

Locating the Line Between Acceptable Performance Enhancement and Cheating

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Regulating authorities in the sports world and the public need to recognize what all athletes striving to be their best have learned early in their careers, that everything they do to prepare for competition is with the hope that it will enhance their performance.

In this age of information and technology, athletes are very knowledgeable about all possible means of performance enhancement that are available. They know exactly what their peers are doing to prepare for competition, and what seems to be the most successful.

Most of these are legitimate practices to improve performance. They include practices such as:

- Endurance training.
- Weight training.
- Massages.
- Anti-inflammatory medications such as aspirin, ibuprofen, and naproxen.
- Asthma medications and other medicines that may or may not treat sports related ailments. Sometimes these medications need to be approved by a regulating authority and their medical needs must be confirmed by a physician.
- Surgeries for muscle-skeletal problems.
- Altitude training.
- Skill-development training.
- Flexibility training.

Of course, besides these legitimate and accepted practices, and regardless of their indulgence of such practices, athletes are equally aware of non-legitimate practices such as doping and other prohibited practices.

Any athlete that has a great desire to be his or her best will do whatever it takes within his or her own value system. This often becomes very difficult for an athlete when he or she realizes that by sticking with one's values that they may put themselves at a distinct disadvantage when competing against others with different or looser values.

There are three broad groups of athletes that emerge when examining how athletes deal with this dilemma.

At one end of the spectrum is the group that has no values that conflict with doing whatever it takes to succeed, whether or not it is within the rules.

Going to the far end of the spectrum are the athletes whose values are so strong that they will not engage in any conduct which is outside of the rules or that they consider unethical or unfair. These athletes would rather lose than succeed by what they consider to be cheating.

In between these two groups, is a middle group of athletes. These athletes may have started out in the group with high values that follows the rules, but have become disillusioned over time and have drifted towards the middle. They have tried perhaps for years to compete

within the rules but have become frustrated with the apparent ease that cheaters are able to beat the system. They feel that national governing bodies and regulating authorities are not doing everything possible to stamp out doping, but are merely making a public relations effort to appear to be doing so. They believe that those authorities are not really interested in solving the problem, but only in protecting the image of their respective sport and the money flowing into that sport from corporate sponsors. Eventually they get to the point where they believe that they are really the only ones that are losing out by staying clean and that they subsequently have no choice but also to dope if they are to remain competitive.

I feel very fortunate that when I was competing and was the World Record holder in the marathon during the early 1980's that I was not faced with this hard choice that current athletes have to make.

I, naively, did not know the extent of doping in athletics and believed that it was a problem primarily in the sprint and weight events, as compared to distance running, where muscular power rather than endurance and cardiovascular ability is crucial to an athletes' success. Other than blood doping, which was rumored to have been used successfully by the Finns, there were not any prohibited practices or doping methods that were clearly beneficial for distance runners, or I did not know about them.

I often wonder how I would handle this problem now. I hope that my religious upbringing and the values instilled by parents, teachers and coaches would keep me from using doping methods. My desire to win, no matter what the physical pain I had to endure, would be very hard to ignore in the current age where many athletes feel it is impossible to be competitive against the best in the world without doping. I believe that it is currently difficult to be among the top 5 in the world in any of the distance events without using EPO or Human Growth Hormone. While some of the top athletes may be clean, so many athletes are running so fast that their performances are suspect. This is compounded for me by the fact that the times these athletes are running just happen to coincide exactly with what top exercise physiologists have calculated taking EPO would produce.

I would like to make it clear that I in no way condone doping and am glad I never felt forced to seriously consider doing it, but I can definitely understand how a good moral person might feel compelled to do so. That person might not even consider it cheating if they believe all their top competitors are doing it.

This is similar to athletes taking appearance fees and prize monies prior to it being allowed by the governing bodies. It was against the rules, but everyone did it because they knew the rules were a sham and that everyone else was doing it. If an athlete didn't take the money 20 years ago, he was the only one to lose out because the money would just remain with the race director or whomever.

If an athlete in this day believes that by staying clean he or she is relegating himself/herself to an at best 7th or 8th place performance in the Olympics, they may question whether it is really worth doing all that training. Purists might say that they could look at themselves in the mirror years later and be proud about having stayed clean. A skeptic might say that they

might be bitter about it, and feel that it was not worth it, that drug testing was all for show and they never really meant to stamp out doping and other prohibited practices. If they had doped on the other hand they would have competed on a level playing field and would not have had any unfair advantage over those other top finishers that were doping. Sure there would be others that finished way back that did not dope, but they too had no chance or winning without doping.

