

# NCAA Votes to Remove Cannabis from Banned Substances List

*LONDON – The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has voted to remove marijuana from its banned substances list for Division I players, effective immediately.*

## **Historic Decision: Cannabis No Longer Banned**

In a landmark move, the NCAA has decided to eliminate marijuana from its list of banned substances for Division I athletes. This decision comes about five months after the NCAA's Division I Council proposed the rule change, emphasizing that cannabis should be treated similarly to alcohol as it is not a performance-enhancing drug.

## **Aligning with International Standards**

The NCAA's decision builds on a 2022 policy change that increased the allowable THC threshold for college athletes, aligning its rules with those of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA). This alignment marks a significant shift in how cannabis use is regulated in collegiate sports.

## **Retroactive Application of New Rule**

The newly adopted rule will be applied retroactively, meaning any penalties currently faced by players for cannabis-related violations will be discontinued. This reform amends the NCAA's drug testing policies for student sports championships and postseason participation in football.

## **Focus on Health and Well-Being**

Josh Whitman, chair of the NCAA Division I Council, stated, "The NCAA drug testing program is intended to focus on the integrity of competition, and cannabis products do not provide a competitive advantage. The council's focus is on policies centered on student-athlete health and well-being rather than punishment for cannabis use."

## **Harm-Reduction Strategies**

The NCAA has indicated that cannabinoids will now be addressed like other non-performance enhancing substances such as alcohol. The focus will be on harm-reduction strategies to address problematic cannabis use, prioritizing the health of student-athletes.

## **Broader Context of Reform**

This policy change follows a preliminary recommendation last June from the NCAA's Committee on Competitive Safeguards and Medical Aspects of Sports (CSMAS) that suggested all three of the NCAA's governing bodies should remove marijuana from the banned substances list. While Division I has now adopted this change, Divisions II and III have yet to vote on the proposal.

## **Legislative Support and Public Reaction**

The move has garnered support from legislators, including Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-OR), co-chair of the Congressional Cannabis Caucus, who stated, "Slowly, surely, America is coming to its senses after 50 years of the failed war on drugs. It is only fitting that the NCAA remove cannabis from its list of banned substances."

## **Impact on Athletes**

Historically, college athletes have been subject to testing during postseason play, with positive tests potentially resulting in lost eligibility for an entire season. Officials now aim to focus more on addressing problematic use rather than penalizing players for isolated incidents.

## **Recommendations from Experts**

In recommending the policy shift, the NCAA committee highlighted the ineffectiveness of the previous policy and affirmed that cannabis is not a performance-enhancing drug. The committee emphasized the importance of moving towards a harm-reduction strategy.

## **Comparative Policies in Other Sports**

Other sports organizations have also been amending their marijuana policies. The NFL, for example, has stopped suspending players over marijuana use as part of a 2020 collective bargaining agreement. The NFL has also invested in research to explore the therapeutic potential of CBD.

## **Global and National Perspectives**

The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) announced last December that it would remove marijuana from its banned substances list, though state regulations can still impose penalties. Nevada sports regulators have also moved to protect athletes using marijuana in compliance with state law.

## **Ongoing Debate with WADA**

Despite these reforms, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) continues to ban cannabis. Some panel members within WADA argue that marijuana use by athletes violates the "spirit of sport." This stance has been criticized, particularly following the suspension of U.S. runner Sha'Carri Richardson in 2021, which sparked calls for policy changes from various stakeholders, including the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) and President Joe Biden.

## **Future Implications**

As the NCAA and other sports organizations continue to evolve their cannabis policies, the landscape for athletes is likely to change significantly. The NCAA's decision represents a shift towards more lenient and health-focused approaches to cannabis use in sports.

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