



## French speaking athletes' experience and perception regarding the whereabouts reporting system and therapeutic use exemptions



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### ABSTRACT

The introduction of two anti-doping measures by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) directly affects athletes lives: obligatory whereabouts reporting with the Anti-Doping Administration and Management System (ADAMS), and recorded applications for Therapeutic Use Exemption (TUE). French-speaking elite athletes ( $N = 69$ ) from France, Belgium and Switzerland responded to a web-based questionnaire about their perceptions and experiences under these two measures. The results showed a strong ambivalence towards the whereabouts system. Though 94% considered it necessary, and accepted it as part of an athlete's duties, 34% considered that it infringed too much on their private life, 54% felt that it reduced the pleasure of being an athlete, 74% felt to be under surveillance, 54% found it too time-consuming, 57% encountered technical hurdles, and 58% perceived its application between different countries and sports as unequal and unfair. Many athletes did not like the testing procedures and more than half felt that it causes anxiety. Trust in the system's capacity to detect doping in athletes was partial (83% of athletes under the whereabouts system trusted it, and 60% of athletes not under the system trusted it). Concerning the management of TUEs, 49% of athletes had low trust in their management by authorities, 47% suspected abuse by fellow athletes and 46% had refrained from medically justified treatment. Our findings suggest considerable dissatisfaction with the whereabouts system and TUE among French-speaking athletes. We conclude that there is a need to improve on the above aspects in order to increase athletes' satisfaction and adherence to WADA's anti-doping policies.

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### 1. Introduction

Vocal anti-doping sentiment started half-heartedly in the 1960s, but was not accompanied by serious anti-doping measures, and doping tests were merely symbolic (Dimeo, 2008; Houlihan, 2004). After the Festina affair in 1998, the International Olympic Committee fostered the idea of harmonizing, globalising and intensifying anti-doping efforts. This led to the inception of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) in 1999. Since then, athlete surveillance for anti-doping purposes has progressively been intensified. WADA's anti-doping policy is outlined in the World Anti-Doping Code (the Code), which defines what doping is and what anti-doping measures are to be used to prevent doping (WADA, 2015).

One important aspect of modern anti-doping is the whereabouts rule, introduced in 2004 to facilitate out-of-competition urine and/or blood controls with no advance notice. This rule obliges a pool of elite athletes, selected by their international federation or national anti-doping organisation, to report their whereabouts. The athletes have to give precise information about their home address, training times and venues, training camps, travel plans, competition schedule and any disability which might affect the control process (WADA, 2015).

To aid in the gathering of localisation data, WADA created in 2005 the Anti-Doping Administration and Management System (ADAMS), a web-based database management system, with four functions. First, the whereabouts reporting, allowing athletes to submit and modify their whereabouts information from any place in the world with an Internet connection. Second, an information centre where the various laboratory results, therapeutic use exemptions (TUE), and violations of anti-doping rules are stored. Third, a database enabling the planning, coordination and initiation of controls, avoiding repetition. The fourth function facilitates

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online management of TUE requests, and online notification to those involved in the process. In 2009, the whereabouts system was revised and the obligations for athletes selected in the pool were extended. The main changes obliged athletes to provide more detailed information on where they will train, work, compete or conduct any regular activity in the upcoming three months, and to indicate their availability for urine and/or blood sampling one specific hour per day, at a specific location (WADA, 2015). Any missed control – because the athlete failed to give the correct whereabouts information or was not present at the location he/she was supposed to be – is subject to a warning. Three warnings in a period of 12 consecutive months (reduced from 18 months in 2015) constitute a doping offence, punishable by a ban from competition for up to two years.

The obligation of elite athletes to provide information about their whereabouts on a daily basis is a controversial and debated element of the Code. It has been criticised by researchers, well-known athletes and athlete's organisations (Kayser, Mauron, & Miah, 2007; Møller, 2011; Overbye & Wagner, 2014; Waddington, 2010). Furthermore, a few studies have investigated athletes' perception and experience with the whereabouts system in Norway (Hanstad, Skille, & Loland, 2010; Hanstad, Skille, & Thurston, 2009), the Netherlands (Valkenburg, de Hon, & van Hilvoorde, 2014), in Denmark (Overbye & Wagner, 2014) and with TUEs in Denmark (Overbye & Wagner, 2013). These studies suggest that elite athletes in principle approve of anti-doping testing and accept the whereabouts rules as part of their duty, but are critical of the whereabouts system's managerial aspects. Waddington (2010, p. 269) noted that "given that athletes are commonly considered to be the main beneficiaries of anti-doping policies, both in terms of protecting their health and in terms of ensuring a level playing field for all athletes, WADA might have expected that athletes generally [...] would have welcomed the new whereabouts system as a step towards achieving those goals." However, these studies suggest that elite athletes' perceptions of the whereabouts system are ambivalent. This could be an obstacle to furthering anti-doping efforts, as athletes need to be engaged in the process.

