

RUNNING MAN — CHEAT OR SCAPEGOAT?

Nowhere do the moral fires burn brighter than over drug 'cheating' in sport. But the issue is not as black and white as campaigners would like.

Campaigners against the use of drugs to improve sporting performance argue in simplistic, crusading terms, but there is a case for saying that these arguments do not justify the restrictions proposed. Behind the emotion generated by the issue may be an attempt to compensate for Britain's loss of sporting prestige as well as concern over the tarnishing of sport's image as a healthy alternative to drug abuse.

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ALL AUTHORITATIVE voices in sport are unequivocal in their condemnation of the use of drugs to enhance performance; the Government, as represented by Colin Moynihan, the Sports Minister; organisations such as the Sports Council and the International Olympic Committee (IOC); and star athletes like Sebastian Coe (also vice-chair of the Sports Council) and Carl Lewis.¹

Their beliefs are expressed with a zeal that is almost religious in its intensity. As an anti-drugs crusade, it mirrors the 'Just Say No' campaign in that not only is it deliberately simplistic, but it brooks no critical examination. Dr Richard Nicholson of the Institute of Medical Ethics has been condemned by Sebastian Coe as "the doctor who promotes drug abuse"² for daring to challenge the anti-drugs orthodoxy in the institute's bulletin in 1987.³

Such an attitude of 'If you're not for us, you're against us' stifles serious debate and reduces the issue of drugs and society once again to the level of propaganda and rhetoric.

Recently published health education material on the dangers of steroids similarly retards progress by taking us back to ineffective 'shock horror' drug education.⁴ Far from protecting athletes, the anti-drug movement has helped create a climate of fear and mutual distrust between athletes, officials and sports organisations, fuelled by the less responsible sectors of the popular press.

In his alter ego as Richard Bachman, Stephen King wrote a futuristic story about a gladiatorial-style game show called *The Running Man*. Specially selected contestants win a fortune by outwitting a team of trained killers: the price of defeat is death. Arnold Schwarzenegger played the lead in the film version; it would hardly spoil the ending to reveal that he wins through. Jeff Gutteridge, Ben Johnson and others have not been so lucky. For 'death', read 'character assassination'.

The campaign against drugs in sport has fast become a vendetta against the athletes

themselves; there are calls for 'hit squads' armed with permanent entry visas to IOC-affiliated countries, authorised to do out-of-competition random drug testing.

Nobody seriously endorses or promotes the use of drugs to improve performance. The issue is not whether such use is a 'good' or a 'bad' thing — but whether it is sufficiently bad in a way that could justify the authorities' reaction to it. Irrespective of who is ultimately 'right' or 'wrong', when somebody's livelihood, their civil liberties, even their whole life motivation is at stake, it just isn't good enough for policy to be determined by sloganeering. Questions have to be asked.

Flawed crusade

Doubtless steroids have caused health and emotional problems. But a dispassionate investigation by a group not embroiled in sports — the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs — concluded the problem was not of the kind that called for Misuse of Drugs Act controls.

However, the universality and power of the condemnation appears to have made it politically inevitable that such advice would be disregarded in favour of the prime symbol of society's determination to act against steroid 'misuse' — controlling the drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act.⁵

Other commentators have argued that if drugtaking is cheating, then so is the uneven access athletes have to special training facilities, medical help, dietary advice, and so on.⁶ The case for the panoply of controls and sanctions sport is mustering against its own drug 'cheats' can arguably be shown to be full of holes.

As far as the drugs themselves are concerned, several commentators have highlighted what might politely be termed 'inconsistencies' on the part of the IOC in determining which drugs are banned and which permitted.⁷ A few examples will suffice.

Anabolic steroids are banned, but corticosteroids are not. Yet corticosteroids

given as painkilling injections are used to enable athletes, footballers, etc to compete when they would otherwise have been sidelined. But for painkilling injections, Peter Elliott would not have been running in the 1500 metres final in Seoul.⁸ Set against the short-term benefit to player and/or team must be the long-term consequences of repeatedly competing when injured. A recent television documentary told of a retired footballer now hobbling around on sticks as a result of playing when he should have been watching.

One could argue that painkillers only ensure you can take part, not make you perform better — they are 'enabling' rather than 'enhancing' drugs. So if 'enabling' drugs are allowed, why is pseudoephedrine, found in cold remedies, banned? The intensity of training makes sportspeople particularly vulnerable to viruses of all kinds — cold remedies containing pseudoephedrine may well *enable* an athlete to compete. But pseudoephedrine is also a stimulant which *could* enhance performance. True, but so is caffeine, which is only banned in high doses, whereas pseudoephedrine is banned in any quantity.

Betablockers, used for heart conditions and sometimes taken by sportspeople who need a steady hand and eye and calm nerves (as in shooting, snooker, etc), are banned, but alcohol, used for precisely the same reasons, is not.

It seems clear that in the headlong rush to be 'seen to be doing something', the IOC's list of banned drugs is anomalous and to a large extent reflects society's double standards on drugs in general.

The sub-text

The movement against drugs in sport has an emotional charge behind it that itself needs explaining — just why are people getting so upset?

