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# Weekender

The Weekend of  
September 16, 1989



## Fall colors

A GLIMPSE OF WHAT AREA  
ART GALLERIES HAVE TO  
OFFER. SEE **Time Out**

# THE CAPITAL TIMES



He was young.  
He was attending MATC.  
He was excelling at his job.  
He was an accomplished powerlifter.  
On June 18, it ended when he put a  
rifle to his head. Now his parents are  
finding he may have been using

# STEROIDS

By **MATTHEW DIETRICH**  
Capital Times Staff Writer

Nobody knew better than Michael how easy it is to get anabolic steroids. And nobody knew more about how the strength- and muscle-building drugs can emotionally ruin their users.

"Almost everyone gets their steroids from the 'roid dealer' found in any local gym," the hulking, 225-pound 19-year-old from Middleton wrote in a college term paper last December. "I have been an avid powerlifter for some time, and I see these dealers everywhere."

"Doctors have said that the depression athletes feel when quitting steroids is similar to the depression a heroin addict or an alcoholic feels," he wrote a few

pages later. "There have even been a few cases of suicides among steroid users, probably because of the depression."

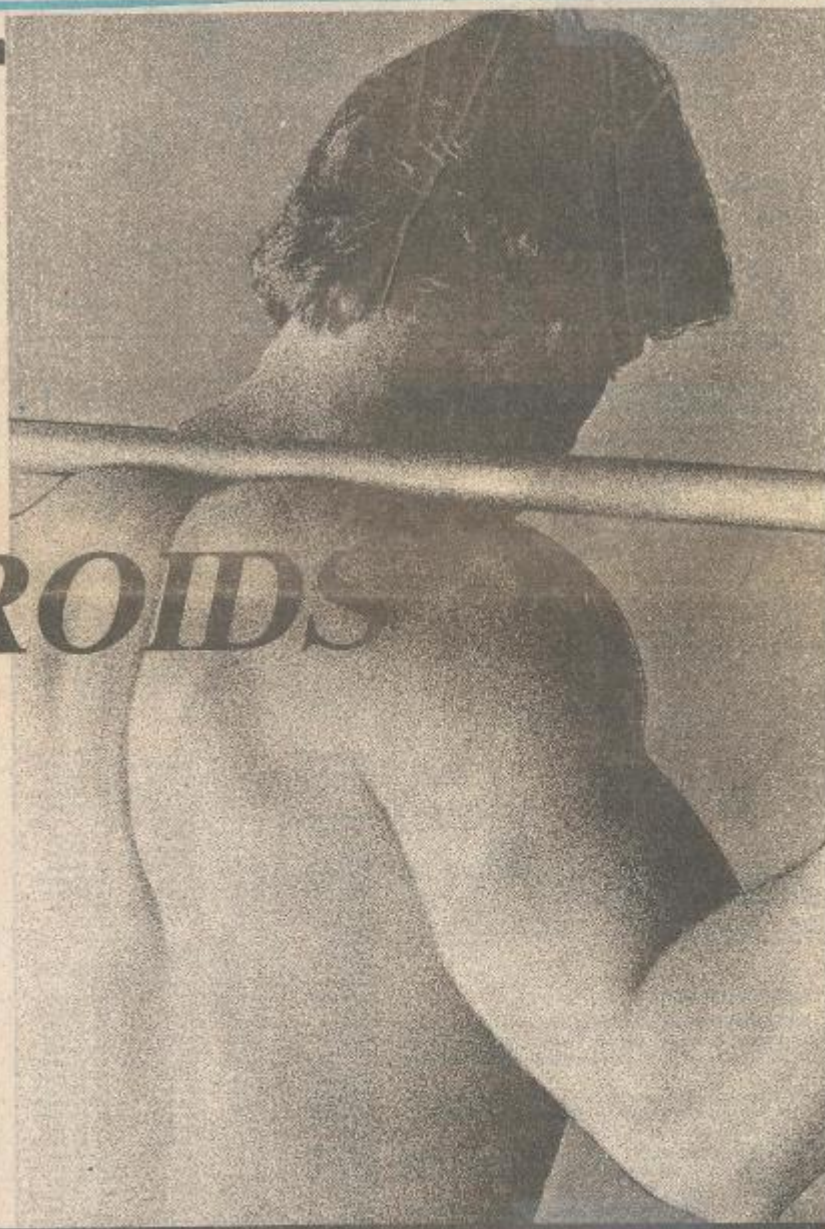
By age 19, Michael, through his studies and personal experience, had become an expert on steroids.

