



National Collegiate Athletics Association  
700 West Washington Street  
Indianapolis, Indiana, 46204

Dear Association and Committee Leaders and Executive Board Members,

On behalf of the thousands of parents and families we represent who have personally felt the negative impacts of marijuana, the Parent Action Network urges you to reject the CSMAS recommendation to remove marijuana from the NCAA's list of banned substances, and vote "no" on this measure in June. The Parent Action Network, an affiliate of Smart Approaches to Marijuana, is focused on supporting family members with loved ones who have been negatively impacted by marijuana. Every day, we hear stories from parents that reaffirm the scientific consensus: marijuana is harmful to the developing brain.

If the NCAA were to remove marijuana from its list of prohibited substances, many more athletes will become frequent recreational users. This de-facto endorsement of the use of marijuana by the NCAA will spur negative outcomes among student athletes, prospective athletes, students, and young people around the world because of the role student athletes play for young athletes everywhere.

In NCAA [materials](#) for the 2023-24 school year, you correctly cite that: "Cannabis use is linked to anxiety, panic reactions, respiratory damage, short-term memory impairment and a decreased focus on goals and personal achievement." Indeed, marijuana is associated with mental illnesses, ranging from [anxiety](#) and [depression](#) to [schizophrenia](#) and [psychosis](#), and even [suicidality](#), even more when initiated in youth. Marijuana use can severely [impact brain development](#) in youth, leading to lower IQ and worse mental health, academic, and professional outcomes, even long after discontinuation of use. Marijuana use can also cause [cardiovascular harm](#) and may lead to testicular [cancer](#). Research also tells us that secondhand marijuana smoke is [four times worse](#) than secondhand cigarette smoke, which means risks to marijuana apply not only the student athlete but to their friends and teammates as well.

Marijuana can be [addictive](#), especially for young people. A [study](#) published in *The Lancet* found that daily users of high-potency marijuana—which is now being engineered to contain up to 99% THC—are nearly five times more likely to develop a psychotic disorder. This is alarming because the Substance Use and Mental Health Services Administration [warned](#) that "Approximately 1 in 10 people who use marijuana will become addicted. When they start before age 18, the rate of addiction rises to 1 in 6." More teens [are seeking](#) professional treatment for Cannabis Use Disorder (CUD) than are seeking treatment for alcohol, cocaine, opioids, or any other drug.

For youth, substance use is related; 95% of people who do not initiate any drug use, including nicotine, alcohol, or marijuana use, by age 21 are unlikely to ever do so. This is partially why it is crucial to discourage any substance use for college students. It should also be noted that every state with commercial marijuana sets the minimum legal age of consumption at 21, meaning that only a fraction of student athletes would be legally eligible to consume marijuana or THC.

The recommendation of CSMAS to remove marijuana from the banned substances list is concerning both because of the research affirming the risks of marijuana use, especially for college students, but also considering the World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) [decision](#) to keep cannabinoids on their list of banned substances. As you know, WADA is largely seen as the authority on this issue as the organization that determines which substances can be used in the Olympics and other international competitions. Although the CSMAS claimed its rationale for the removal of cannabis from the list of banned drugs was "largely informed by the December [2022 Summit on Cannabinoids in College Athletics](#)," its rationale is flawed. For instance, they claimed marijuana is not capable of being a performance-enhancing drug, but this point has been refuted by scientific literature and by WADA.

Cannabinoids not only carry a risk for health consequences, but there is also documented evidence that cannabinoids can impact athletic performance. The physical and psychoactive effects of marijuana raise the possibility that it can be used to enhance an athlete's performance, though these effects may not impact all sports equally. For instance, researchers [found](#) that "participants who reported using marijuana to improve sports performance tended to compete in high level (national and international level) winter sports including skeleton, bobsled and ice hockey" —most notably, [Ross Rebagliati](#) tested positive for marijuana after winning the gold medal in the men's giant slalom in the 1998 Olympics. Huestis et al. [found](#) that "cannabis is presented as a drug that has significant positive effects in sports, such as improvement of vision for goalkeepers and muscle relaxation." And the New York Times [reported](#) that "World Archery, the international federation for the Olympic sport of archery, bans alcohol from competitions because it could help to steady an archer's hand. Cannabis could potentially offer a similar advantage in sports that require such feats."

Even if an athlete claims that his or her use of marijuana is only for recreational purposes and that it has no effect on performance, its use will continue to draw criticism. A 2018 [study](#) in the Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine found, "there is a perception among some athletes that cannabis use may have beneficial effects." Researchers also [found](#), "a common rationale for use [by athletes] appears to be to enhance sports performance." As such, the appearance of marijuana's performance-enhancing effects, even if they are negligible in some cases, will cause athletes to claim its users are given an unfair advantage. The use of any drug by student athletes should be discouraged because it is at odds with the essential values of sport.

