



The 'secret everybody knows': Drugs like cocaine and molly becoming more popular in NHL

By **Katie Strang** (/author/katie-strang/)

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Back in May, a video featuring the Washington Capitals' Evgeny Kuznetsov sitting near two lines of a white, powder-like substance that many presumed to be cocaine began making the rounds on social media. It was taken while the team was in Las Vegas to play the Golden Knights.

Not much came of it — Kuznetsov issued a denial that said he never used drugs, the Capitals and the NHL followed with statements of their own, and people more or less moved on amid the churn of playoff hockey.

The issue resurfaced when the International Ice Hockey Federation announced in August that Kuznetsov had tested positive for cocaine back in May while he was competing for the Russian national team in the world championships. Kuznetsov then issued a statement (<https://www.nhl.com/news/evgeny-kuznetsov-suspended-four-years-by-iihf/c-308636836>) in which he acknowledged he had “disappointed so many people.”

The IIHF assessed a four-year ban and, in September, the league levied one of its own, suspending Kuznetsov for three regular-season games (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2019/09/14/capitals-evgeny-kuznetsov-be->

suspended-three-games-by-nhl-positive-cocaine-test/), not for the drug test itself, but for “inappropriate conduct,” presumably for misleading both NHL and team officials.

The entire saga peeled back the curtain on the topic of drug use in the NHL, an issue often shrouded in secrecy, protected by confidentiality and mostly kept obscured, save for the odd rumor that gains traction on Twitter or hockey message boards.

And it prompts a number of pressing questions: How common is drug use in the NHL? Which drugs are the most prevalent? Is the league concerned?

In an attempt to answer these questions, *The Athletic* spoke to dozens of people within the game — players, coaches, executives, agents, scouts and more — to gauge what is taking place behind closed doors and once players leave the rink. To encourage candor and to assuage any fear of retribution, personal or professional, anonymity was granted to those who asked for it.

Here's what we found:

The vast majority of people interviewed indicated that the tendency of players from eras past to abuse drugs, even painkillers, has shifted. Marijuana use is still considered common and its legalization in many places in the United States and the federal legalization of the drug in Canada has prompted discussions between the NHL and NHLPA about an informal agreement about its usage (<https://theathletic.com/437842/2018/07/19/inside-the-discussions-on-marijuana-use-in-the-nhl/>).

But the growing sense is that some players are spurning the postgame six pack of beer and turning to stronger substances, including hard and synthetic drugs. At least 10 people interviewed for this piece cited cocaine as the vice of choice among NHL players, especially among the younger set. Molly (a pill form of MDMA, which is also known as ecstasy), was frequently mentioned as a drug surging in popularity as well.

“It's really the secret that everybody knows,” said one recently retired NHL player who still is working in the game.

The NHLPA does survey drug testing each year, in part to determine which drugs are on the rise and in part to identify substances that are becoming a cause for concern. Testing for drugs of abuse used to be administered to only 1/3 of NHL players, the NHL and NHLPA struck a

resolution in 2016 to apply the testing to all players, so as to ensure more accurate and comprehensive results.

And while the NHLPA does not release the results of that testing, there has been concern from both within the union and the league in recent years about cocaine use specifically. In 2015, an explosive article by TSN (<https://www.tsn.ca/on-eve-of-season-nhl-acknowledges-possibly-more-players-using-cocaine-1.372075>) revealed that team security officials were discussing its rise and the NHLPA was addressing its use in “closed-door meetings with numerous NHL clubs.” Even NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly acknowledged that the number of positive cocaine tests among players had increased.

This did not come out of nowhere.

Players like Zack Kassian (<https://www.tsn.ca/edmonton-oilers-forward-zack-kassian-perseveres-to-become-one-of-hockey-s-best-stories-1.1382035>) and Nick Boynton (<https://www.theplayertribune.com/en-us/articles/nick-boynton-everythings-not-ok>) have spoken candidly about their issues with hard drugs, including cocaine. Back in April 2015, Jarret Stoll, then a member of the Los Angeles Kings, was busted in Las Vegas (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nhl/2015/04/20/police-la-kings-jarret-stoll-had-cocaine-ecstasy-in-vegas/26085365/>) with both cocaine and molly in his shorts as he was getting ready to enter a hotel pool party to celebrate the end of the season with many of his teammates.

It is impossible to know just how prevalent cocaine and molly have become, but people are talking about it as a legitimate trend and there is anecdotal evidence to suggest the drugs are in circulation.

“Guys are just popping molly on the weekends or before a team Halloween party or whatever,” said the retired player, who has been shocked at how openly the drugs are now used.

One veteran NHL player said that when he was first in the league, booze reigned supreme. Now, he’s seen a sharp rise in what he calls “festival drugs” like cocaine and molly. Ten years ago, hearing about cocaine use in an NHL setting was rare.