Now Michael is 19 forever.

On June 18, six months after writing that paper for his freshman English composition class at Madison Area Technical College, Michael went to his bedroom, put a rifle to his head and fired the only gunshot of his short life.

His was a death filled with irony — a healthy young man

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# Steroids

who avoided junk food and denounced all drug use to his friends and eventually fell prey to steroid abuse; who cursed steroids in print but took large quantities of them himself; and whose mother found a videotape about a steroid-related suicide in his room after his death.

Michael's suicide devastated and confused his parents, who had recently watched him attain unprecedented success at school, work and what had become his life's passion: powerlifting.

Michael's parents, who asked not to be identified, have had numerous conversations with their son's friends from the gym and from his night job at the state Department of Revenue. They are now struggling to come to grips with this likelihood: that the weightlifting obsession that fueled their son's life for three years was also the power behind his death.

They believe Michael's muscle-bound body was the product of anabolic steroids — massive doses of which he is believed to have been taking for most of the last three years of his life.

Michael's death, which his friends and parents say was not preceded by notable bouts of depression or anger, is one of many cases beginning to surface nationwide in which steroids are blamed for causing psychiatric disorders including paranoia, overaggressiveness, mood swings and major depression.

Doctors and scientists involved in sports medicine believe that cases like Michael's are symptomatic of increasing steroid use by teenagers.

More importantly, his death illustrates the little-known psychological dangers connected with the muscle- and strength-building drugs, which are available by prescription but more often are obtained and used illegally.

Michael's involvement with steroids dates back to 1986, when he asked an employee of Vic Tanny Health and Racquetball Club to make a connection for him with a steroid dealer.

"He wanted to get big so fast," recalls Robert Mitchell, who had been powerlifting for almost a year when Michael began coming to the club. "He felt like he needed to impress everybody in the gym."

Mitchell, who is now 26 and no longer works at the club, said he and Michael quickly became friends, often working out together after the gym was closed.

From a dealer he won't identify, Mitchell bought Michael a \$25 bottle of the anabolic steroid Dianabol, enough for a four-week cycle, and the teen-ager incorporated the drug into his six-day-a-week workouts. He expected instant results, and was impatient when he did not get them.

"Mike would come in and say, 'Robert, I'm not feeling anything,' and I'd say, 'Give it three weeks.'"

Before obtaining the steroids for Michael, Mitchell had undergone a six-week cycle on Dianabol and had made remarkable gains in both strength and size.

Although his parents had heard of anabolic steroids and their adverse physical effects, they attributed his growth and increased strength to the seemingly endless hours he spent in the gym and to the mas-



In two weeks, his bench press increased from 185 pounds to 225 and his weight increased 25 pounds.

"It would have taken me six months to a year to do that (without steroids)," he says.

Mitchell says he ended his steroid use after only one cycle following a warning from his physician that the drugs had affected his liver. He told Michael he couldn't get him any more drugs and advised the teenager to see a doctor after finishing the Dianabol.

By that time, however, Michael had made his own connections and was beginning his own steroid program.

"Any guy in any gym knows where to get drugs, and Mike met most of his friends through the gym," Mitchell says.

The two continued to work out regularly together, Mitchell eventually earning the nickname "House" and Michael being dubbed "Duplex" by club members as his physique and strength swelled.

While he attended Middleton High School, Michael had not been active in team sports and, according to his parents, had such difficulty academically that he wanted to drop out about the same time he started bodybuilding.

"School was very hard for Michael," his father says. "The proudest day in my life was when he graduated high school."

By the end of his second semester at MATC, however, he was maintaining a B average, the best he had ever done in school.

As he continued his workouts, adding massive amounts of body mass and strength to a body that weighed 140 pounds a year earlier, Michael's self-esteem also grew. At the gym, where he had been quiet and shy as an outsider, he became well-known in the circle of powerlifters.

"Mike's personality changed as he got bigger," Mitchell said. "He got more confident as he got bigger."

Chris Malchow, a bodybuilder who recently placed third in a contest in which all participants were tested for steroids, said Michael was always in high spirits when he worked out.

Although Malchow does not use steroids to enhance his workouts, he said those who want them can find them fairly easily with a little persistence.

