

Sports

Top sports trainer tries to clear name following steroid documentary

By [Will Hobson](#) and [James Wagner](#) January 26

TAMPA — The physical trainer and the pharmacist met at a dinner party thrown by a professional athlete friend. Conversation was awkward at first, but they found they had a few things in common: midwestern roots, Christian faith, and an intense interest in nutritional supplements.

Before long, they struck up a business relationship both hoped would blossom. That relationship ended last month, however, after a documentary exposed the pharmacist as a dealer of banned performance-enhancing drugs.

Before last month, Jason Riley's reputation was above reproach in the insular, competitive community of trainers who work with the many professional athletes who live or work near this city. Riley's list of former clients is headlined by retired New York Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter, whose late-career resurgence came after training with Riley. But now the 41-year-old Nebraska native feels his name has been wrongly tarnished because of his relationship with Charlie Sly, a 31-year-old itinerant pharmacist at the center of the Al Jazeera documentary "The Dark Side: The Secret World of Sports Doping," which aired in late December.

Riley, who was never named or cited in the documentary, said in an interview late last week that he was unaware of Sly's apparent side business dealing banned drugs. Sly did work for Riley's supplement company — Elementz Nutrition — but Riley downplayed the connection, claiming Sly wasn't paid and only worked sporadically for him.

Riley, who suspects rumors about him and Sly have scared off potential clients, said he has never given any athlete performance-enhancing drugs or worked with an athlete who was taking them, to his knowledge. Riley doesn't know why many of the athletes Sly named in the documentary as having taken banned substances are current or former clients of Riley's, such as baseball players Ryan Howard and Ryan Zimmerman.

(Sly made his statements in the documentary unaware that he was being recorded, and he recanted the claims after the documentary went public. Many of the athletes he named have denied his claims; [Howard and Zimmerman have sued Al Jazeera and the reporters involved with the story for libel.](#))

"I have spent my entire career running in the opposite direction of performance-enhancing drugs," Riley said. "To watch a guy that I thought I knew talking on camera about this stuff . . . that's not the guy I knew."

Riley blamed himself for “a lack of discernment” in trusting a man he introduced to colleagues as a “brilliant” consultant who would help him create top-of-the-line nutritional supplements.

“I tend to believe that everyone is inherently good, and we all want our light to shine out,” Riley said.

Riley refused to identify the friend who connected him and Sly at a dinner party in Nevada in 2011, but he did say this professional athlete was the only one he knew who was friends with Sly. An Illinois native who grew up in Indiana, Sly went to high school with former New York Jets and Miami Dolphins tight end Dustin Keller. They played basketball together, and when Keller was about to get drafted by the Jets, a Lafayette, Ind., newspaper described Sly as “one of his [Keller’s] best high school friends.

In the Al Jazeera documentary, Sly said he helped Keller take steroids throughout high school and college. Keller, who hasn’t played in the NFL since a knee injury in 2013, did not reply to multiple requests to comment through his agent. Sly also did not respond to multiple phone messages.

“I’m here to clear my name . . . I don’t want to drag names into this,” said Riley, who trained Keller. “Dustin was an extremely hard worker . . . I have a lot of respect for him.”

A relationship on faith

Seated across from each other that night in 2011, Riley and Sly struck up conversation over similar backgrounds and interests.

An Omaha native, Riley attended the University of Nebraska, where he helped train three national championship football teams while getting a degree in kinesiology and exercise science. In 2000, he moved to the Bradenton/Sarasota area to work at the IMG Academy, the sprawling private athletic training institute run by the global sports talent management company.

With two major professional sports teams in Tampa, another in St. Petersburg, and six baseball teams that spend spring training there, the region has become a hub for people who want to get in the business of helping pro athletes get bigger, stronger and faster. Over the years, Riley has developed an impressive client alumni list spanning multiple sports, from pro baseball players such as Jeter, Howard and Tyler Clippard to football players such as Sammy Watkins and Mike Neal, to tennis stars Maria Sharapova, Tommy Haas and John Isner.

In 2008, with the financial backing of Janis Krums — a former client turned angel investor — Riley launched Elementz Nutrition. A devout Christian, Riley selected a Bible verse for his company’s mission statement: “Anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor’s crown except by competing according to the rules,” from 2 Timothy.

Sly knew the Bible verse, Riley said, and he interpreted that shared familiarity as a mutual aversion to banned or illegal drugs. Sly was attending Roseman University of Health Sciences in the Las Vegas suburb of Henderson, Nev., where he was working toward a doctor of pharmacy degree along with a master's degree in business administration. (He later completed both, records show.)

“I think he was in tune with what I believed in regard to vitamins and nutrition,” Riley said. “I thought he was very intelligent . . . an outside-the-box thinker.”

The men exchanged email addresses, and Sly started consulting for Elementz Nutrition, offering advice on which ingredients Riley should use for supplements. The two apparently started working together quickly. In late 2011 — just months after Riley says he and Sly met — Keller told Men's Journal magazine he worked with “Jason Riley and Charlie Sly of Elementz Nutrition” in the offseason to plan nutrition, supplementation and training.

