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COMMENTARY

Kevin Sabet and Teresa Haley: Allowing NBA play would be dangerous to young fans’ health

By Kevin Sabet and Teresa Haley
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NBA stars are known for their highflying feats on the court. Now, they might just be high.

Reports have suggested the new tentative contract between the NBA and the National Basketball Players Association might do the unthinkable: The deal may allow players to use marijuana and THC products during the season without being penalized. It may even permit players to promote and invest in companies selling the drug, which is stronger and more dangerous than ever.

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That’s right. They might really send the message to their young players and millions of kids who admire basketball players, whose brains are still developing, that getting high is OK.

Let’s be clear: Today’s highly potent marijuana is anything but “recreational,” as the U.S. surgeon general and every major medical association in the nation have said for years. Still, the NBA and its players may now give THC drug products their imprimatur. Any suggestion that the league would indirectly promote drug use should be shocking to fans, parents and policymakers.

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Medical science is becoming more conclusive that THC, the psychoactive component in marijuana, has significant detrimental physical and psychological impacts. This is particularly true when the THC is taken in the high doses often found in today’s concentrates, edibles and vaping products.

Science has shown there is a direct [association](#) between frequency of marijuana use before the age of 18 and higher THC potency with the development of addiction, IQ loss, motor skill loss and mental health issues. Cannabis use disorder — the clinical term for marijuana addiction — in young people in “pot legal” states has grown 25%, according to a [2019 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association Psychiatry](#).

States that have commercialized THC have also seen increases of more than 100% in calls to poison control centers, addiction hotlines and emergency room visits involving minors.

[[Researchers: The legalization of marijuana comes at a hidden cost to our young people](#)]

Even former Miami Heat guard Dion Waiters experienced a medical emergency on a team charter flight in late 2019 after consuming THC-infused gummy bears. John Lucas, a Houston Rockets assistant coach who runs a wellness and recovery program, was correct when he said, “The problem with it is it doesn’t kill you. But it does kill your spirit, your ability to achieve. It takes away your drive.” In fact, the [majority of Lucas’ clients](#) today are coming in for marijuana addiction.

It’s no secret that many NBA players likely use marijuana. They’ve learned to understand drug testing schedules. But the prospect of this change in NBA policy is still bewildering and alarming. No player today would endorse a cigarette brand, and no player should be willing to endorse a THC-laced product. One would think owners wouldn’t want players with THC habits on the court or encouraging more drug use among fans.

The league and the players should also consider the disproportionate impact of such a move on the NBA fan base, particularly communities of color. More than 70% of NBA players were people of color during the 2021-22 season. A survey by Statista found that 76% of Black Americans indicated they were NBA fans.

Pot shops in some American cities have their heaviest concentrations in lower-income and minority neighborhoods. The league and the players association would do well to acknowledge that Big Marijuana is targeting those communities heavily. That might make for a moneymaking opportunity for a player, but you can’t spin it as a good thing for the community.

If the new contract includes a marijuana exclusion provision and reverses the NBA’s long-standing prohibition on endorsing drug products, the league and the players will be encouraging more drug use that will harm lower-income people the most.

The NBA has proudly stood up for social and racial justice. Those negotiating the new contract must know that more drugs aren’t creating opportunity for communities of color either. Only 4% of commercial marijuana businesses have any Black ownership, and the biggest players in the industry are still corporate tobacco behemoths like Altria, a Philip Morris company.

Young people idolize their favorite sports figures. They seek to emulate them. Encouraging more young people to engage in high-potency THC use would make the NBA little better than the insatiable marketers of Big Marijuana who could care less about the consequences.

In the end, the NBA and the players have a choice to make. They can choose to take their responsibility as brands, public figures and role models seriously — or they can show Americans it’s really just all about the money.

Nobody wins with drugs in the game. Let’s hope this new basketball contract isn’t an air ball for all of us.

Kevin Sabet, Ph.D., is president and CEO of the nonprofit [Smart Approaches to Marijuana \(SAM\)](#). He also is a former White House drug policy adviser to Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Teresa Haley is president of the NAACP Illinois State Conference and founder of Haley & Associates. Haley was a recipient of the NAACP’s Activist of the Year award in 2020.

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