



The final frontier of anti-doping: A study of athletes who have committed doping violations



Terry Engelberg^{a,*}, Stephen Moston^b, James Skinner^c

^a Department of Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management, Griffith Business School, Griffith University, Gold Coast, QLD 4222, Australia

^b Centre for Applied Psychology, Faculty of Health, University of Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia

^c Institute for Sport Business, Loughborough University, London, UK

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ABSTRACT

Although the use of banned drugs in sport is not a new phenomenon, little is known about the experiences and perceptions of athletes who have committed anti-doping rule violations. This study qualitatively explored the experiences of 18 athletes (from the sports of bodybuilding, powerlifting, cricket, sprint kayak, rugby league, and swimming) who had committed anti-doping violations. Themes explored included motivations for initiating and maintaining doping, the psychology of doping, deterrents to doping, and views on current anti-doping policy. In most cases doping had started early in their careers. The perceived culture of the sport was considered central to the 'normalization' of doping, particularly in bodybuilding. When explaining their decision to dope, athletes engaged in processes or moral disengagement (including advantageous comparison, minimizing consequences and diffusion of responsibility). Ironically, moral arguments were perceived as the most effective deterrents to doping. Findings are discussed in relation to the difficulties in establishing credible deterrents and suggestions for the future development of anti-doping policy.

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1. Introduction

In Australia, sport is a powerful cultural force and protecting the integrity of sport is a national priority (Australian Sports Commission, 2012). One of the most significant threats to the integrity of sport is doping, with a report by the Australian Crime Commission (2013) describing growing links between sport and organized crime. In the report it was alleged that 'Organised crime has been found to have a tangible and expanding footprint in this market, and their activity is being facilitated by some coaches and support staff of elite athletes, who have orchestrated and/or condoned the use of prohibited substances and/or methods of administration' (p. 36).

The apparent facilitation of criminal conduct by sporting administrators (including coaches, managers, owners and even sponsors) is not a new problem (Carruthers, 2012). It has been argued (Eitzen, 2009) that athletes may be prone to a wider range of criminal activities, such as sexual assault, than non-athletes (Chandler, Johnson, & Carroll, 1999; Crosset, Benedict, & McDonald, 1995). It has also been argued that sports administrators sometimes turn a blind eye to such conduct by their

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 07 5552 7675; fax: +61 07 5552 8507.

E-mail addresses: t.engelberg@griffith.edu.au (T. Engelberg), Stephen.Moston@canberra.edu.au (S. Moston), j.skinner@griffith.edu.au (J. Skinner).

players, even to the extent of ‘excusing’ serious criminal offences (Benedict, 1997). Investigations of the criminal histories of players in the USA (Benedict, 1997, 2004) and Australia (Wilson, Stavros, & Westberg, 2008) reveal that in many sporting teams the proportion of players with criminal convictions is far greater than that observed in the general population. For offences, such as doping, which is not a criminal act in countries such as Australia, the anticipated performance benefits accentuate the apparent ambivalence towards misconduct. In an industry that is judged on a single criterion, winning, many in the sporting world have adopted an attitude encapsulated in the 2013 marketing campaign for Essendon Australian Football Club: ‘whatever it takes’ (Cotsis, 2013).

1.1. Deterring doping

The global problem of doping in sport is currently overseen by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), an organization that developed the World Anti-Doping Code (WADA, 2003), which periodically undergoes revisions. The current edition (WADA, 2009) will be superseded by the third edition in 2015. To date, WADA’s anti-doping policy has relied heavily on the deterrence value of doping controls. It has been assumed that if doping athletes *perceive* that there is a high likelihood of detection, and that there will be severe consequences, then they will be less likely to engage in such behaviours (British Medical Association, 2002). In criminological research this approach to crime control is known as deterrence theory (Matthews & Agnew, 2008; Paternoster, 2010), and it is the premise underpinning the criminal justice systems in most countries (Matthews & Agnew, 2008). In deterrence theory it is assumed that if the perceived likelihood of detection is increased (e.g., through the introduction of more or better tests), or the severity of consequences is increased (e.g., larger fines, longer bans), then the deterrent effect is similarly increased (Pratt, Cullen, Blevins, Daigle, & Madensen, 2006). Unfortunately, despite its intuitive appeal, the theory has limited empirical support (Hanstad & Waddington, 2009; Paternoster & Iovanni, 1986). In fact, the theory is now widely acknowledged as being largely ‘wrong’ (Pratt et al., 2006).