Sly was enigmatic and unreliable, Riley said, sometimes taking months to reply to an email. Sly moved often, from Nevada, to Brownsburg, Ind., to Austin, and only visited the Tampa area a few times. Elementz has never been money-flush, so Riley discussed giving Sly equity in the company, but Riley said they never formally wrote up paperwork.

“I can count on both hands the number of times I've seen Charlie face to face,” Riley said.

In 2012, Sly applied for a pharmacist intern license in Florida. For his residence, he listed Riley's home in Lakewood Ranch, a suburban community about 30 minutes away from Bradenton and Sarasota. Riley said he had no idea Sly did this until this month.

In 2014, Riley changed the address for Elementz Nutrition in state corporate filings from a Sarasota office to the Tampa location of his new gym, the Performance Compound, which he opened with former NFL players Llewellyn

“Yo” Murphy and Anthony “Booger” McFarland.

That business relationship soured last year, ending when Murphy and McFarland sued Riley, alleging he had tried to steal clients for himself and was sabotaging the gym’s Internet marketing efforts. Riley denies the charges, and the lawsuit was later dropped.

“It was a simple business dispute we were able to resolve,” said Riley’s lawyer, Anthony Fantauzzi.

Murphy said Sly never set foot in the Performance Compound during the year Elementz Nutrition was headquartered at the gym. Murphy said none of his clients, to his knowledge, take performance-enhancing drugs.

“It just frustrates me that we’ve gotten wrapped up in this,” Murphy said. “We’ve done absolutely nothing wrong.”

Murphy and Scott Lee, a Tampa investor and part-owner of the gym, both minimized the connection between Elementz Nutrition and the Performance Compound and emphasized that Riley has had no relationship with their gym since early 2015.

“I think it’s a perfect case of someone lying down with some dogs and getting up with some fleas, unfortunately,” Lee said. “We’re not that. We don’t have anyone in this facility that would sacrifice or risk what has taken us so long to build. All of our athletes, to our knowledge, are hard-working, of high integrity, and of high character.”

‘How did this happen?’

The last time Riley communicated with Sly, he said, was by email last July. Riley asked Sly for thoughts on a weight-loss vitamin package. In December, the documentary aired.

To investigate the use of performance-enhancing drugs, Al Jazeera enlisted a former track star from Great Britain named Liam Collins, who invented a cover story that he was trying to revive his athletic career and he was willing to take banned and illegal drugs. Collins secretly video-recorded everyone he met.

Sly is the unwitting star of the documentary, boasting to Collins that he supplied a bevy of pro baseball and football players with banned substances.

While no corroborating evidence has emerged to support many of Sly's claims — most notably those about NFL star Peyton Manning, who has denied taking human growth hormone as Sly alleged — there's no refuting that Sly dealt banned substances. In one scene, journeyman baseball player Taylor Teagarden, while hanging out in Sly's apartment, admits Sly gave him Delta-2, a steroid banned by sports leagues. (Teagarden did not respond to requests to comment for this article.)

Riley watched the documentary when it aired the weekend after Christmas.

"I was devastated," he said. "I trusted him. . . . If this is what he was involved in, I wish he would have told me because I would have run in the opposite direction."

In the past few weeks, Riley said he was turned down for one job he thought he was "a shoo-in for" and has had several possible clients stop taking his calls; both of which he attributes to rumors about his relationship with Sly.

"It's been a rough three or four weeks trying to go through this and process this and try to figure out . . . how did this happen?" Riley said. "But I know I haven't done anything wrong. At the end of the day, this is only going to make me stronger."

It remains to be seen if the Al Jazeera documentary uncovered a doping kingpin who had helped dozens of pro athletes cheat or an aspiring steroid dealer who invented stories to try to convince a prospective client to buy his drugs. Officials with the NFL and MLB have said they will investigate Sly's allegations in the documentary. On Tuesday, MLB confirmed the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency will assist its investigation.

Riley said he has not been contacted by anyone with either league or any other agency in connection with an investigation of Sly.

Elementz Nutrition is now headquartered in Riley's home. On its website, it lists four products for sale: two whey protein mixes and two mineral complexes. Riley has no plans to rekindle his consulting relationship with Sly.

As he has looked back on his business dealings, Riley said, he has searched his memory for any sign that Sly worked with banned substances. He can't remember anything.

“I had no reason to think he was doing anything wrong,” Riley said. “I believe that Charlie’s true intent was to help people . . . to try to help people reach their potential.”

Wagner reported from Washington; Post researcher Julie Tate contributed to this report.

Will Hobson is a national sports reporter for the Washington Post. He has previously worked for newspapers in Tampa, Clearwater, Daytona Beach, and Panama City, Fla. In 2014, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in local reporting for his work on Tampa Bay Times stories about abusive landlords and squalid government-funded housing for the homeless.

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Stats, scores and schedules

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