The aim of our study was to investigate the perception of current anti-doping procedures, specifically the whereabouts system and TUE management, among elite French-speaking athletes, and to compare their opinion with those expressed in aforementioned studies. We invited a convenience sample of French-speaking elite athletes with and without whereabouts obligations to reply to an anonymous web-based questionnaire, in order to investigate their opinion on current anti-doping procedures, their attitudes, beliefs and trust in the whereabouts system. Athletes who belonged to a testing pool were asked about their experience with the whereabouts system. We further investigated how athletes use and perceive TUE. We used an existing questionnaire to enable comparison of results with a Danish study (Elbe & Overbye, 2014; Overbye & Wagner, 2013, 2014). We aimed at contributing more information around athletes' perceptions of the TUE-system as only one other study has explored this topic, and to fill in some of the gaps in knowledge around French speaking athletes' responses to the whereabouts system, experiences during a test, and TUEs.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Procedure

We used an online questionnaire<sup>1</sup> based on the questionnaires from the Danish study on whereabouts (Overbye & Wagner, 2014),

TUEs (Overbye & Wagner, 2013) and athletes' experiences during a urine doping control (Elbe & Overbye, 2014). The questionnaire was obtained from the authors of the Danish study and translated into French. We tested the questionnaire first with eight athletes in order to verify that the questions conveyed the correct meaning and made some necessary changes. Questions were formulated in a neutral way. No specific technique to quantify response bias was used. Under Swiss legislation, given the nature of the study, formal ethical approval was not necessary. Athletes were free to participate and the questionnaire was anonymous.

### 2.2. Questionnaire

The questionnaire included 28 questions grouped into seven themes: Opinion on current anti-doping procedures; Experience with the whereabouts system for athletes in the whereabouts pool; Attitudes and beliefs about the whereabouts system; Level of trust in the whereabouts system; Experience with TUE; Influence of TUE regulations on any use of prohibited substances permitted by a TUE; Trust in the way official bodies manage TUEs. Answers were given on a four-point scale ranging from "Corresponds completely" to "Does not correspond at all". In addition, there was an "I do not know" category. Each theme allowed for comments to be submitted, and a final open question encouraged suggestions for improvement of current anti-doping controls.

### 2.3. Participants

Invitations to participate in the survey and to fill out the questionnaire were sent out to French-speaking elite athletes from different countries (France, Switzerland, Belgium; and medium-size European countries allowing comparison with other studies) via e-mail and by word of mouth, using contacts in national sports federations, sports physicians, physiotherapists, coaches, trainers and athletes. We targeted athletes aged over 16 years who had been tested for doping before and/or who belonged to a registered testing pool. We counted on a "snowball effect" to gather additional participants. The data collection started on February 3, 2014 and ended on May 11, 2014. Several email reminders were sent.

### 2.4. Data-analysis

Findings were presented in terms of descriptive statistics, reporting the percentage of athletes agreeing or disagreeing with specific statements. Free comments and answers to the open questions were transcribed as quotes and were used to complement or reinforce the quantitative results. They are presented as illustrative comments of the types of issues preoccupying the athletes, and not as representative of the group of respondents.

## 3. Results

We recruited 69 athletes, 28 of them women (41%). Because of our recruitment strategy we could not calculate a response rate. Half of the respondents belonged to the registered testing pool ( $n = 35$ ). The respondents chose from a list of age ranges: 17–18 yrs ( $n = 3$ ), 18–23 yrs ( $n = 26$ ), 24–30 yrs ( $n = 30$ ) and >30 yrs ( $n = 10$ ). 49% were French ( $n = 33$ ), 43% Belgian ( $n = 30$ ), and 9% Swiss ( $n = 6$ ). 59% ( $n = 40$ ) of the athletes were involved in an endurance sport (road cycling, mountain biking, athletics, swimming, ski-mountaineering or cross-country skiing), 22% ( $n = 15$ ) a muscular or sprint sport (weight-lifting, kayaking, tennis, rowing and sailing), 9% ( $n = 6$ ) a martial sport (judo, wrestling), 6% ( $n = 4$ ) a team sport (basketball, volleyball) and 4% ( $n = 3$ ) a precision sport (fencing, shooting, archery). In our study 48% ( $n = 33$ ) of the respondents declared having been tested between 1–3 times, 20% ( $n = 14$ ) 4–6 times; and 10%

<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire can be obtained upon request from the authors.

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