Now, though it’s not necessarily rampant, he said it’s not uncommon.

“It’s not like it’s a hockey thing. It’s a culture thing,” the player said, pointing to the usage rates among the general population as well.

Part of the drug’s ubiquity is its surge in availability. According to a 2017 report issued by the State Department, and a subsequent article (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/04/colombias-coca-boom-is-showing-up-on-u-s-streets/>) summarizing the findings in the *Washington Post*, the size of Colombia’s illegal coca crop “exploded since 2013,” and the surging output was reflected with the drug’s increased appearance on U.S. streets.

Several research studies suggest cocaine usage is an increasing area of concern, as well, particularly as it relates to cocaine-related deaths. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Center for Health Statistics, “the number of overdose deaths involving cocaine almost doubled” between 2014 and 2016. (https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr67/nvsr67_09-508.pdf)

When asked what they’d warn young players about, both Adam Henrique and his Anaheim Ducks teammate Devin Shore said cocaine, because they feel its use is becoming more commonly accepted and openly used among the general population.

A 2016 survey (https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/report_2736/ShortReport-2736.html) on National Drug Use and Health, administered by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, revealed that the number of young Americans who tried cocaine for the first time took a massive jump, increasing 61 percent from 2013 to 2015. According to a 2018 study by SAMHSA, 16.1 percent of the American population 18 and over had reported using cocaine during their lifetime.

Henrique said he’s afraid to even use tobacco chew because of its addictive properties; the idea that cocaine is now becoming so popular is a disturbing one.

“Cocaine is a huge drug now,” Henrique told *The Athletic*. “I’ve noticed, in general, if I’m out with buddies, whether it’s during the year or the summertime, if someone points it out to me — I’m oblivious to it — but once someone points it out to you, you can’t not see it.

“It seems so casual, that it’s not a big deal; like having a beer almost, which is kinda scary,” he said. “Where does it stop?”

Shore chimed in to back up Henrique's observation.

"I've heard people talk more about cocaine (now) than I have in high school," he said.

Even those in management seem willing to admit that this is becoming a worrisome trend and that anyone connected to the game who denies such drugs are making the rounds is being either intentionally obtuse or incredibly naive.

One NHL executive scoffed at the idea that players would never dabble in these substances or be subject to the same temptations.

"Fuck that," he said. "They've got the same problems of any other kid."

The executive went on to say that rumors are rampant that at least a few of the top players in the league are developing a reputation for cocaine use, and that it shouldn't be even the least bit surprising.

They play on the edge, he said. Why is it shocking if they live that way, too?

Former NHL player Dan Carcillo, who remains one of the most vocal and passionate advocates for players in the arena of traumatic brain injuries and post-career care, said that the common denominator among all of these substances is that they are used to numb pain.

An 82-game season is a grueling test, emotionally and physically. Players are often playing through injury, anxious about their roster spot and always on edge about their performance. It should not be a shock that some turn to substances to assuage some of those issues.

Carcillo said he feels like the NHL has driven a culture of drug abuse with the exacting nature of the play and travel. Players are constantly trying to reconcile the push-and-pull of quieting their mind and falling asleep after the adrenaline rush of a big game, and then fighting off the grog and getting amped up for the next. The way he describes it, it's almost like a never-ending search for homeostasis that just ends up cultivating countless dependencies.

He's seen particular drugs' popularity ebb and flow but said drugs like cocaine and molly are popular among players because of the euphoric-type feeling they create.

“It mimics that feeling when we get on the ice, when our hearts are racing and there’s blood coursing through our veins,” said Carcillo (who is currently helping with Decriminalize Nature Chicago, a group that aims to decriminalize and expand “the access of entheogenic plants and fungi” for health and well-being). “It’s that feel-good drug.”

There’s another reason those drugs are popular; they metabolize quickly. According to forensic studies, cocaine usually works its way through the system in 2-4 days, molly in 2-3. Multiple former players indicated that this is a big part of the appeal, along with the ability to avoid consuming the empty calories a beer binge brings.

But there are serious risks, too, especially with the emergence of fentanyl, a potent and sometimes deadly opioid that is often found in other street drugs.

According to the CDC (<https://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-mexico-drugs-20190706-story.html>), fentanyl was responsible for more than 31,000 deaths last year. It is 50-100 times (<https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/pdf/pbss/PBSS-Report-072017.pdf>) more potent than morphine. It is often ingested unwittingly, as dealers are cutting their product with fentanyl to increase its euphoric effect. It’s also proven to be a deadly combination. Of the 11,316 cocaine overdose deaths in 2016, 40 percent of those also involved fentanyl, according to the CDC.

It is for this reason that some feel it may make sense for the NHL and NHLPA to consider modernizing its program to deal with the scourge of fentanyl and the threat it poses — even a small amount can be fatal — to those who even dabble in synthetic drugs.