"If they want to get them, they're going to go up to the biggest guy in the gym," Malchow says, adding that a potential buyer must develop a trust relationship with the dealer before purchases can be easily made.

Although his parents had heard of anabolic steroids and their adverse physical effects, they attributed his growth and increased strength to the seemingly endless hours he spent in the gym and to the mas-

'If people think getting steroids is a problem because they are illegal, it's not,' the 19-year-old writes in his term paper. 'If you are into bodybuilding and powerlifting and want them, you can get them as easily as buying a gallon of milk.'

sive amounts of high-carbohydrate food he consumed daily.

"If you could see the amount of food this kid would eat and the hours he spent in the gym, you'd think it was natural," Michael's father says.

In April, Michael confided to a co-worker at the Department of Revenue that he thought the drugs were making him sick.

"He said he got sick and coughed up blood and was going to quit taking them," says Trevor White, who is now a student at Western Wisconsin Technical College.

Word around the gym was that, by that time, Michael was taking six times the amount of steroids used by other weightlifters, according to Mitchell and Malchow.

"He was so health-conscious, that was what was so weird," White says, adding that Michael always avoided soda pop and junk food in favor of milk and healthy snacks. "I was kind of shocked. It looked to me like he did all that on his own."

Even his workout partner of three years never suspected Michael's steroid use.

"We'd talk about somebody that was on them and what a waste it was," says 17-year-old Jeff Hilgers. "Apparently he didn't tell me, didn't tell his parents, didn't tell anybody."

"He kept it all inside," Hilgers says.

Michael's mother remembers that her son had developed a persistent cough last spring and that he seemed to catch colds frequently, but neither she nor her husband knew that those could be symptoms of heavy steroid use.

No one knows whether Michael actually quit the drugs, but there certainly were withdrawal signs.

In May, his mother noticed he was suddenly breaking out with acne on his face and back, a problem Michael attributed to excessive sweating at the gym. His parents also noted that he had begun wearing sweatpants instead of the shorts he had always worn in the house and to the gym.

They now believe their son was hiding the size of his legs as they shrank from lack of the drugs.

His parents also noticed a subtle change in Michael's personality. Michael's even-temperedness seemed to gradually erode and he became prone to sudden mood swings, his mother says. Although he never became violent or outwardly depressed, he often expressed subtle frustration with himself.

It was not until they arrived home early in the evening of June 18 to find the police in their house that they realized the extent of his emotional problems.

Doctors and researchers have long been warning steroid users of the possible adverse side effects the drugs can bring. The most well-known are the physical effects, which include increased risk of liver disorders and liver cancer, cancer of the prostate, kidney tumors and heart disease.

Anabolic steroids, however, have also proven dangerous to the minds of their abusers, although case histories that directly link steroids with psychiatric disorders are far less prevalent than those dealing with physical ailments.

A 1988 study published in the American Journal of Psychiatry polled 41 steroid users from Massachusetts and California and found that five had experienced major

depression after quitting steroids. Many others in the study experienced paranoia and uncontrollable impulsive behavior while taking the drugs.

Scientists have noted biochemical changes caused by steroids that can affect the brain, but depression from steroid withdrawal can also be brought on as an athlete loses size and strength after quitting.

Michael's parents suspect their son may have sunk into depression after quitting steroids because he saw much of what he had worked for — in size and in strength — slowly slipping away.

Although Malchow says he has never used steroids and competes in "natural" bodybuilding contests, he says he empathizes with steroid users who feel they cannot quit because they don't want to lose size and strength.

"If you're in a gym and going for a bench press with 275 (pounds) — if you're on steroids or not — if you push that bar off your chest, there's no better feeling in the world," he says. "It's a sense of power."

On Saturday, June 17, Michael withdrew \$600 from his bank account. The next day, Michael attended church with his family, came home and left after asking if there was anything to eat in the house. That was the last time his mother saw the oldest of her four children.

At 2:38 p.m., he bought a \$400, .324-caliber rifle and \$50 in ammunition from a sporting goods store in East Towne Mall. He called home at 6 p.m. and asked his mother when she and his father were leaving.

Michael returned home 15 minutes later, went to his room, and killed himself.

Like all parents who lose a child to suicide, Michael's parents immediately started asking themselves why. Why did he do it? Why didn't they perceive a problem? Why didn't their son ask for help?

