There is no proof that THG – the drug at the heart of the Balco case – has performance enhancing effects. And there has not been a positive THG test either. The drug was only discovered through so-called “non-analytical positives.”

The Danish anti-doping researcher, Rasmus Damsgaard, has reviewed the scientific literature and found no information on the performance-enhancing effects of THG. And there is no scientific or empiric evidence to substantiate suspicions that THG is an actual or potential health risk either.

“So the verdict on THG is pending although there is no doubt that its use is against the spirit of sport,” Damsgaard told the Play the Game conference in a session on lessons from Balco.

From his point of view, the inventors of THG were cheating on their customers, but the drug served as a very convenient excuse for raising a new, necessary debate on drugs in the US.

Strong disagreement on the effects of drug that triggered the Balco scandal

By Kasper Lindberg

For Tygart, the Balco affair illustrates how some athletes are always going to be sophisticated enough to bypass the testing system.

In the Balco case, athletes used a cream as a masking agent in addition to the steroid THG. The purpose of the cream was to cloak the body’s own indications of an artificial steroid being induced. Indeed, drug tests came out negative, and instead the discovery of THG was set off by an anonymous tip.

To Tygart, this is an illustration of one of the new frontiers in doping, the so-called “non-analytical positives” or the possibility to charge an athlete with doping abuse based on something other than a positive doping test.

“Any system that does not allow for a non-analytical positive is not a system that is of benefit to clean athletes,” Tygart said, emphasizing the right of clean athletes to compete on a level playing field.

Tygart thought it to be self-evident that athletes should be subject to doping charges if there is evidence such as masking agents, extreme hematocrit levels or other things strongly indicating the use of doping.

The Balco story:

by Elliott Almond, San Jose Mercury News

The slate-colored building sits on a frontage road steps from a freeway where the roar of San Francisco Bay commuters swirls in the salty air. The building has a windowless façade, aside from a glass door that leads to a narrow hallway lined with autographed photos of superstar athletes. Few, if any, paid much notice to Bay Area Co-operative Laboratories until federal and local law enforcement agents burst through the door with guns drawn, subpoenas in hand, on September 3, 2003.

In the ensuing two years, much of what the Balco defendants were doing surfaced in the Bay Area’s two major newspapers, the San Francisco Chronicle and San Jose Mercury News.

The two papers have published about 1,200 stories with Balco connections. This blanket coverage has impacted sports journalism in the United States by forcing beat reporters from high schools to Major League Baseball to begin learning about the effects of performance-enhancing drugs on the athletes they cover.

After the 1988 Summer Olympics, Canadians experienced a national cleansing with an examination of the Ben Johnson drug case. Americans did not know it at the time, but they started down a similar path two years ago with the raid of Balco.

It was the warning sign that all was not right in our world of fun and games and we would never again sit in the stands and watch with glassy-eyed innocence.

Uncovering the truth

Jeffrey Novitzky is a criminal investigator with the IRS, dealing with tax fraud and money laundering cases. In August of 2002 he became interested in the activities of Victor Conte Jr., founder of Balco and formerly a bass player in the band Tower of Power.

Through tips, the government suspected Conte of laundering money he earned from selling drugs to athletes. After 18 months of surveillance of Conte and Balco, Novitzky concluded he had uncovered a steroid-distribution ring that was servicing celebrity US athletes.

Meanwhile, the US Anti Doping Agency was alerted to a new substance by track and field coach Trevor Graham, who had had a personal fallout with Victor Conte. He sent the agency a vile with traces of a substance now known as THG. Graham told officials that Bay Area athletes associated with Balco were using the clear, liquid substance.
HOW REPORTING IT CHANGED US SPORTS

The USADA and IRS were on parallel tracks. They began working together. By the end of 2003, after the USADA announced it had discovered THG – or “the clear” as Conte called it – the story gained traction.

Every Thursday, a throng of reporters would impatiently wait outside the grand jury room on the 17th floor of the Federal Court House in San Francisco. They would descend upon anyone in the hallway in hopes of getting a few of the more than 30 professional athletes who testified, to speak to them. The scene personified the definition of “media circus”.

Three strikes against baseball
The identities of big name baseball players commanded most of the attention for a country enamoured of that peculiarly American pastime. But it was evident that Conte and Balco mostly helped track stars including double World Sprint Champion Kelli White.

During the fall of 2004, Conte and other defendants met government officials to try to resolve the case without a trial. But they had reached an impasse. About this time, major US television networks seriously courted Conte to tell his story. By then he had become so frustrated with media coverage of the case he decided he would work with ABC to give his side. Conte offered compelling, detailed testimony about how he helped inject Marion Jones with human growth hormone.

It was supposed to be major international news, and ABC promoted it during the first week of December 2004. But just before the broadcast, the Chronicle published transcripts of grand jury testimonies by baseball players Jason Giambi and Barry Bonds on consecutive days.

In a span of 48 hours three major US sports figures had been implicated in serious drug charges. If Americans were sceptical of media reports before that, they were now listening.

A month later, former baseball star Jose Canseco published a tell-all book called “Juice”. In it, Canseco acknowledged his own use of performance-enhancing drugs. He described locker room scenes of famous players such as Mark McGwire using drugs.

Law makers certainly were paying attention in Washington D.C. It was one thing to hear about American track athletes using drugs, but quite another when it involved their precious home-grown game of baseball. If the game’s greatest home run hitters were frauds, then what does that say about American values or sense of fair play and justice?

Members of the US House of Representatives Committee did not like what they saw. They subpoenaed a handful of baseball stars to testify before Congress. The March 17 scene was remarkable. It was one of those unifying moments when a nation stops and watches something collectively.

If not quite the Ben Johnson case, it became America’s moment of truth about drug use in sports.