Again, there are some athletes that will dope and do whatever it takes legitimate or not to succeed. There are some which will only do what is strictly legitimate and within the rules. Finally, there are those in the middle, which do not want to dope but feel they have no choice if they are to be competitive. They wish that doping could be completely stamped out by methods such as blood testing but see a lack of real conviction by governing bodies and regulating authorities to do so.

Another area of possible doubt and confusion for athletes looking for all possible legitimate means to enhance their performance, is the rapidly growing sports supplement and vitamins industry. While vitamins, protein powders, etc. have been used by athletes for decades, there is now a huge industry aimed at producing supplements which are touted to provide some of the beneficial effects of banned substances, while being natural and legal. Often their substances are made of natural ingredients but have been prepared in an unnatural way. For instance, rather than taking banned hormones, there are new supplements called pro-hormones, which are precursors to those hormones. By taking them, an athlete theoretically can produce more of the final hormone they want.

There are different herbs and substances that are supposed to stimulate one's own hormone production to be greater than normal. Sometimes their products will have a disclaimer stating that use of the product can lead to a positive test, or sometimes they will state that it will not. If an athlete called the USOC Drug Hotline to ask if a substance is on the banned list, they will ask the athlete his or her name and tell the athlete yes or no. Often they will ask the athlete what it is supposed to do, at which point the athlete is told the substance is illegal if it affects their hormone status and accordingly gives them an unfair advantage. Once again everything an athlete does is to gain an advantage and enhance their performance. I ran 130 miles a week when a lot of my competitors only ran 110-120 miles a week because I felt it gave me a competitive advantage over them.

Diet and nutrition is an integral part of an athlete's training program, and it is generally accepted that it is not possible to get all the nutrients an athlete needs to train at the required level from eating only regular food. In order to recover adequately from strenuous workouts, prevent injury, and ward off sickness, athletes believe that they must take supplements. At what point do these supplements cross the line and too closely resemble or mimic a banned substance? This is a very gray area that needs much clarification.

For those athletes in the middle that feel they can not compete any more with athletes that are doping, these supplements may present an alternative to doping. Their rationale for using them may simply be that if it is "natural" and not on the banned list, "I'm going to use it because I know a lot of my competitors are using much more powerful banned substances."

One last area which needs to be examined with regard to athletes and the moral dilemmas they often face when trying to enhance their performance, is the treatment of legitimate medical needs with banned substances.

If the true aim of drug testing is to insure the health of athletes, then there should be greater flexibility in allowing athletes with a medical condition that requires medical treatment to be treated with the drug of choice for that condition regardless of whether or not it is banned.

For example some male athletes that had to have a testicle removed have been allowed to receive testosterone replacement therapy and still compete.

Any competent physician can tell you that hypo-gonadism and other conditions often require treatment that is banned by governing bodies. In the case of hypo-gonadism, which results in low testosterone levels, the vast majority of patients receiving that treatment have not had a testicle removed. Years and years of heavy endurance training is known to result in low hormonal levels for many athletes that should be treated, but yet these athletes are basically told that if they wish to still compete they can not be treated in the best manner for their health.

Some type of program needs to be set up to allow athletes with legitimate medical needs to be treated correctly while still ensuring that they gain no unfair advantage over their competition.

Since athletes will do whatever they can within their moral values to be the best they can be, there must be a clearly defined line between acceptable performance enhancement and cheating. This line can not be hazy and athletes must be notified immediately when any changes are made to that line.

The line has to be set in a way that is consistent with some acceptable view of the reasons for doping control and with the moral values of the majority, and can be justified based on these considerations. All substances or practices that are banned must be contrary to those reasons for doping control and values. If there is insufficient valid scientific evidence or proof to back-up a substances inclusion on the banned list, it should not be.

Also it should be clearly shown and demonstrated why taking those banned substances is considered cheating either because it provides an unfair advantage combined with a health risk that other athletes should not be forced to take or because it provides a short cut that other athletes may not have available to them.

Placing substances on the banned list should be reserved for those substances that can be scientifically proven to be dangerous or provide an unfair advantage. Placing too many substances on the list dilutes the deterrent effect of the list because athletes become skeptical and suspicious of the reasoning or the arguments against using certain substances.

Athletes need to be told the truth about the dangers of doping without exaggeration or dubious arguments and statistics, and equally important, why it is ethically wrong to cheat. They need to be educated why taking a certain substance is cheating and be given the

scientific evidence to back that up. Some may argue that this will only teach more athletes how to cheat, but it is clearly evident that the present system, built on a vague delineation between legitimate performance enhancement and cheating, needs to be overhauled. No system built on misinformation or faulty science will stand the test of time. Hopefully, we still have some time left to save athletes from the doping menace.