

8-4-1998

## Legalizing Performance-Enhancing Drugs

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### Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Legalizing Performance-Enhancing Drugs" (1998). *On Sport and Society*. 165.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/165>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
AUGUST 4, 1998

By the time the remaining riders rolled down the Champs-Elysees Sunday afternoon, this year's Tour de France had become the Tour de Drugs, an international pharmacology festival. What should have been the continuation of the French national celebration over the World Cup, turned into a shameful display of rule violations, poor sportsmanship, and police tactics worthy of a banana republic. Some writers were calling it the Tour de Farce.

The one good thing that this year's Tour has done is bring the discussion of drug use in sport to the forefront internationally. My fear is that the end result will be harsher treatment for drug users, thus addressing the symptoms but the not the real problem. At same time the international track and field community is confronted with the fact that two Americans are facing banns for the use of performance enhancing drugs. Dennis Mitchell is facing a two year ban for high levels of testosterone, and Randy Barnes is facing a lifetime ban as a two-time violator. Barnes tested positive for a banned nutritional supplement that naturally increases the body's testosterone production. Barnes claims he did not know the substance, which can be purchased over the counter in any health food store, was banned. Some International Amateur Athletic Federation officials have no idea when that substance was added to the list, but they believe it happened in the past year, so Barnes' story may have some credibility.

As for the Tour de France it was apparently awash with drugs as the cars of trainers and team vehicles had the appearance of those of a medical salesman. Festina, the first team to go out, was expelled after their trainer's car failed to clear customs. Before the end of the Tour four other teams had pulled out of the race, and five riders admitted that they had been using banned substances and several more teams and riders are still under investigation.

There is nothing particularly new in all of this. Major drug scandals have plagued international sport for decades now, and there is a sort of international competition that has developed between the users and the detectors. Generally the users have won this competition and undetected drug use has become a given. Masking agents and techniques have generally stayed ahead of the technologies of detection and some feel the gap is widening.

The question of course is what to do about it. Inevitably there are calls for stricter enforcement and harsher punishment. But these have been tried for the last few decades and neither seems to make much difference.

In a rare show of courage, or perhaps just exasperation, the head of the IOC Juan Antonio Samaranch called for better definitions of what constitutes doping, and for a reduction of the number of banned substances to only those which are a danger to the health of the athlete. Of course in some cases the consequences and dangers of a drug are not known for years.

Samaranch's suggestions have already attracted the ire of many IOC barons and other international sporting officials who say that such a move would be a sign of weakness, whatever that means.

More realistic would be a policy that does not ban those drugs that are obvious health hazards, and then we would see just how driven the world class athletes are to gather in the cash and glory.

This is a cruel thought, but then the latest performance enhancing drug available to men around the world, Viagra, has already taken the lives of several men who were willing to risk their health for performance enhancement on a very different field of play. There is no evidence that these deaths have caused any drop in demand and no likelihood the drug will be banned.

It has seemed to me that the only way to deal with this drug problem, if it really is a problem, is to declare it not to be a problem. Open the competition to any and all performance enhancing drugs.

This would not be qualitatively much different than the training regimens and applications of technology, which already dominate the sporting scene. For the past several decades science and technology have been employed in the enhancement of performance. Training techniques have been studied and modified to cut that tenth of second here or there off the time or increase endurance by a micro-percentage. The entire academic and research field of human kinetics has grown, like the cancer it is, over the past three decades as the search for the winning edge has reached absurd proportions.

The arrival of the computer has allowed for a closer examination of human movement and the impact of technologies on sporting activities of all kinds. Even the average duffer can go down to the local mall and have their golf swing dissected by computer technology. The technologies of golf clubs and tennis rackets, balls of all sorts, shoes and other equipment have become crucial in sport. These advances have not come to serve the consumer, although they ultimately reach the marketplace; they have been developed to serve the elite athletes of the world to get the infinitesimal edge in the competitive world. Then they are spun off to the consumer market.

Each day and each week on the auto racing circuit the mechanics and engineers are working feverishly to get that one-one hundredth of a percentage of horsepower advantage or fuel efficiency over their competitors. At the same time and in the same way those who work with the human machine are involved in similar pursuits; fine tuning those machines to run faster, jump higher, endure longer.

It should be added that the results of these developments have been to test or stretch the human body beyond its limits, and have often resulted in long term damage to the body. There are countless athletes who die young or suffer in their old age as a result of their over-exertion in athletics, an over-exertion done in the search for the winning edge. This is all done in the name of sport.

Indeed the stakes have become so high in the minds of those who compete and those who use them to sell merchandise to the public, that they are willing to risk health and even a few years of their life to achieve the cash and glory.

So what would be substantively different if all drugs were utilized in sport? Would it not be just another technological application of the performance enhancement ethos? Isn't this what we already have in the legal enhancement areas of applied technology?

In the end individuals would be forced to make decisions about the balance between risk and reward, and in the process we should get a very good read on just how mad the world of sport has become, and how far from sport we have been removed by the drive for cash and glory.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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