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## **An MHSAA Commentary By Executive Director John E. "Jack" Roberts: There's A Better Way Than Testing**

*On November 15, 2006, USA Today contributing columnist Robert Lipsyte wrote that testing high school student-athletes for performance-enhancing substances was needed. The following is a response by MHSAA Executive Director John E. "Jack" Roberts which was originally published in the December 2006-January 2007 edition of the MHSAA Bulletin.*

I oppose drug testing of high school student-athletes; and contrary to Robert Lipsyte's recent column in *USA Today*, this is a valid opinion of deeply involved and committed people that is neither a state of denial nor a do-nothing attitude.

One of the recurring themes of Mr. Lipsyte's writings over the years has been that too much importance is given to school sports and its participants. I agree, and I cringe at the increase in national travel, tournaments and telecasts of high school events. Even high school athletes are being set apart from the crowd, and far too much attention is being lavished upon their temporal physical accomplishments.

Singling out high school athletes for drug testing only adds to this misguided notion that who they are and what they do somehow deserve special attention.

The only kind of drug testing that is effective as a deterrent to the use of performance-enhancing drugs is that which is the most sophisticated and is administered frequently and universally. However, the only kind of drug testing that is affordable at the school level - that which is occurring in New Jersey this year - is the most simple and administered to only a random few of the postseason tournament participants. This is barely a speed bump, hardly a deterrent. It does nothing to alter athletes' attitudes, nothing to change student behavior.

What can change attitudes and actions is education. And the kind of education that has proven to be most effective is the kind the Michigan High School Athletic Association is piloting and promoting in

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Michigan: the ATLAS and ATHENA programs. These are gender-specific programs, coordinated by trained school coaches, but actually led by student-athletes themselves. They provide alternatives to performance-enhancing-drugs and demonstrate a better way to prepare for sports. The programs deconstruct advertisements that bombard youth with unhealthy messages and wrong choices.

ATLAS and ATHENA have proven to reduce use of performance enhancing drugs and also to significantly reduce other risky behaviors and to increase healthier choices.

This is where our resources are needed. Not testing a few for performance-enhancing drugs, which is not even in the top ten of drug problems facing adolescents. But teaching many of our students to make better decisions for sports and ultimately for life.

Drug testing for performance enhancing drugs in school sports is a simplistic and ultimately ineffective approach to promoting either saner sports or healthier students.

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**MEDIA ADVISORY** – An audio version of this commentary can be heard on the MHSAA Internet Broadcast Network ([www.mhsaanetwork.com](http://www.mhsaanetwork.com)). The link is posted under Featured Broadcasts. For more information about the ATLAS and ATHENA programs, visit the Resources page of the MHSAA Web Site and click on the link “Steroid Education, Drug and Alcohol Prevention & Healthy Eating Alternatives Program.”

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