“They (NHL and NHLPA) probably need to get stricter on this, because it’s become very cavalier,” said one retired player. “All it will take is for one player to have their molly or cocaine laced with something.”

Some teams have taken significant steps to educate their players on drug use and how to seek help if needed.

In 2015, the Los Angeles Kings, following a year in which multiple players were caught with drugs, then-general manager Dean Lombardi hired former NHLer and recovering addict Brantt Myhres to work in a player development role and help players who were going through substance abuse issues.

He provided a sympathetic ear to players and offered advice.

All of his work was confidential, so it's tough to show the quantitative effects of his presence with the team. But Myhres, who left the organization when Lombardi was fired, said he's proud of the work he did.

"How do you know it's working? Well, for three years you didn't have anyone on the front page of the paper," said Myhres, who is now 11 years sober.

It wasn't just keeping players out of trouble, though; to Myhres, it was a matter of keeping players healthy: "You're being proactive instead of reactive"

Implementing a proactive approach is precisely what Calgary Flames GM Brad Treliving was aiming to do when he brought former NHLer Brian McGrattan on in a similar role in 2017 (<https://www.sportsnet.ca/hockey/nhl/brian-mcgrattan-calgary-flames-player-assistance-big-read/>).

A former player himself, and one who had seen what McGrattan went through to get help and stay sober, Treliving knew that when it was time for a player to ask for help, it was often too late. He didn't want to wait for any player to reach that point.

"It's not the end, but it's Chapter 11 of a 12-chapter book," Treliving said. "We want to be there by Chapter 1."

The only way it works, Treliving said, is that someone like McGrattan, who connects to the Flames' players on a peer/player level, is able to cultivate a sense of trust and 100 percent assurance that what he hears won't go right back to management.

Treliving said he wants his players to know he's not probing into the process. He delegates those challenges to McGrattan, who is only to involve management if a player is in immediate danger of harming himself or others.

The decision to hire McGrattan wasn't prompted by a specific incident but an acknowledgment that the NHL is similar to the general population with regard to substance abuse and addiction issues.

“Sometimes we think, within our little cocoon of our sport, that we're immune to a lot of the social issues that affect everybody else in everyday life,” Treliving said. “We're not.”

When Len Boogaard heard about the July 1 death of Los Angeles Angels pitcher Tyler Skaggs, he was struck by how eerily similar it was to the death of his own son, Derek. Almost, he said, like a carbon copy.

Derek Boogaard, who had played the 2010-11 season with the New York Rangers, died of an accidental overdose of alcohol and opioids on May 13, 2011. He was found fully clothed, on his bed, in his downtown Minneapolis apartment by his brother.

Less than eight years later (<https://www.latimes.com/sports/angels/story/2019-08-30/tyler-skaggs-autopsy-report-fentanyl-oxycodone-alcohol-angels-rusty-hardin>), Skaggs was found by a team employee, fully clothed, lying on his hotel room bed in Texas after aspirating on what the autopsy revealed to be alcohol, oxycodone and fentanyl. The 27-year-old pitcher died choking on his own vomit.

Two professional athletes who had reached the pinnacle of their sports. Two young men who had their entire lives in front of them, who left behind family and friends to grapple with how to reconcile such a senseless tragedy.

“It was almost deja vu,” Len Boogaard said from his home in Regina, Sask. “How can we let this happen?”

The scandal that engulfed Major League Baseball (<https://theathletic.com/1294989/2019/10/15/analyzing-the-legal-implications-of-the-tyler-skaggs-case/>) was further heightened when an Angels team employee told federal investigators he procured illegal prescription drugs for Skaggs and abused the drugs with him for years. That revelation sent the league and the players association into discussions (<https://theathletic.com/1293724/2019/10/15/talks-are-underway-to-implement-opioid->

testing-in-major-league-baseball-this-offseason/) about tweaking the current drug-testing program to include opioids in the future. The two sides have expressed a willingness to adapt the jointly administered drug testing program to the ever-changing cultural landscape.

Other leagues, like the NHL, have taken notice, too. Whether that means there will be similar talks on the horizon is not immediately clear. When asked about the NHL/NHLPA drug-testing program at the annual player media tour in September, NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said he was satisfied with its scope.

He did, however, leave open the possibility to make modifications.

“I think, for right now, we have struck the right balance, but it’s something we need to constantly re-evaluate to make sure what we’re doing is relevant and makes sense,” Bettman told *The Athletic*.

Relevance is a critical factor, not only within the scope of the current drug testing program but also the way in which players are educated about drug abuse.

The league’s drug-testing focus is on performance-enhancing drugs, which includes disciplinary action for a positive test. A positive test for recreational drugs doesn’t necessarily warrant any action at all. Marijuana is not on the list of banned substances, nor is cocaine, nor are any other typical drugs of abuse. Players are only required to enroll in the SABH program if they test with levels that suggest they are in immediate danger.