The altering of this policy also raises additional questions, including questions surrounding NCAA policies on name, image, and likeness. Would a student athlete be able to endorse specific THC products? Students transfer schools. If one division allows marijuana or THC but another does not, the NCAA will struggle with harmonizing policies across divisions. As stated

above, if this policy is changed, the NCAA's marijuana policy will be out of step with the policies of every other governing body, including WADA, who continue to prohibit marijuana and THC use. Student athletes are often called to represent their home country in international competition. Permitting the use of substances that are banned on the international elite level sets student athletes up for failure.

Finally, we are concerned about the message the NCAA's policy would send to impressionable youth across the nation. Youth around the world aspire to reach the levels of performance of their favorite athletes, often emulating their behaviors. If young athletes see student athletes smoking marijuana shortly after winning a national championship, many may want to begin using the drug themselves or will find this behavior acceptable. Through this lens, the health risks associated with the use of marijuana will be passed on to those who are influenced by the elite athletes who use it. The NCAA can avoid this cycle by continuing to insist that student athletes be the standard bearers of good health and be role models who uphold the spirit of sport, which will only be possible if marijuana remains prohibited.

Many of the behaviors learned during one's time as a student athlete carry on throughout their lives; there is no doubt that the time spent as a student athlete is time well spent. We should continue to encourage healthy behaviors that set student athletes up for success on the field and in the classroom and after graduation. We commend the NCAA for striving to protect the health and well-being of student-athletes. Changing policy to permit marijuana use among student athletes would fall short of that standard. We urge you to consider the potential consequences of removing marijuana from the list of banned substances for student athletes, their friends, their families, and young fans.

The Parent Action Network is dedicated to supporting families who have suffered the tragic and very real consequences of today's high-potency marijuana. We strive to raise the voices of families in the hopes that leaders will consider the impact policies like this have on real people and make evidence-informed decisions regarding marijuana. Below are a handful of statements from some of our families. We urge you to consider these stories and potential harms that would be associated with the NCAA's removal of marijuana from its list of banned substances.

With urgency,

Crissy Groenewegen  
Director  
Parent Action Network

## **Parent Testimonials**

### **Catherine Clark, Parent of NCAA Student Athlete, and another child with SZA**

“I am a mother of an NCAA D1 athlete, and another child diagnosed with Cannabis Induced Psychosis (CIP) resulting in schizoaffective disorder (SZA). My daughter is a scholarship athlete at the University of Michigan. The NCAA dictates how many hours she can practice, where she can train, how much caffeine she can drink (Celsius drinks are a banned substance), and what she can do with visiting recruits. But now, she can use THC with no fear of being punished. Her older brother, a former high school all American swimmer, has been diagnosed with SZA, triggered from Cannabis Induced Psychosis. She knows that genetically; she has a high chance of having the same brain vulnerability to cannabis. For that reason, she abstains. Most young people, like her brother, do not know if they have the genetic tendency for SZA, the sort triggered by cannabis use, until it is too late for them. Your job is to protect student athletes, often from those who stand to benefit from their choices, and sometimes, like now, from themselves. Perpetuating the prevailing incorrect narrative that cannabis is harmless to developing brains, including those of student athletes, is doing them a disservice, and I am disappointed in your decision to act in a way contrary to all medical advice available to you.”

### **Laurie G., Parent of Victim**

“My son's life was dramatically and irrevocably changed as the result of his decision to use THC products. In high school, he had top grades in his classes, taking classes such as AP Psychology, physics, and chemistry. He spoke to his class at graduation. He was kicked out of his PsyD program due to his strange behavior from the psychosis induced by THC products. He tried to get a fresh start some months later in a master's program, but he started using THC products again, and again he deteriorated and was asked to leave. We found him almost unable to speak; he had not eaten in days; he was wildly paranoid; he was deep in psychosis. That was two years ago. Since then, our whole family has struggled through a scary hellish landscape, with our son being hospitalized multiple times due to substance-induced seizures and psychosis. Addiction and mental illness have destroyed our son's dreams. Our family's dreams, too. I don't wish this on anyone. Taking marijuana off the list of NCAA's prohibited substances would send a strong message that marijuana must be safe, and that the NCAA is cool with athletes using it. The outcome will be sad for all the kids who, because of the rule change, decide to start using marijuana and end up loving marijuana more than the game and more than getting a degree. The NCAA rules on prohibited substances don't exist to punish kids; they exist to protect kids.”

### **Winnie Stevenson, Parent of Victim**

Before using THC, my son had no medical or mental health issues. Throughout high school and early college, he was an honors student, athlete (track and cross country), and community volunteer. He started using high-potency THC his junior year of high school and, over the next few years of using, his mental health steadily declined-- from irritability to social withdrawal to strange beliefs and fears-- until he was eventually hospitalized and diagnosed with schizophrenia. He later went on to attempt suicide during a cannabis-induced psychotic episode. Before this happened to my family, I thought it was "just pot;" now I have come to understand that use of high-potency THC products can cause psychosis-spectrum disorders like schizophrenia. Please read the research and listen to those impacted. There is no place for cannabis products in our schools or in our athletics.

