



# The myth of clean sport and its unintended consequences



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## ABSTRACT

Anti-doping has long been premised on the myth of clean sport, a consistent vision that has survived changes in the social and cultural environment. This article starts with a discussion of the meaning of clean sport focusing on the gap between this idealisation and practice. It then traces the historical emergence of this myth, briefly explaining its cultural foundations, and its influence on in-competition drug testing development in the 1960s. It is argued that clean sport only made sense when the focus was on in-competition use of stimulants. The emergence of drugs such as steroids, used out of competitions, created a conflict between the reality of doping practices and the mythical past and future idealisation of sport as clean. Nonetheless anti-doping leaders maintained their public position that testing systems could defeat doping practices. Due to the continuity of ethical ideas, the construction of health fears, and public scandals, the World Anti-Doping Agency pressed on with, and was empowered by, the absolutist clean sport vision leading to the conceptually flawed, contradictory, draconian and problematic policy environment we face today.

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## 1. Introduction

The myth of clean sport has been an idealistic feature of anti-doping discourses since the inter-war period, and subsequently underpinned the creation and implementation of a list of banned substances in the late 1960s. It has become a common sense narrative, taken for granted as the purpose of anti-doping, and related to the tendency to see sport in general as a beneficial social good. Coalter's (2007) discussion of the ways in which sport is idealised in public policy making as embodying a series of vague and presumed social benefits (i.e. health, community, urban regeneration, economic, and individual self-esteem) is helpful in understanding how and why anti-doping came to be supported by latent beliefs in the nature and role of sport in society. He writes that sport has a 'mythopoetic' status:

Mythopoetic concepts tends to be one whose demarcation criteria are not specific . . . Such concepts are based on popular and idealistic ideas . . . Such myths contain elements of truth, but elements which become reified and distorted and 'represent' rather than reflect reality, standing for supposed, but largely unexamined, impacts and processes (p. 9).

The rhetoric of clean sport has become banal: accepted without question by the global sports community as a reflection of the

true essence of sport. In this sense, anti-doping has mirrored the mythopoetic approach to sport as a whole to establish 'clean sport' narratives as both indicative of sport in its broadest sense and as justification for intensive regulations.

A brief scan of relevant organisations websites shows how this concept is prominent and easily reproduced. The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) uses 'clean sport' as a focal point for its efforts. For example, in April 2015 it released a statement encouraging whistleblowing:

The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) is encouraging supporters of clean sport worldwide to help protect the clean athlete by reporting information relating to doping. Clean sport proponents – including members of the public, media, anti-doping stakeholders and athletes – are encouraged to report doping via a new page on WADA's website (WADA, 2015a, 2015b).

We can see how anti-doping is linked to the mythopoetic sense of sport's values in the WADA's description of the 'spirit of sport' as 'the celebration of the human spirit, body and mind, and is reflected in values we find in and through sport' and so 'Doping is fundamentally contrary to the spirit of sport' (2015, p. 14).

Another example is that UK Anti-Doping regularly hosts an annual 'Clean Sport Forum' and uses the term to focus on athlete responsibility: 'All athletes in the UK are part of clean sport. It is the mission of UKAD to protect your right as an athlete to compete in clean sport.' (UK Anti-Doping, 2015). Finally, from the United

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States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA), a clean sport campaign which promotes the claim that 'true athletes compete clean for many powerful and personal reasons'. From there, athletes and coaches are invited to 'take the pledge today to boldly declare why you compete clean'. Some of the suggested reasons are listed by USADA: 'family, health, integrity, love of sport, country, legacy' (USADA, 2015).

While it is easy to find examples of the discursive strategies and meanings conveyed by the term, it is significantly more challenging to ascertain what it means. Assuming we confine an interpretation to the locus of anti-doping (i.e. not include other forms of cheating and corruption), a broadly stated definition might be that sport is free of drugs and other forms of artificial enhancements. As discussed below, this was the vision of early anti-doping enthusiasts. This pertains towards a sense of the natural body which is not enhanced through any means except careful and dedicated training; a concept laden with class and ethnocentric bias, reflective of amateur ideologies in sports cultures (Gleaves and Llewellyn, 2014; Henne, 2015).

In order to have practical meaning, the vision of clean sport needs some form of a structure, as no one would expect athletes to refrain from using all available drugs. The development of the list of banned substances in the 1960s aimed to delineate acceptable from unacceptable. Judgements would be made by a core group of Western, male, middle and upper class scientists and administrators who wanted to protect their own power base while utilising vague notions of the essence and ethics of sport (Dimeo, 2007). However, the details were fraught with dilemmas. Athletes would be allowed to use such drugs as paracetamol, birth control pill, supplemental vitamins and so on, that were accepted because they were used widely in society, relatively harmless and not performance enhancing. The powerful social elite did not trust athletes and their support staff to follow the rules independently, so created a testing system that could inform sports organisations whether or not athletes had contravened the regulations and used a banned substance or technique. Since an 'analytical finding' is almost always the only source of evidence, the pragmatic description of an athlete as clean can only really refer to whether or not they have been caught doping. As such, the concept is not an obvious as it may ostensibly appear to be, and is evidently an ideology rather than empirical fact.