"Deviant activities, even though they may have no direct effect on the interests of those who observe them, may be condemned because they represent concrete examples of individuals ... dodging the rules. For if a person lives by a code of conduct which forbids certain pleasures, which involves the deferring of gratifica-

"We consider this [doping] to be the most shameful abuse of the Olympic ideal; we call for the life ban of offending athletes; we call for the life ban of coaches and the so-called doctors who administer this evil."
— Sebastian Coe, 1981.

tion in certain areas, it is hardly surprising that he will react strongly against those whom he sees to be taking short cuts."⁹

So said sociologist Jock Young back in 1971, highlighting the Protestant work ethic's role in condemning recreational drug use as 'unearned pleasure'. Ben Johnson was attacked in a similar vein — he'd taken a 'short cut' to athletic success, consequently his 'pleasure' at winning the gold medal was 'unearned'.

If this is the sub-text of the moral outrage, then it is singularly inappropriate in sport. Taking steroids as an example, all the medical evidence suggests that only those already undergoing an intensive long-term training regime coupled with special diets will derive any 'benefit' from these drugs in terms of enhanced performance and the ability to undergo even more gruelling training sessions.¹⁰ Success under these conditions is hardly 'unearned'.

A sub-text more specific to the role of sport in society may also be in operation. The anti-drugs campaign in sport is being

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lumped together with the campaign against drug misuse in society in general. The difference may be that this is one battle some think can be won through the kind of surveillance tactics against athletes 'at work' that would not be tolerated in other work situations.

But an essential element in the campaign against drugs in sport is the argument that sport should be regarded as an integral part of society. Why, then, is it not also subject to the same constraints on breaches of civil liberties that operate elsewhere in society?

Also the public presentation of sport as contaminated by drug abuse risks undermining the campaign against drugs in general. Sport's image has been almost the antithesis of the anti-drugs campaign's portrayal of drug misuse — sport as a healthy, constructive, *truly* satisfying activity, as opposed to an illusory and ultimately destructive gratification. Indeed, sport is among those 'approved' sources of excitement put forward as alternatives to divert young people from drugs. That the alternative itself should

now be seen to be riddled with drugs must be galling.

Not only this, but Ben Johnson proved 'drugs' *can* go along with success and fitness at the highest level. Even if he'd died from steroids the next day, he would still have been the fastest man in the world. Government ads attempting to prevent drug misuse by associating it with physical decay and failure can hardly be reinforced by this competing message.

Lost innocence

At a deeper level, perhaps athletes are being scapegoated for sport's 'loss of innocence' at the hands of multinational sponsorship. We hear much talk from sports organisations about how drugtaking corrupts the ideals of sport. But it is these same bodies who, in selling sport to corporate interests, have created an environment where the rewards for winning are staggering.

It could be argued that sport itself has corrupted the ideal that what counts is 'not the winning, but the taking part'. The crowds *are* only interested in winners and to the *winner* goes the spoils of victory — large sums of money to endorse products and turn up at prestige meetings.

Commercialisation of sport has meant that fractions of a second or of a centimetre determine not only who is famous, but also who is rich and set for life. Is it any wonder athletes will do anything to find that tiny bit extra that could make all the difference?

Perhaps too, by taking the lead in the crusade against drugs in sport, Britain is trying to compensate for loss of prestige in international sport and in the wider political arena. As George Orwell observed, sport is surrogate war and has always been a reflection of a nation's place in the world. The fact that Britain all too often loses this war is more comfortably explained by drug cheating by the opposition than by looking at sporting investment and opportunities at home.

In the 'good old days', Britain trumpeted the cause of fair play and sportsmanship from a position of strength, both in politics and in sport. We had an Empire, we invented many of the sports being played, and our success at these sports was the best possible advert for the British way of life, a manifest justification for the fact that great tracts of the atlas were coloured pink.

IN THE LONDON Olympics of 1908, Britain won more gold medals than in the whole period 1928-1988 inclusive. It is probably no coincidence that in the modern era America and the Soviet Union dominate the world both in the political *and* the sporting arenas. If Britain were as successful now as we were over half a century ago, would we be trying to capture the moral high ground of world opinion about drug-taking in sport? ■

1. See for example Moynihan C and Coe S. *The misuse of drugs in sport*. London: Department of the Environment, 1987.

2. Quoted in *Sunday Observer*, 9 October 1988.

3. Institute of Medical Ethics. *Drugs in sport: a reappraisal*. *IME Bulletin*: 1987, suppl. no.7, p.1-25.

4. See, for example, Sports Council. *Dying to win*, 1987.

5. *Druglink*: 1988, 3(6), p.5.

6. Institute of Medical Ethics, op cit.

7. eg, Collier J. "Drugs in sport: a counsel of perfection thwarted by reality." *British Medical Journal*: 1988, 296, p.520.

Foot N. *Banning drugs in sport: a skeptical view*. Hastings Center Report: 1986, August, p.5-10.

8. Letter to *Glasgow Herald*, 30 September 1988, quoting Peter Elliott as saying: "I don't really want cortisone but this is the Olympics. I'll try anything to make the start line."

9. Young J. *The drugtakers: the social meaning of drug use*. London: Paladin, 1971, p.96.

10. Shapiro H. "Steroids." *Druglink*, 4(6), p.13-14.