

The Sporting Participant's Perspective

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During the 1970s, when East Germany reigned as the world's most successful sporting nation, a number of athletes and officials debated the reliability of international drug testing procedures. The athletes of Eastern bloc countries, particularly the female swimmers and track and field athletes of East Germany, became almost invincible. Their extraordinary performances were so remarkable that many world records set during those days still stand unchallenged as a reminder of the outstanding combination of sporting talent and performance enhancement by science. However, the revelations of the last decade have now confirmed that East German sport was administered by an unscrupulous regime which saw the use of drugs as a legitimate means of sport enhancement.

An East German programme of drug taking, scientifically regulated and clinically controlled, was politically endorsed for almost two decades. During this time, young athletes were carefully selected, expertly trained and chemically modified to set dozens of world records and win unprecedented numbers of Olympic medals. By so doing, the politicians and scientists of the Communist Bloc identified feats of such athleticism as the means to win the admiration and respect of the rest of the world.

Twenty years on and with images of East German sporting dominance still fresh in the minds of many, another sporting nation seems set to follow a parallel course of competitive drug misuse. Despite proclamations that there was more than just a passing coincidence between the events of the 70s and current trends, little official action has been spontaneously taken by international sports federations. There are no prizes for guessing that China has assumed the mantle of the world's most drug-boosted sports nation. China's swimmers won a sackful of gold medals at the 1995 World Championships in Rome where over 150 tests were conducted under the auspices of the International Swimming Federation (FINA). Members of the FINA Medical Committee ensured that these tests were carried out in accordance with IOC regulations but clever masking procedures ensured that all Chinese competitors were clean. Despite the concerns voiced by the international swimming coaches present in Rome and clinical features in the Chinese women which were reminiscent of their former East German counterparts, no further inquiry was undertaken by FINA.

In the intervening two months, as China prepared its athletes for the Asian Games in Hiroshima, an unexpected out-of-competition test was carried out and ten Chinese athletes including gold medallists and world record-holders from Rome returned positive results. As a result, the combined opinion of Canada, USA, New Zealand and Australia has denied China from competing at the Pan-Pacific Swimming Meet in Atlanta later this year. The future of China's participation in the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games must surely rest in the balance.

It is clear that current testing procedures, although reliable for the majority of substances identified as performance enhancing, are still deficient in cases where sophisticated masking techniques and the new generation of peptide hormones are used in competition. The most effective deterrent to drug misuse is the simple act of out-of-competition testing. Without notification, any competitive athlete must expect to be tested. There can be no room for complaints of intrusion or invasion of privacy. Above all else, athletes demand an even playing field, and this is the personal price they must pay to ensure that cheating is eradicated.

When Ben Johnson returned home in disgrace from the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, the uninitiated were made aware that organised drug misuse was present at the very top. Johnson was part of a triad which included his coach Charlie Francis and physician Jamie Astaphan, both of whom stood to gain from the success of their protégé. To be effective, any system of judgement must acknowledge that there are often other guilty parties. To provide sufficient deterrent, all those complicit with the misuse of drugs in sport must be penalised.

The monitoring of drug misuse presents sports administrators with their greatest dilemma. From the perspective of the participant, any protocol for testing must be both consistent and reliable. Only then will the sports arena be maintained as a venue for athletes to match their physical prowess rather than a scientific forum for biochemists to compare their skills.