In their search for reasons to the unanswerable questions, Michael's mother recalled an episode of "Geraldine" she had seen on TV two months earlier.

The topic of the show was steroid abuse, and the guests included the family of a 17-year-old bodybuilder from Michigan who had taken huge doses of steroids then killed himself in a fit of anger after his car doors had frozen shut.

At the time, Michael's mother thought her son might be interested in the show and told him to turn it on. He said he wasn't interested and left for the gym.

When Michael's parents mustered the courage to re-enter his room after his death, they found a videotape of that show next to Michael's television. They don't know if he ever watched it.

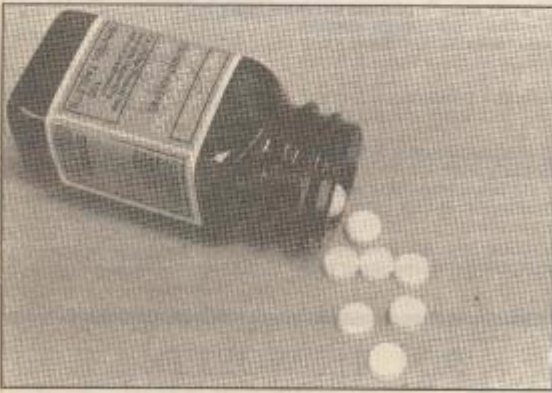
As their suspicions about possible steroid involvement in Michael's death grew, the teen-ager's parents contacted the Dane County coroner's office and requested that their son's body be tested for steroids.

The test showed no steroids, causing Michael's parents again to search for a cause — until they discovered that depression often comes with steroid withdrawal, after all traces of the drug have been flushed through the body.

"I have very little doubt that he was using anabolic steroids," says

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Steroids can be taken in pill form as well as through injection.

## Dangers, secrecy of use slow research on steroids

By MATTHEW DIETRICH  
Capital Times Staff Writer

Anabolic steroids have made headlines in recent years for their widespread use by professional athletes, Olympians and college sports participants to increase size, strength and endurance.

But as reports citing increasing steroid use surface, reliable information about adverse side effects of the body-building drugs, especially the psychological damage they can cause, continues to flow in trickles rather than waves.

The main problem in steroid research is that, because many users take extremely high doses of steroids, scientists cannot accurately reproduce the patterns of steroid abuse without endangering test subjects.

Dr. Greg Landry, head medical team physician for sports at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, says some tests have shown that steroid abusers use a minimum of 350 percent of the therapeutic doses of anabolic steroids and often as much as 10 times the prescription amount.

No doctor or scientist could ethically have human test subjects

take such high doses, even in a controlled lab setting, because of the unknown health risks, according to Landry.

While researchers have tried to poll users to obtain side effect information, the results are often suspect because participants aren't always honest in reporting their steroid use.

A 1988 study published in the American Journal of Psychiatry polled 41 steroid users from Massachusetts and California and found that five had experienced major depression after quitting steroids. Many others in the study experienced paranoia and uncontrollable impulsive behavior while taking the drugs. However, the study's authors note that accurate results are extremely difficult to obtain voluntarily because steroid users don't want to honestly discuss their use of the illegal substances.

Because little is known about the possible psychological harm anabolic steroids may cause, Landry and others involved in steroid research believe some steroid-related deaths are misdiagnosed as

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Dr. Greg Landry, physician for the University of Wisconsin-Madison sports teams and supervisor of the university's steroid testing program.

Because few concrete conclusions about the effects of steroids on the mind have been drawn through research, Landry said the role of steroids in some deaths can easily be missed by medical examiners and coroners.

"Quite frankly, health providers are not very knowledgeable about anabolic steroid use," Landry says. "There are very few medical indications for them, and (steroid use) has been pretty much a sports medicine problem."

An autopsy was not performed after Michael's death because the direct cause of death was not in question.

Dane County Coroner Ray Wosepka says Michael's parents' request for steroid tests was the first in Dane County, and he expects to order more such tests as knowledge of possible steroid effects and the prevalence of steroids spreads.

Michael's parents are still trying to recover from the loss of their son 13 weeks ago, but they say learning of his steroid abuse has helped them answer some of the questions about Michael's final action.

"It's a big relief in that you feel you know the answer why," Michael's father says. "Then it brings out this tremendous anger that this shit is available in our society."

Michael's parents now hope other parents might look more carefully for signs of steroid side effects and discuss the dangers of those drugs with their children.

