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PRO BASKETBALL

N.B.A. Union Strikes Deal for Supplements

By LIZ ROBBINS

Billy Hunter, the executive director of the N.B.A. players union, was approached before the season by a nutritional supplement company offering its products. He gauged the interest of some players, but he did not approach the league.

This week, the union entered into a one-year agreement with the company, Abbott Nutrition, to supply \$5,000 of its EAS brand supplements to each team and to give players a 50 percent discount on its products.

The company guarantees through independent testing that its products contain no substances banned under the N.B.A.'s drug policy. The National Football League, with its players union, signed an agreement with EAS in 2004.

The N.F.L. decision was a joint venture, but Hunter did not involve the National Basketball Association. "I didn't really see there was a need to do that," he said yesterday in a telephone interview.

Hunter at first said that not involving the league might have been a subconscious decision. There was no financial incentive for the union, he said, and he considered it a benefit the union could provide.

The union's unilateral action — albeit over energy bars and protein shakes — comes as Hunter is voicing strong objections to the N.B.A.'s actions. He said he was frustrated that the league had not consulted the union on decisions ranging from the dress code to the new ball to the officials' crackdown on complaining. If the agreement with EAS is not a pre-emptive strike, then it is a sign of an increasingly strained relationship between the union and the N.B.A.

"A lot of that has been precipitated by the league, the moves that the commissioner has decided to make and implement — many we feel are beyond scope of the collective bargaining agreement," Hunter said. "At a minimum, we should have been

consulted. As a result, maybe I feel less compelled to consult them on things."

The N.B.A. said that it had had discussions with the union regarding supplements and would continue to do so. But there was a caveat.

"It has been the N.B.A. policy that our players should not take supplements," Tim Frank, a league spokesman, said.

"There are a lot of energy products out there," Rod Thorn, the president of the Nets, said. "Some people use them, some

In the current agreement, signed last year, all players — not only rookies, as in the previous agreement — may be tested up to four times a year, including once during training camp.

Players who test positive for performance-enhancing drugs face a suspension of 10 games for a first offense. The penalty increases to 25 games for the second offense, a year for the third and disqualification from the league for the fourth.

Some players take supplements despite the increasing risk of punishment, and Hunter said he thought EAS products would provide some reassurance because the ingredients were certified.

Chris Hickey, marketing director for the EAS brand, said that its nine current products are tested by NSF International, an independent agency in Ann Arbor, Mich.

When asked why EAS did not also contact the N.B.A., Hickey said that union officials had advised his company on "the best way to facilitate the relationship."

"We did not approach them because this is a supplier-ship, versus a sponsorship," Hickey said Wednesday from the company's headquarters in Columbus, Ohio.

EAS, which stands for Energy-Athletics-Strength, was formerly known as Experimental and Applied Sciences and was based in Golden, Colo. Abbott Nutrition bought the company in 2004.

Hunter is satisfied with the EAS brand and encouraged by its wide use in N.F.L. locker rooms and by some N.B.A. players. When he meets his constituents, he distributes free samples and gives them order forms.

"We're not compelling players to use it," Hunter said. "But when we inquired among teams, already many used products. This was a way for them to get it at no cost."

"In times of high stress, when players need all kinds of nutrients, we thought it would be appropriate to make sure they have a safe product."

The supplier guarantees that its product contains no banned substances.

don't use anything. We talk to the players, and the league talks to players about the products that are allowed and ones that aren't. Everybody is aware of what they can and can't do."

Performance-enhancing drug use in the N.B.A. has never been a major concern compared to those in the N.F.L. and in Major League Baseball. But marijuana and cocaine use have at times affected the N.B.A.'s image.

The N.B.A. has had a drug policy since 1984, when it called for an immediate ban of any player convicted of, or pleading guilty to a crime involving cocaine or heroin. But not until 1999 did the policy include testing for steroids and marijuana.

Only three players have been suspended for steroid offenses: Don MacLean in 2000, Matt Geiger in 2001 and Soumaila Samake in 2002. Terms of the collective bargaining agreement prohibit disclosure of specific violations.