

Kelli White

Why I became a part of the BALCO affair (+ Questions and answers)

It means a lot to me that I can be here to tell my story. I think it means a lot to sport and I want to offer any help that I can to clean up doping in sport.

I appear here today having made the regrettable mistake of using drugs to enhance my performance, and with my experience and knowledge regarding use of performance enhancing drugs, I welcome the opportunity in any way that I can to rid doping in sport.

I started competing in track and field when I was ten years old and when I turned about 12 or 13 I started to work with renowned coach Remi Korchemny, and for the next decade and a half he became a very important figure in my life and I trusted him with every aspect of training.

I went to University of Tennessee where I competed for four years and in 2000, I decided to turn professional and moved back home to California to train with Korchemny again. Shortly thereafter I was introduced to Victor Conte by Korchemny, and my belief then when I met Mr. Conte was to receive information on supplements, legal supplements on how to enhance my performance but never in any way did I think that I would be involved in anything illegal.

At the time where I met Mr. Conte in December 2000 he had given me vial of something he told me was flaxseed oil, and I used it and a few weeks later he invited me to his office again and explained to me that what he had given me was not flaxseed oil but was in fact something that was illegal and if not used properly could yield a positive drug test. And that point right then I decided to stop using the substance and I stored just about everything they had given me at the time.

In 2002 I had a very, very poor season. I was plagued with about three or four injuries and had a hard time competing. I tried my hardest to recoup from those injuries and couldn't so going into the 2003 indoor season I failed to make the world indoor team and was pretty much depressed at that point.

In March 2003 I went to visit Mr. Conte again, and we sat down and we devised a plan using illegal drugs on how to make me faster, on how to make me healthy, and that's the time when I made the worst mistake that I could ever make. At the time we sat down we decided that I would use what is now known as THG, EPO and stimulants.

With the help of Mr. Conte, I was able to pass 17 drugs tests both in and out of competition, not only in the United States but in different countries. In a relatively short period of time, I became the fastest woman in the world. And for me that was pretty scary – it was exciting, but scary also.

I want to explain what it takes for the whole system to work. It not only took Mr. Conte's help, it took my coach making me believe it was okay, and I think that a lot of the time what happens to athletes is that people make you believe that what you are doing is OK because everyone else is doing it. And that is definitely not the truth because I have friends who compete now who are clean. And it takes away from their achievements when you are made to believe that everyone is doing the same thing.

In August of 2003 at the World Championships in Paris I had captured both the 100 and 200 meter titles and I walked off the track after the 200 meters and I just felt extremely guilty because I knew that what I had achieved at that meet was not right, it wasn't fair and it wasn't real. Instead of being a high point of my career, it really turned out to be such a disappointment not only to myself but to my family and the sport that I love very, very much.

While I was in Paris, I had my first failed drug test. It was actually for a stimulant called Modafonil, and once again with the help of Mr. Conte, I came up with a plan to tell the world that I had been using Modafonil for medical reasons and not the reasons we were actually using them for.

A week after the world championships, the FBI raided the BALCO laboratories and I decided that for my sanity and for other reasons it would be best that I admitted my use of the EPO, THG and the stimulants so that I could be clean and free in my mind.

I believe it is important that I get you to understand the reasons why I chose to do drugs. But first I want to say that those who do use drugs are not bad people, we just have made a bad mistake. And the relationship one has with your coach also extends to the person who is the distributor.

I had a very close relationship with Mr. Conte, I never would have believed that he would hurt me in any kind of way but now I can see that the disregard for the lives and the health of the athletes was compromised. I am also disappointed in how the punishments have played out on the people who were involved. I think that the athletes are severely punished but those around them and those who encourage the activity, the behaviour, they are not punished as harsh as we are. I think that four months in prison is in no way equal to two years of not being able to compete.

I trusted the opinion of my coach and he led me to believe that everyone was doing it and that it was okay and that the only way to ever be good was to use drugs. I put my life in their hands and after reading many documents that were seized from the raid, I can see that they really took advantage of me and many, many other athletes.

It is a troubled situation when you have competed all your life and you love the sport so much and you look at others who are doing the drugs and you feel like you will never get ahead and I think that is another reason that led me to that but when I look back now I don't think that is true. I was already ranked top 10 in the world every year that I competed before that but I think that others around me wanted more from me than I wanted for myself. I would have been happy with where I was but I was convinced by others that it wasn't good enough.

So in the past year and a half my attorney and I have been helping USADA in its efforts to clean up sport. I think that in telling my story, it can only help the fight and give information to those who are trying to help clean up sport. I can only wish that someone else can talk about it with me so I can have a colleague to talk to about the experiences that I have gone through and what it feels like to be in this position.

It is hard to be looked at as such a bad person and coming forward and being honest, that's been difficult along with kind of feeling that I am by myself. I can only explain this story but I can't really tell you how I truly feel inside and how I feel not being able to compete for two years.

Although I have been troubled by the disparity in penalties in other sports – there has been numerous sports where doping has come out – but the problem with my sport is that we are not covered by any player’s association so we are kind of on our own but I have to say that USADA has truly helped me get through this situation. The fight against drugs is extremely difficult and I can see that and I just hope that others can look at my situation and realise that they don’t want to be in the situation that I am in. I just hope that I can be honest and that in telling my story it will open the eyes of the world to what goes on, how this has happened. It is a very, very complicated situation.

I was asked also to make a small comment on why do athletes deny their drug use? I think the reason why people deny it is because...