**Andy Wheelock, Brother of Victim**

"My brother, Dana Wheelock started using Marijuana in his final year of Medical School, (Jefferson Medical School, PA). My parents noticed a substantial change in his academics and were worried that he would not pass his exams in his final year. Since Marijuana was the only change in his Medical School lifestyle, I directly attribute his use of it to his failing grades. I don't think his brain ever recovered from that because he was having a harder and harder time meeting his professional and family obligations in a timely manner."

**Katie R., Parent of NCAA, Div. III Student Athlete and Victim**

My now-24-year-old son is working mightily to rebuild his life after years of marijuana addiction. His use intensified when he started college, and he ultimately had to withdraw from his first-choice school after, in his words, "it got really dark, really quickly." At the start of his freshman year, he was a strong student and a staff writer on the college paper. By the end of the year, his physical and mental health, along with his grades, had plummeted. We had some truly frightening experiences. But after four years of treatment, thousands of dollars, and the daily hard work of recovery, my son is sober, attending a small college in Pennsylvania, and playing on its Division III tennis team. He'd never played tennis before starting lessons two years ago, but tennis and the support of his teammates have become a vital part of his recovery—something that would have been unthinkable if he were still using marijuana. Marijuana use is already prevalent on college campuses and is derailing the lives of many students, including athletes. All of them need to know the facts about the very real risks of today's high-potency marijuana. The NCAA's proposed action to remove marijuana from the list of banned substances for athletes sends the opposite message: marijuana is safe and no big deal. That is irresponsible and reckless.

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**Tobias B., Former Student Athlete, Age 21**

Marijuana set me back in life. In high school and college, I was a good student and a student athlete. Using marijuana caused me to be in a constant state of depression where I would rather get high than do anything else. I quit sports because of weed. Eventually I experienced cannabis induced psychosis and attempted to take my own life. Before all this happened to me, I thought weed was no big deal; now I know the truth.

### **Darryl Rodgers, Parent of Victim**

My name is Darryl Rodgers. I raised two boys who both played high school and college football. Both boys became Eagle Scouts. The oldest of the two, Chase, played in the NIAA. The football program he was a part of had no drug-testing program. My youngest son, Justin, played in the NCAA D2. My oldest, Chase, began to experiment with marijuana in his first year of college and dropped out by his second semester. I watched in horror as the kid we knew became someone we didn't recognize. He lost all motivation and he rapidly lost weight. He began to associate with a rough crowd. We were able to get him into drug treatment and he got better, but he eventually relapsed. On May 29, 2014, Chase died in a marijuana-impaired wreck at the age of 20. The driver later took her own life by setting herself on fire. I am happy to report that my youngest son, Justin, never used marijuana. Justin graduated with a bachelor's degree in chemistry, has good grades and this fall he will be pursuing a Chemistry PhD. Do you see the difference? I sure do. Please carefully consider this decision.

### **W. Lloyd Clark, MD**

Speaking as a parent of a NCAA Division I athlete, a physician, and a clinician scientist, the NCAA has no scientific or medical basis to change its stance on marijuana as a banned substance. According to the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA), marijuana is a Schedule I substance, "meaning that it has a high potential for abuse, no currently accepted medical use in treatment in the United States, and a lack of accepted safety for use under medical supervision.<sup>1</sup>" The FDA is our sole arbiter of drug safety and efficacy. Currently, there are no Schedule I substances approved for use by NCAA Division I athletes. Marijuana distributors and drug manufacturers have a pathway through clinical trials to establish the safety and efficacy of marijuana. Until they do, it will remain a Schedule I substance along with drugs such as heroin and LSD. While there may be vocal groups that advocate for a political solution to make marijuana available to citizens in certain states, the NCAA should align itself with science and federal law.

[https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2020-06/Marijuana-Cannabis-2020\\_0.pdf](https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2020-06/Marijuana-Cannabis-2020_0.pdf)

### **Debbie Berndt, Director of Parent Movement 2.0, and Substance Free Athletics**

"The NCAA is claiming that 'realigning toward institutional testing and how that testing supports/enhances campus efforts to identify problematic cannabis use.' This means letting colleges handle this. This strategy will uneven the playing field. The NCAA handing down 'guidance to the membership about cannabis' will severely impact equity in college sports. Just like the states themselves, colleges perceive cannabis use differently and deploy different standards/ consequences, so a kid in one school may get suspended for a season, ending his/her prospects for professional play, while another may not even be tested. As such, reasonable consequences for cannabis infractions need to be deployed in every NCAA sport and game commonly, or the NCAA will be responsible for this massive 'dis-equity' by lifting the ban."