



# OF GLORY AND SHAME: THE CASE OF OLYMPIC DRUG TEST

**With** the 2000 Summer Olympics just days away, Sydney Australia is expected to, like its many predecessors, witness a sideline contest no less exciting and significant than those for gold and glory; the difference is that the winner wins no medals and the losers will be heavily penalized. In the arena where the players wear white lab coats, technology and ethics are facing one of their toughest times in the history of the modern Olympics.

The widespread drug use and decisive actions taken at the 1999 Tour de France, the world's premier professional road cycling race, served as a major wakeup call for many of the world's major sports governing agencies toward the appalling level of blatant use of performance-enhancing drugs among the elites and, in certain cases, aspiring amateurs. There has been an increase in the use of erythropoietin (EPO) and human growth hormone (hGH), which are effective yet easily accessible. Studies in Sweden and Australia have shown that both can boost athletic performance by an average of 7-10%. In a nutshell, EPO is a natural hormone that, when injected in excess of a certain amount into the body, will cause the body to produce additional red blood cells. This makes it popular amongst many long distance runners and swimmers. On the other hand, hGH, which is preferred by strength- and sprint-oriented athletes, has the ability to accelerate muscle growth thus power.

Current established methods that work excellently well against other drugs cannot be used for EPO and hGH. As they exist naturally in human body, detection of additional hormonal level is technically challenging. Researchers working for the International Olympics Committee (IOC) have been working for years to develop a set of credible detection methods but none can make it for Sydney 2000. Interestingly, they attribute this technical delay to the indecisiveness and lukewarm support from the IOC management.

Analysts suspected that big budgets, like the US\$5 million proposed by the scientific community working on hGH at the St. Thomas' Hospital (London), had put off serious commitment from the IOC. This is countered by an observation that IOC actually invested a total of US\$25 million over 2 years in 1999 to start a sister anti-drug bureaucracy, the World Anti-doping Agency (WAA). Still others attributed IOC's indifference to the fact that the methods developed are indirect ones, which are much more vulnerable to legal challenges by the alleged athletes. Furthermore, the present concept of research will yield methods that are only effective under special circumstances; for example, the EPO test developed by the French IOC office in Paris can only detect extra and new red blood cells within 3 days after implementation. Then again, from the scientific perspectives, having a less effective and refined test is better than no tests at all. The present situation must then be understood from a more varied range of angles.

While the true reason behind IOC's inclination toward WAA is unknown, one must not assume that decision-makers view sports the same way as athletes. Even among athletes

themselves, the difference in values is considerably large. With the rising stakes of gold and glory, fame and fortune, the desire for quick results can easily take precedent over a moral sense of fairness and, regularly, personal safety. If the rewarding policies of state, national, regional and international sports governing bodies continue to stress performance and records as their main criteria, and ignore the roles of drugs until their own athletes are caught and humiliated, the virtue of 'cleanliness' and honesty will continue to be subordinated.

So what can sports government do about drug abuse and help their athletes resist the temptation to use drugs? In what light should public education be carried out, and for whom?

Although sports government should provide the leadership to promote the health and professionalism in sports, considering that they too have a high stake in the performance of their athletes, it can be understood that some are themselves involved in systematic implementation of doping practices amongst their athletes. The 1998 World Swimming Championships had revealed an embarrassing fact about official, high-level involvement in the disclosed cases. Therefore, it only seems rational to address the problem upstream - at the source of sports' financial resources. Commercial sponsors have traditionally been viewed as nothing more than a mechanism behind the scene. However, if commercial sponsors can incorporate 'cleanliness' into their marketing themes and corporate images, the events they are willing to sponsor will have to promise a certain minimum standard of drug detection. The concomitant demand will be an added investment into funding technological research. Since it is the market taste and demand in which these companies are ultimately interested, the beckoning to march as a contingent against drugs should logically come from the consumers – the general public.

The crux of the challenge is that most members of the public are poorly informed of the effects and damage caused by performance-enhancing drugs that only professional athletes and aspiring amateurs are interested in using them. However, this does not imply that the sport-commoners cannot be inspired to a high level by athletes who spend the amount of time they spend working training and racing. One ideal example is the influence cancer-survivor and two-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong has on the United States and the world. Thus, there is ground to believe that the general public can be made more concerned for professional sportspersons and more aware of the negative effects drugs can have on them. Still, someone has to start the ball rolling. The best is for a leadership unit, either the sports Ministry or an appropriate NGO, to kick off a campaign to publicize substantially the harmful effects of drugs and incorporate these messages into actual sporting events that involved the public. One suggestion is to hold an annual 'Walk Against Doping' to raise general awareness and funds for doping detection and education research. A consortium of sponsors should also be put together to see this campaign through. Other measures can be:

- 1) educational talks to schools and sport institutions (sponsors should also be involved),
- 2) step up counseling for young athletes and professional athletes with regards to proper training methods and ethics; coaches should also be given greater attention,
- 3) implement sportsperson guidance plans in which young sportspersons are given paternal advice on handling of pressure specific to competition at the highest levels,
- 4) working to improve the legal credibility of indirect testing results,
- 5) better sport insurance policies that require forfeit of an amount of premium if athletes are found and proven guilty of doping,
- 6) stiffer fines to be imposed on offenders,
- 7) jail term for offenders can be examined.

The need for international collaborations on scientific research cannot be emphasized more. Effective sharing of resources and manpower may help alleviate some of today's most challenging problems in fund shortage.

So far, in the quiet battle for purity and dignity in sports, technology is losing. By paving the way for more players into this game, under the backing of market force, it is hoped that the match can end without going into extra time – in favor of purity and fairness.

*The data and figures are extracted from the article 'All Doped Up – and going for the Gold', News Analysis, Scientific American, May 2000. Written by Glenn Zorpette.*

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