It is on the drugs tester to prove that one is guilty but also I think that a lot of athletes are scared of the providers. I think that they are very powerful people. They can pretty much ruin your career and I don’t think that it is a safe haven to speak up. It is not. Just look at me. I would never take back the decision to come forward – ever – but it is a hard thing to go through. If I think about all the information that Victor Conte had about me and my use, I think that is why a lot of athletes do not come forward because they can ruin your career and it is best just to walk away from the situation, and you serve your ban and you can come back and still work with the same person. I definitely don’t care to do that. I do hope that next year when my ban is finally over I can return to the sport. I would definitely be a hundred per cent clean and I will give it everything that I have because I know that before any of that I was a very good athlete. But the want and the will of others took over my own.

Q&A

Q: Have you been offered any counselling to help you withdraw from drugs?

A: I don’t think I would have needed counselling for that. I think that the hurt and the betrayal is what I need counselling for. It was not like I was addicted.

Q: What are the ramifications with Remi Korchemny – if any – with track and field. Is he allowed to remain as a coach?

A: I know that he still coaches athletes – I am not sure if they are US athletes or not. From what I hear he was at world championships this past year, so I guess nothing.

Q: Is it possible to be a world champion today without using drugs?

A: I definitely believe so. It takes a lot though. I think when I won world and even when it came out that I was using drugs, a lot of the reports made it seem as if I was only good from the drugs. But I must say that in both the 100 and the 200 in 2001 and 2002 and even in 2000 I was ranked top 10 in the world. The world. So I don’t think that it had much to do with that. So I do believe that you can become a world champion without drugs.

Q: It puzzles me that after a year of injuries, you went back to Mr. Conte. Would you please elaborate on that decision when you knew he would make you use illegal drugs.

A: I knew what I was doing. I do not point blame on anyone but myself because it was my sole decision to go to Mr. Conte. I saw him turn some athletes into megastars which made me know that what he had worked. My whole goal of going to him was not to be a star but to be healthy and consistent. Because in track and field it is all about being consistent, always being first, second or third all the time. And I needed that because in 2002 I was such a rough up-and-down season that I didn't want to repeat that and I saw what his substances can do to an athlete. That's why I went to him.

Q: You said the fight against drugs is extremely difficult. Would you please elaborate on your vision of that?

A: One reason why it is difficult is because the drug testers can not stay ahead of the drug makers. These things are not manufactured in a real lab – most of the time it is in people's homes. Not only that, it takes a team of people to mask other drugs. We are talking doctors writing special notes to writing prescriptions and with all of that help – and you have hundreds and hundreds of athletes, thousands of athletes in the world – and you only have so many drugs testers. How do they stay ahead of that? So I can see it being a very difficult fight. And it is very hard for them to put everything out there on the list, so like I said it is hard for them to stay ahead of the drug makers and the drug users.

Q: How do you see the sanctions. Are they fair?

A: I think they are harsh but that is the price that we pay for being athletes. I think that we give up a lot of our rights being athletes and we know this. Drug testing alone – standing there using the bathroom in front of someone at any given time, it is something you give up as a right being an athlete but I do believe that the consequences are a little harsh. If you just think about that: Four months in prison, four months house arrest versus two years of not being able to compete is hard. It is very hard.

Q: How hard is it for you to not start believing that you are a bad person?

A: I did not set out in my career to cheat. That was never a thought in my mind. I was very naïve to the whole drug situation. I never thought it was as big as it was. I remember when I left our indoor nationals in 2003 not making that team, I felt that I was no longer a good athlete, and I think I fell into a black hole and I was desperate but in making that decision I didn't consult anybody, because I knew what their answer would be. It would be: Don't do it. But in that desperation and in that moment, I didn't see any other way, and now I can see that I could have made a whole bunch of different choices and still be competing right now

Q: How big an impact do you think that BALCO's distribution of drugs has had on US sports and sports worldwide?

A: I think it was pretty big. I don't think anyone wants to go through what I went through and sit here and have to explain that type of story. I hope it made a few people run and hide and stop what they were doing. It was a very big deal for our sport but I don't think it impacted on any of the other sports such as baseball and football as much as it impacted on my sport and that is another disappointment that I have from the whole situation.

Q: In your sport, do you think the problems are getting better or are they getting worse?

A: When I look at the times women are running now, I think it has gotten better. The times look doable. Legal.

Q: How much would a drop in income mean to you? Was that the reason or just your sporting vanity that made you take the decision? And were you telling yourself that all the others are doing it and being a pro you can do it?

A: Money wasn't the biggest factor. Like I said: If you are consistent, you will be in every race all the time. My job is to compete and if I am not consistent I don't compete, so the biggest thing wasn't money. It was to be healthy, it was to be able to compete.

Vanity, no! I looked terrible. I was huge. I couldn't stand to see myself on tv. It had nothing to do with vanity at all. I had gained close to 20 pounds in four weeks – I was humongous. I was always covered up, I didn't want my family to see me. So it definitely wasn't vanity.

Q: Would the guilt you experienced at the World Championships in 2003 have been enough to stop you, if you had not also been caught with a positive test and the whole BALCO thing was unearthed? Or would you still have been using today?

A: That is a really good question. No, I would not have been using today. The things that my body went through during that time: the acne, the high blood pressure and all kinds of other things that were going on, I am sure that would have stopped me from doing what I was doing.

Q: Have you experienced any long-term damage to your body? And what has the reaction been from the athletic community to your coming forward and telling your story?

A: Right now I don't think there are any long-term effects. I was only using it for about four months. I don't know how people feel about me right now. I have kind of taken myself out of the sport and just tried to get myself back together. I have had people email me to say I am a murderer – they have said some horrible things – so I am not quite sure. The relationship between my training partners is no longer there – those ties have been severed since all of this.