This article traces the historical development of this vision and its influence on drug testing implementation in the 1960s. It is argued that, at this juncture, the logic of in-competition testing for stimulants was actually quite reasonable as it focused on a single event and the possibility that an athlete boosted their short-term performance to win a podium place over a non-stimulant using athlete. Of course, such event-only testing did not show that sport was clean as athletes could easily use drugs during their training periods. The logic of clean sport led inevitably to a ban on steroids once a test had been established, and in the absence of out-of-competition testing, athletes freely used steroids and clean sport was a fallacy.

Nonetheless, the clean sport message remained in place and, due to ethical positioning, health fears and public scandals, was simply reinforced by WADA from 2000 onwards. It is both backward and forward looking: providing an imagined and essentialised image of the past, alongside a model of progress for the future. It paints a picture of present-centred crisis, a loss of ethical direction, that needs resources, regulations and punishments in order to be recovered and the future to become a better place. Therefore, it is a strategy about power enhancement, indeed power over athletes and their entourage, that places control with centralised authorities who can impose their will over those defined as 'transgressors'.

Yet, the demands for clean sport have led to draconian, unfair and ineffective policies (Møller, 2014; Goode, 2015); one consequence of which is the historical and contemporary failure of anti-doping to deliver a clear distinction between the cheats and the innocent. It is argued that the absolutist vision is unhelpful as it

creates myth-based expectations that cannot be fulfilled. Instead, it is proposed that a more realistic sense of performance enhancement and sport, and fairer treatment of guilty and innocent athletes, should be considered for future policy initiatives.

## 2. Amateurism and naturalism: the original ideas behind clean sport

As Gleaves and Llewellyn correctly point out, there has until recently been a lack of understanding the early 20th century debates on drugs in sport. They correctly argue for a broader historical framing of the problem in contra-distinction to the various scholars who have taken the death of Danish cyclist Knud Enemark Jensen during the 1960 Olympic Games as the launching point for tracing the roots of anti-doping policy. They write:

bureaucratic concerns about doping not only predated the Second World War but were also framed by the IOC almost exclusively within the context of amateurism. As the IOC's regulatory framework governing conduct and eligibility, amateurism required athletes uphold certain moral standards. The Olympic amateur played the game for the game's sake, disavowed gambling and professionalism, and competed in a composed dignified manner fitting of a 'gentleman'. Anti-doping rhetoric, and later legislation, first emerged as part of the early twentieth-century push to defend amateurism against the perceived nefarious forces of gambling, commercialism, professionalism and totalitarianism that were supposedly over-running amateur sport (2014, p. 840).

Hoberman (1992) and Dimeo (2007) show that this was a period of growing awareness of potential performance enhancing methods, partly legitimised by broader concerns over fatigue among workers and soldiers, and partly by scientific curiosity regarding the properties of stimulant and other drugs. By contrast, many in the upper echelons of world sport wanted to protect the reputation of sport as both a form of healthy physical exercise and a cultural space with specific ethical values. Amateurism played a large part in fomenting anxieties around drugs, which somehow smacked of an over-seriousness found normally in professional sports. While there is some evidence suggesting that sports leaders took a passive stance towards drug use in cycling, others focused their anti-doping concerns on 'purer' environments such as the Olympic Games. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Henri de Baillet-Latour provided a useful illustration of the perceived inter-relationship of values and the threat of doping in 1937: 'amateur sport is meant to improve the soul and the body therefore no stone must be left unturned as long as the use of doping has not been stamped out' (1937, no page, cited in Gleaves and Llewellyn, 2014, p. 847).

Neither the IOC nor any sports organisation had the weaponry to start the fight against doping. However, the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF, 1928) in 1928 and the IOC in 1938 made official statements prohibiting artificial methods of performance enhancement. The IAAF proposed that doping should be prohibited and defined it as 'the use of any stimulant not normally employed to increase the power of action in athletic competition above the average' (IAAF, 1928, p. 43, cited in Gleaves and Llewellyn, 2014, p. 846).

As Ritchie (2015) points out: 'the values of the people that created the first anti-doping statements of principle and sanctioning rules, alongside the general social environment within which those principles and rules were created, are instructive in terms of thinking about the issue today' (p. 21). Quite whether there is a linear thread between the ideas and leaders of anti-doping between the 1920s and the firming up of policy in the 1960s is open to debate.

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