



Doping control in sport: An investigation of how elite athletes perceive and trust the functioning of the doping testing system in their sport



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ABSTRACT

Doping testing is a key component enforced by anti-doping authorities to detect and deter doping in sport. Policy is developed to protect athletes' right to participate in doping-free sport; and testing is a key tool to secure this right. Accordingly, athletes' responses to anti-doping efforts are important. This article explores how the International Standards for Testing, which face different interpretations and challenges when policy is implemented, are perceived by elite athletes. Particularly, this article aims to investigate how elite athletes perceive the functioning of the testing system (i.e., the efforts of stakeholders involved in testing) in their own sport both nationally and worldwide. Moreover, it seeks to identify whether specific factors such as previous experience of testing and perceived proximity of doping have an impact on athletes' perceptions of the testing system. The study comprises a web-based questionnaire ($N=645$; response rate 43%) and uses qualitative findings to elaborate on and explain quantitative results. Results showed that two-thirds of the athletes reported the national testing programme in their sport to be appropriate. A majority of the athletes who had an opinion on the subject regarded testing programmes in some countries as not extensive enough or believed that in certain countries doping control was downgraded to win medals. Past experience of testing seemed to have a positive influence on trust in the concrete measures; however, if athletes experienced flaws during the control procedures, this could increase distrust and cause worry. The proximity of doping in an athlete's sport influenced the athlete's perception of the testing system. Particularly, athletes who need the testing system to be effective and to function well across the world show greater distrust of or dissatisfaction with the current testing system. The athletes' diverging views indicate that contemporary anti-doping policy is simultaneously met with support, (dis)trust and frustration. By integrating the views and experiences of Danish elite athletes, this study confirms that the current testing system is confronted with obstacles, and it contributes knowledge about some of the challenges WADA faces when policy is implemented. Implications of results and recommendations for anti-doping authorities are outlined in the paper.

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1. Introduction

The establishment of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) in 1999, and particularly the implementation of the first World Anti-Doping Code in 2004 (WADA, 2003), marked the beginning of a process of intensification, harmonisation and standardisation of anti-doping rules and efforts worldwide. The WADA Code outlined the mutual responsibilities of national and international sports federations and national governments, and thus provided a comprehensive basis for joint efforts against prohibited substances and methods in elite sport worldwide. Doping testing is one of the five main international harmonisation strategies that operate in conjunction with the Code (WADA, 2011a) and a key component of current anti-doping strategies to detect and deter doping in sport. Current anti-doping policy seems more efficient than the former testing regimes (see Section 1.1). However, Houlihan (2014) points out that a major challenge currently undermining anti-doping efforts is related to lack of commitment among a number of important governments and International Federations (IFs) and, moreover, that treating signatories' adherence to rules and their formal implementation as evidence of compliance is misleading. That the current testing regime is indeed facing challenges was confirmed in a recent report prepared for the WADA executive committee in which a number of observed weaknesses in the system were outlined explaining why current testing regimes lack effectiveness. These pertained, for example, to a lack of commitment among some stakeholders, differing standards of compliance and other flaws (WADA, 2013).

Athletes' perceptions of the functioning of the testing system in their sport may influence their views on its deterrent effect, as well as their trust in and support of the system as a whole. Although rules will be enacted and enforced regardless of athletes' perceptions of the efforts, anti-doping authorities depend on the athletes' support and trust in order to prevent doping efficiently in elite sport and to legitimise the rather extensive anti-doping programme. Additionally, athletes' responses to policy must be considered because the policy involves all athletes and is (formally) developed in order "to protect the *Athletes'* fundamental right to participate in doping-free sport . . ." (WADA, 2015:11). In the process of securing athletes' right to doping-free sport, doping testing is a key measure. In this context, the efforts towards establishing harmonised and effective doping testing programmes across the world are key elements in the current anti-doping strategy. Thus, elite athletes' responses to the testing system are the key voice when assessing implications of anti-doping efforts. In addition, there are indications that the recent intensification of anti-doping efforts has created a new kind of inequity and a feeling of unfairness among athletes who believe – or know – that they are subjected to a stricter testing regime than their foreign competitors (Hanstad, Skille, & Thurston, 2009; Overbye & Wagner, 2014; Waddington, 2010). If so, this must be considered a threat to the legitimacy of anti-doping efforts. Consequently, there is a need to further explore athletes' perceptions of the effectiveness of, as well as their trust in, the doping testing system in their sport.

Therefore, based on a quantitative survey (also with open-ended questions) of 645 Danish elite athletes and interviews with current and former elite athletes, this study aims, firstly, to explore how elite athletes perceive the testing system and to what extent they trust the functioning and effectiveness of this system in their sport in a national context and in other countries. Secondly, the study aims to investigate whether or not the athletes' gender, age, sport type, previous experience of doping testing and perceived proximity of doping have an impact on their perceptions of and trust in the doping testing system. In the final section, some implications of the results for current anti-doping policy are outlined.

Before presenting the results, a brief contextualisation is given in order to provide an insight into: (i) the policy, implementation and challenges of the doping testing system; (ii) athletes' assessment of doping testing in sport; and (iii) the theoretical inspiration for this study and the Danish context.

1.1. Policy, implementation and challenges of the doping testing system

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) conducted its first mandatory doping test during the winter Olympics in Grenoble in 1968 (Todd & Todd, 2001). Early testing regimes have been characterised as being merely symbolic: doping tests were only conducted in competition, testing systems were inconsistent, and test results were not very reliable (Dimeo, 2007; Houlihan, 2002; Verroken & Mottram, 2005). Additionally, anti-doping efforts sometimes varied considerably from country to country and among IFs; for example, with regard to the prohibited list, rules for sanctions, and rules for the granting of Therapeutic Use Exemptions (TUEs) (Fraser, 2004; Houlihan, 1999, 2002). Moreover, the IOC, IFs and National Olympic Committees were not very committed to fighting doping, the coordination between these stakeholders was not optimal, and only few national governments took the fight against doping seriously (Houlihan, 1999). This inconsistency and inefficiency in anti-doping efforts, as well as the lack of cooperation between and commitment among stakeholders, was hoped to be eliminated by the establishment of WADA and the implementation of the first WADA code in 2004 (WADA, 2003). Although this intensification of doping controls and harmonisation of anti-doping efforts did indeed eliminate many of the inconsistencies that were dominant in early anti-doping regimes, recent studies paradoxically suggest that current policy – due to great disparities among stakeholders' harmonisation standards and their implementation of the Code, including the International Standards for Testing – has led to a different kind of inconsistency and new forms of inequality for athletes under stricter regimes. For example, studies have shown that the national implementation of the Code takes various forms (Wagner & Hanstad, 2011); that differences exist in the management of missed tests and filing failures across National Anti-Doping Organisations (NADOs) (Dikic, Markovic, & McNamee, 2011); that there is a great variation in the national requirements of athletes' availability for testing, in the criteria for selecting athletes for the registered testing pool and in the

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