

# Our big drug test failure

By **BRUCE HOLLOWAY**

We've often highlighted soccer's administrative shortcomings on these pages, but for absolute shame, can anything match New Zealand Soccer's efforts in refusing to name the player who this winter returned soccer's first positive drug test.

Who do they think they are protecting here, and why?

For the record, New Zealand Sports Drug Agency's annual report for the year to June revealed that one National Club Championship player tested positive to the banned stimulant ephedrine.

The agency is not permitted by statute to release any details concerning the infraction while NZS chief executive Bill MacGowan refused to name the player or his club.

I had hoped to name the player at this point. I've been advised not to in the interim, but for the record, it is a Waitakere City player.

At this point I'll acknowledge there are some Sitter! subscribers who believe for the good of the game we shouldn't highlight such dirty washing.

I disagree. What sort of a game are we "fostering" when we take such a soft line on soccer's first drug transgression? Are we saying that a drug user is bigger than the game?

What sort of culture are we breeding? And what other transgressions are we covering up if we're prepared to stay quiet about drugs?

Soccer should have nothing to hide. By way of comparison, the English FA released the names of their drug cheats last July. They put the information in the public domain in the interests of the game.

Reading midfielder Byron Glasgow was sacked from his club after failing a drugs test, and a couple of weeks later Newcastle United released teenager Anthony Parry -- who later admitted to being a heroin addict.

But back in New Zealand MacGowan said when the offence came to light "all parties agreed" there was "no reason" for naming the player. He did not see any incongruity between his association's pledge for greater transparency in running the game and refusing to name a drug cheat.

MacGowan would not answer any further questions. "Save your breath," he told me.

By ringing around NCC clubs we were quickly able to zero in on Waitakere City. It was the only club approached which refused to deny that one of its players had tested positive.

Officials from other clubs -- and indeed players -- were also happy to point us in the right direction, despite the official wall of silence.

Waitakere City chairman Peter Bult refused to comment. He referred all inquiries to club manager David Johnson, who also refused to be drawn on the

matter. "It is a New Zealand Soccer issue," he said.

Last season's NCC league manager, Rex Dawkins, said it was not a matter which came under his jurisdiction. Last month Dawkins took up the post of first team co-ordinator at Waitakere.

Could it all have been a terrible misunderstanding? A few innocent Coldrex tablets, perhaps?

No. New Zealand Sports Drug Agency programme director Jayne Kernohan said ephedrine was not available in any medication in New Zealand and hadn't been for many years.

The agency is not permitted to release any data quantifying the level of substance abuse. Anything above five microlitres per millilitre of blood is unacceptable.

"That is a generous level," Ms Kernohan said.

Standard penalties for a first offence for taking ephedrine ranged from a warning to a three-month ban, she said, suggesting the Waitakere player's eight-month ban took account of the off-season.

Ephedrine was originally used to relieve asthma symptoms by dilating the bronchioles that supply the lungs with oxygen.

But today it is primarily considered a fat burner and a means of increasing adrenalin output, thereby increasing power and energy. It was the drug of choice of Diego Maradona before he was thrown out of the 1994 World Cup.

In June a Phoenix Research survey of 200 athletes showed 66 per cent felt culprits' names should be made public if they are caught using performance enhancing drugs.

Sporting bodies risk losing their Hillary Commission funding unless they adopt anti-doping policies which contains minimum standards for co-operation and penalties for athletes who test positive.

But for a different spin, here are some thoughts from Waitakere City striker Darren Fellowes, who said he was unaware one of his team mates had returned soccer's first positive drug test.

Fellowes thinks soccer attracts too much attention from drug snoops.

The New Zealand Sports Drug Agency did just 50 soccer tests in the year to June 30, compared to 202 in rugby and 92 in league.

But Fellowes said one Waitakere player was tested three times.

"It was getting beyond a joke," he said.

"Why they are getting at a sport which is not professional baffles me.

"If they've taken drugs, so what? This is not highly paid sport. There are no gold medals at stake here.

"They should be concentrating on the professionals, the rugby and rugby league players, not soccer players and netballers.

Fellowes said he regularly took counter medicines before matches.

"I take panadol as a pain-killer to get through problems with my ankles and knees. For all I know I could get done next. I haven't got a clue what you can and can't take. Our soccer is a recreation not a profession. There's not even any prize money at stake."

I tried to also get comment from former Waitakere skipper Shane Gillies. He did not return repeated messages left on his cell phone or at his work. On the one occasion I got through to him he hung up immediately.

***"If they've taken drugs, so what? This is not highly paid sport. There are no gold medals at stake here..." -- Fellowes***