They also hope other parents will heed the warning their son gave in December about the availability of steroids to young people and will learn from Michael's tragic example.

"If people think getting steroids is a problem because they are illegal, it's not," Michael wrote in his term paper. "If you are into bodybuilding and powerlifting and want them, you can get them as easily as buying a gallon of milk."

## Research

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natural.

Wally Schessow, football coach at Memorial High School, says he does not need scientific studies to know how easy it is for his players and students to obtain anabolic steroids.

"Getting steroids is as easy as getting alcohol or marijuana or cocaine," he says, adding that he believes steroids are "as bad as any other drug."

Students in health classes and athletes at Memorial are taught in-depth about steroids and their side effects, and Schessow believes education is the only way to prevent steroid abuse.

Although Landry supervises the random drug testing of about 900 athletes on UW teams, he also believes in education over testing as a

deterrent to drugs.

"I do not see drug testing as a substitute for education and therapy," Landry says, adding that the \$100-per-test cost makes testing highly impractical at both the high school and college levels.

Punitive action against steroid dealers has been hindered by murky laws concerning anabolic steroids and by the fact that knowledge of their harmful effects is relatively new.

A bill introduced last week in the state Legislature by Sen. Charles Chvala, D-Madison, seeks to clarify the laws pertaining to illegal steroid sales and use. If passed, the bill would make dealing anabolic steroids illegally a felony and would impose a 30-day jail term and \$500 fine for illegal steroid possession.

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## STEROIDS: ONE TEEN'S NIGHTMARE

# Guilt, unanswered questions haunt parents

By MATTHEW DUTCH  
Capital Times Staff Writer

Knowing that the story of their son's suicide might help other parents recognize the dangers of abusing anabolic steroids has brought since is a Middleton couple.

But it is only a drop of consolation in a sea of grief.

When they first realized that Michael's steroid ingestion probably spurred the depression that led to his death in June, the 30-year-old's parents no longer had to ask why he did it.

But with some questions answered, there instantly were others: Why didn't he come to us for help? Why didn't we notice his drug abuse? Why didn't his friends tell us?

In the three months since Mich-

ael shot himself in his bedroom, his mother says, the pain has not lessened.

"I never gave away," she says. "I'm still thinking he still might come home."

In the back yard of their home near Middleton's southern edge, Michael's parents recall how they began quizzing their son's friends from various gyms about his steroid use, even as they filed past the closed casket at his wake.

"Even in the state of shock I was in, I asked them if he was taking steroids," Michael's father says.

But their attempts to find out exactly what Michael was taking and where he got it were often met with indifference from those who knew him at local gyms.

Phone calls were not returned. Some who were contacted said

they knew Michael was taking the drugs but would not be specific about amounts and types.

Many have said steroids are easily obtainable by anyone who works there, but the conversations always end when Michael's mother or father asks for names of dealers.

"Nobody calls back. They don't want to talk," his mother says in frustration. "I just don't think they care."

The grief of losing their oldest child, coupled with confusion over why he took his life, at first consumed the couple and their other three children. Trying to pinpoint the cause for his death put strains on the entire family, Michael's father says.

"This can lead to all kinds of family problems," he says. "If

you're trying to assess blame, it can break up a marriage."

While noting that learning about Michael's steroid involvement has been a "big roller" in many ways, the town's father says he will never be able to answer all the questions.

"There will always be a certain amount of, 'What did I do, what didn't I do,'" he says.

Each time she learns about another side effect of anabolic steroid, memories rush into the mind of Michael's mother.

She wonders now if her son kept his hair short in the months before his death to hide the hair loss that can accompany steroid use. She recalls his sagging eyelids and the moles that seemed to plague him last spring and wonders what she could have done if she had suspected they were steroid-related.

But eventually the analysis yields to any mother's instincts.

"I'd just could have hugged him and told him I loved him," she says. "He must have been torn up inside and we didn't see it," she continues, succumbing to one of many onslaughts of tears that come and go every day. "I guess he's at peace now."

Nothing will bring back their son, but Michael's parents hope that spreading the word about the dangers of anabolic steroids might prevent other families from having to go through what they are experiencing.

As Michael's mother chokes when she says her oldest son's most prized possession — a thick blue belt worn while powerlifting — his father expresses the only ray of optimism they have gleaned from



Michael

Outraged:  
"We hope that some good can come from the bad."