The SABH program focuses on recovery and rehabilitation, not punishment. Players are treated confidentially, a fundamental part of why they undergo treatment willingly and, many times, proactively.

The NHLPA also provides educational resources to players each year, through their preseason seminars and during the rookie orientation program.

Detroit Red Wings defenseman Madison Bowey, who went through the orientation program during his draft year six years ago, said alcohol was the biggest point of emphasis then — not abstaining from it entirely, but consuming it responsibly. A former NHL player, Rob Ramage, came in and shared his story (<https://torontosun.com/2016/01/31/ex-leaf-rob-ramage->

working-with-habs-prospects/wcm/dd592496-68f7-40f7-bca0-cb90844ad73a) of driving drunk and killing his best friend, and it was an impactful presentation. Painkillers were also featured heavily as a topic of emphasis.

“They talked a lot about painkillers — that a lot of guys get prescribed (painkillers) and can abuse (them) a little bit,” Bowey said, adding that they were warned about the dire consequences of mixing alcohol and painkillers. “That was big.”

More recently, fentanyl has become a focal point, and with good reason, according to Bo Horvat, captain of the Vancouver Canucks.

“That’s the one I hear about the most, because a lot of stuff is getting laced with that,” Horvat said.

Horvat said that every year, the preseason seminar includes videos, information and a lecture about drugs, alcohol, concussions, and other health and safety issues. He considers that an essential part of an NHL player’s education.

“They really harp on that kind of stuff. It’s huge for guys to see and hear different stories and what has happened around not only our league but in other leagues, too,” Horvat said. “It’s a real eye-opener for guys to see, especially at a young age.”

Perhaps the biggest takeaway from Skaggs’ death is that many believe it was not a freak accident or a fluke. In fact, if the Angels employee cooperating with federal investigators is to be believed, at least a handful of other players on the Angels were abusing opioids as well.

This, according to those who have worked in law enforcement, should come as a surprise to no one. Professional athletes are neither isolated from drug use nor immune to its abuse.

Tom Martin, a longtime DEA agent who now runs Martin Investigative Services in Newport Beach, Calif., has had plenty of experience dealing with athletes and pro sports franchises. He’s seen no evidence to suggest that drug usage isn’t consistent across demographics.

“Hockey players are no different than baseball players and the run-of-the-mill public,” Martin said.

He wonders if the current drug program addresses the realities of the modern drug landscape, where one bad night, one bad decision can lead to a player's death. Others within NHL circles are wondering that, too.

Len Boogaard is not convinced a change in testing would make a difference.

According to the medical records he obtained in the wake of his son's death, Len said Derek refused rehab several times, tested positive for opioids seven times between January and April 2011, and was non-compliant when he finally did go to an inpatient treatment center. He died the following month while taking a leave from treatment to attend his sister's graduation.

In a wrongful death lawsuit against the league, filed in 2013, Boogaard's family said that Boogaard violated several components of his aftercare program but was never disciplined or escalated into the latter three stages of the four-step program. In stage 1, the player continues to receive his full NHL salary, with no penalty, so long as he complies with his treatment plan. Stages 2 through 4 feature suspensions without pay during treatment.

The suit argued that the league "had failed to prevent the over-prescription of addictive medications to Derek" and "had breached its voluntarily undertaken duty to monitor and curb Derek's drug addiction in the program."

The league had the lawsuit dismissed based on a federal labor law preemption.

Len Boogaard heard about the Skaggs case from a media contact after the news broke on Twitter. It was a stark reminder that there is still so much work to be done in the realm of professional athletes and drug use.

"There isn't a day that has gone by that I haven't thought about him," Boogaard said. "I don't need a trigger; it's every day."

"Eight years later and the same thing is still happening."

What did you think of this story?





MEH



SOLID



AWESOME

Katie Strang ([author/katie-strang/](#)) is a senior enterprise and investigative writer for The Athletic. She joined The Athletic after six years at ESPN.com, where she held a variety of roles, including senior editor and writer, covering the NHL and MLB. While reporting on the NHL, she was a regular on the Hockey Today podcast and a contributor to SportsCenter. You can contact her at katie@theathletic.com Follow Katie on Twitter [@KatieJStrang](https://twitter.com/KatieJStrang) (<https://twitter.com/KatieJStrang>).



247 COMMENTS

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Evan G. Nov 5, 12:44pm

Unreal .. powerful powerful reminder that behind all the fame & fortune these are just kids finding their way.

Susceptible to same temptations as everyone else..

287

Stephen L. Nov 5, 2:57pm

*Kids w lots of money

41

Ryan H. Nov 5, 4:36pm

@Stephen L. and lots of people enabling them so long as they keep producing. Definitely a dangerous mix.

35