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Imagine, 500-Pound Football Players

IT appears that sportswriters have overlooked what might turn out to be the most significant sports story of 1982.

That is the report first published by a British science journal that growth-hormone genes transplanted from rats into mice produced offspring from 20 to 80 percent larger than normal.

If what scientists have been telling us about human beings performing physiologically like laboratory rats and mice is reliable, then the athletic import of this discovery is obvious.

We may look forward to basketball players eight or 10 feet tall and football linemen who weigh 350 to 500 pounds. A quarterback who could stand up and see over the line might be as tall as a basketball player and be paid about as much. Giants might also have some advantage in baseball, golf and other sports.

The discovery, which researchers say may be far from practical application, has other profit-making potentials. One is to produce larger domestic livestock, although the trend has been to market beef cattle at lighter weights and to breed hogs ready for market at 200 to 250 lb., instead of like the 500 or 600 lb. porkers of the past.

Scientists say the gene for prolactin could be engineered to enable dairy cows to increase milk output. This doesn't appear urgent as long as government refrigerators are crammed with surplus butter and cheese that dairymen probably lost money on.

There are few places in business and industry where giants are needed. Mechanical and electronic devices enable people of average size or smaller to operate most procedures just as well as much larger workers with equivalent skills.

This brings us back to the athletic world, where husky individuals are in demand and some receive fortunes in salaries every year. This is because millions of ordinary-sized people enjoy vicarious participation in the games and may be willing to bet on the outcome.

DNA research that led to making of the mighty mice should not be confused with cloning, whereby identical animals or plants may be reproduced in considerable numbers in a single generation. Claims of successful cloning of mammals have not been established but if accomplished it also could have considerable athletic significance.

Many citizens undoubtedly will react with horror at the idea of deliberately reproducing humans to predetermined, specified shapes, weights and heights. Religious or moral considerations might not deter scientists who theorize that the universe came in existence by means of a spontaneous "big bang" and that man, in effect, evolved himself.

Furthermore, if there is a way to make money by manipulating genes to produce giants someone will do it. Promoters probably would find some women willing to have children made-to-measure.

DNA technology has tremendous potential for good of the human race, but this might not include all possible applications. At present, there seem to be no limitations on uses of genetic engineering.