One reason why deterrence theory may have failed to deter doping is because the perceived likelihood of detection is probably very low (Moston, Engelberg, & Skinner, 2014a). For example, in Australia during the reporting period 2011–12, the Australian Sports Anti-doping Authority (ASADA) conducted 7196 biological tests of athletes, resulting in only 33 athletes or support personnel being entered into the Register of Findings of anti-doping rule violations (ASADA, 2012). Former WADA President Dick Pound acknowledged that the small number of athletes who are caught was an underestimation of the problem (Price, 2012). Asked to estimate the true incidence of doping, Pound said: ‘It’s north of 10 and short of 90 [%], but it’s more than people expect’.

WADA’s attempts to deter doping appear to have met with only limited success (Hanstad & Waddington, 2009) and doping in sport is perceived to be highly prevalent by both members of the public (Moston, Skinner, & Engelberg, 2012) and athletes (Moston, Engelberg, & Skinner, 2014b). Consequently, many academics (Kayser & Broers, 2012; Kirkwood, 2009; Smith & Stewart, 2008) and even WADA itself (Pound, Ayotte, Parkinson, Pengilly, & Ryan, 2013) have declared anti-doping efforts to have been a failure.

1.2. Prevention of doping

Given this pessimistic assessment, it is not surprising to discover that anti-doping efforts have undergone a number of significant changes in recent years. For example, a surge of social science based research suggested that a shift towards prevention rather than detection might be the best strategy for eliminating drug use in sport (Lippi, Franchini, & Cesare, 2007; Lucidi et al., 2008). However, it should be noted that the focus appears to be shifting back towards a detection based focus, with coordinated investigations conducted by anti-doping investigators and public bodies such as police officers, seen as the way forward (Moston, Engelberg, & Skinner, 2013; WADA, 2011).

This change in focus has seen an increasing emphasis on understanding the psychological characteristics of doping athletes (Gucciardi, Jalleh, & Donovan, 2011; Wiefferink, Detmar, Coumans, Vogels, & Paulussen, 2008). However, to date, this literature has generally offered only superficial insights into the practice of doping because of three major issues (Kirby, Moran, & Guerin, 2011). The first issue is that samples typically consist of non-doping athletes (e.g., Bloodworth & McNamee, 2010). The second issue is that questionnaire based studies (e.g., Waddington, Malcolm, Roderick, & Naik, 2005) have offered pre-determined motives (e.g., financial gain, desire to win, etc.) for doping that may not accurately reflect the actual views of the athletes. The third issue is that many cases of doping feature inadvertent (accidental) use, where no ‘motive’ for doping actually exists.

One solution to such problems is to conduct open-ended interviews with athletes who have committed anti-doping rule violations. A review of the anti-doping literature (Backhouse, McKenna, Robinson, & Atkin, 2007) identified athletes who had committed anti-doping violations as one of the populations that were absent from existing research. There are two major pragmatic reasons for not having studied this group in the past.

First, as discussed earlier, there is only a small pool of athletes who are known to have violated anti-doping rules. Second, athletes who have committed deliberate violations (and have not yet detected) are unlikely to participate in research studies which might result in insights into their behaviour that would facilitate their detection.

The difficulties inherent in recruiting athletes who had previously used banned substances to participate in research studies were illustrated by Kirby et al. (2011). Despite an extensive search of newspaper archives, autobiographies and doping reports, to identify possible participants, the final research sample in their study comprised only five athletes.

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