testing Players for Opioids

MLB's drug policy was updated in response to the overdose death of Los Angeles Angels pitcher Tyler Skaggs in July.

December 19, 2019 By Benjamin Ryan

Major League Baseball (MLB) is taking a significant step to address opioid abuse within its ranks, updating its drug policy to mandate testing for opioids as well as cocaine beginning in spring training, The New York Times reports. This shift in policy, made in partnership with the players' union, was prompted by the death of Los Angeles Angels pitcher Tyler Skaggs, who overdosed in July and was found to have the opioids fentanyl and oxycodone as well as alcohol in his system.

Previously, players were tested only for drugs of abuse if there was "reasonable cause" or if they were in a drug treatment program. Now they will receive testing for opioids, fentanyl, cocaine and synthetic tetrahydrocannabinol (THC, the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana).

The new drug policy will favor treatment over punishment. Those who test positive for drugs will be referred to a board that includes substance abuse specialists as well as representatives from MLB and the players' union. If warranted, the board will provide a treatment plan. Only if players fail to cooperate with their evaluation or treatment plan will they be subject to disciplinary action.

"It is our collective hope that this agreement will help raise public awareness on the risks and dangers of opioid medications and contribute positively to a national conversation about this important topic," Dan Halem, MLB's deputy commissioner for baseball administration and chief legal officer, said in a statement.

The policy will also mandate educational programs during the 2020 and 2021 seasons on the "dangers of opioid pain medications and practical approaches to marijuana."

The policy no longer considers natural cannabinoids—including THC, CBD and marijuana—as drugs of abuse, meaning that both major and minor league players may use them to treat aches and pains without being disciplined.

To read the New York Times article, click here.

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