



Who is more skilful? Doping and its implication on the validity, morality and significance of the sporting test



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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore if and in what ways doping can be regarded as a challenge to the validity, morality and significance of the sporting test. We start out by examining Kalevi Heinilä's analysis of the logic of elite sport, which shows how the 'spiral of competition' leads to the use of 'dubious means'. As a supplement to Heinilä, we revisit American sports historian John Hoberman's writings on sport and technology. Then we discuss what function equality and fairness have in sport and what separates legitimate from illegitimate ways of enhancing performance. We proceed by discussing the line of argumentation set forth by philosopher Torbjörn Tännsjö on how our admiration of sporting superiority based on natural talent or 'birth luck' is immoral. We analyse his argument in favour of eliminating the significance of meritless luck in sport by lifting the ban on doping and argue that its rationale is incompatible with the purpose of sport. We hereby show that although there certainly are morally problematic features of anti-doping the idea that doping must be banned can be defended by reference to the constitutive function of physical differences in sport. In conclusion we show that although doping will never be eradicated from sport because of its ability to increase the physical differences that serve a constitutive function in sport, those differences are not primary in our fascination with elite sport. Instead, we argue for the sporting competition as a stage where fascinating narratives can unfold in a dramatized manner. The integrity of athletic excellence can thus survive even if doping continues to be a factor in sport.

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1. Introduction

When Finnish sport sociologist Kalevi Heinilä developed his theory of the *Totalization Process of Sport* in the 1970s he foresaw two of the major problems sport struggles with today. In his analysis Heinilä demonstrates 1) how international elite sport out of necessity develops into an enterprise involving all-encompassing systems surrounding the athlete(s) and 2) how athletes and elite sport systems eventually will be tempted to utilise 'dubious means' to enhance athletic performance. Those tendencies were evolving fast in a time of Cold War sports politics, when Heinilä wrote, but have only grown more evident in the decades that followed. Accordingly, doping has since the late 1990s been regarded as one of the biggest threats to the integrity of elite sport.

The aim of this article is to explore if and in which ways doping can be regarded as a challenge to the validity, morality and sig-

nificance of the sporting test. We start out by examining Heinilä's more than 30 years old analysis of the logic of elite sport, which shows how the 'spiral of competition' leads to the use of 'dubious means'. As a supplement to Heinilä, we revisit the American sports historian John Hoberman's thoughts on sport and technology. Then we discuss what is understood by *equality* in sport and *legitimate* versus *illegitimate* ways of enhancing performance. This is followed by an analysis of what we believe to be the original foundation for our resistance to doping. We then discuss and criticise the line of argumentation set forth by Torbjörn Tännsjö on how our admiration of sporting superiority based on natural talent or 'birth luck' is immoral. We analyse the argument in favour of eliminating the significance of meritless luck in sport and argue that its rationale is incompatible with the purpose of sport. We hereby show that although there certainly are morally problematic features of anti-doping, the idea that doping must be banned can be defended by reference to the constitutive function of physical differences in sport. In conclusion, we show that although doping will never be eradicated from sport because of its ability to increase the phys-

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ical differences that serve a constitutive function of sport, those differences are not primary in our fascination with elite sport.

2. A competition between systems

Heinilä (1982) developed 25 theses to argue that sport logically develops into an arms race between nations competing for sporting excellence (Heinilä, 1982). He argues that because a victory in sport is inconclusive in nature (today's winner will be challenged tomorrow) a 'Spiral of Competition' is established. The logic is that: If you train 12 h per week, I will train 14. If you do 14 h, I will do 16, and so forth. The 'Spiral of Competition' means that the demands for success in international sport are constantly upgraded leading to what Heinilä coined the 'Iron Law of Totalization'. With upgrading demands the athlete needs assistance regarding all issues affecting his or hers performance, i.e. training, diet, equipment, supplements, psychology, etc. Consequently, a system of support is established around the athlete.

The result is that in international sport, all other things being equal, better 'Systems' will outperform poorer systems: "As a consequence of continuous upgrading of demands in international sport, competition totalizes into a competition between 'Systems'" (Heinilä, 1982, thesis 8). Although it may appear that athletes just compete against each other as individuals or teams, success in top-level sport is fundamentally dependent on the optimization of all background variables. The system of which the athlete or team is a representative must therefore – if it responds rationally and logically to the increasing international competition – optimize its performance capacity by adjusting all relevant parameters. For a system to be effective, it thus has to cover all kinds of relevant resources, which affect the outcome of competition, or "the productive capacity of the System", as Heinilä puts it. Since for the system the rule applies that "[t]he more total the utilization of relevant resources, the greater the probability of international success" (Heinilä, 1982, thesis 10). Thus, totalization in the form of the development of a system of support is not restricted to a few elements but seeks to cover all resources that are considered relevant in elite sport. This condition is now a matter of course in all nations with Olympic ambitions—even in the United States, although the state here plays a limited role (Bosscher, 2008). Unsurprisingly, a system adopting the performance imperative increases the pressure on individual athletes and teams to succeed. And as Heinilä points out: "The greater the pressure to succeed the more likely the use of dubious means" (Heinilä, 1982, thesis 18).

Heinilä was not the only scholar in the 1980s to analyse the logic of elite sport in order to understand what was seen to be unwanted and unintended consequences of sport. Hoberman follows Heinilä as regards the spiral of competition and the resulting constant upgrading of demands in sport. The background for this, he adds, is that "sport is a global monoculture whose values derive in large measure from the sphere of technology" (Hoberman, 1988, p. 202–203). Following the French philosopher Jacques Ellul, Hoberman views technology as efficient procedure *per se*. It is the logic of technique that calls for the mechanization of everything possible in order to obtain the highest possible level of efficiency. As for Heinilä's *Iron Law of Totalisation*, Ellul's *technique* aims for "efficient ordering", wherefore sport, Ellul argues, can be said to be "an extension of the technological spirit" (Hoberman, 1988, p. 207). Sport is thus a particularly powerful symbol of the principle of unlimited performance by efficient procedures. This is for instance seen in how sport is highly influenced by a mechanical world-view that allows for bodily manipulation through scientific insights. Therefore, sport has come to exemplify how the performance of humans can be propelled forward by technology and science. Sport, according to Hoberman, thus represents an agenda for the development

of the human body based on a technological machine-like image of man (Hoberman, 1988).

Viewed in this light doping in its various forms (from relatively simple injections of EPO (erythropoietin) and anabolic steroids over blood doping techniques to advanced gene modifications not yet in place) is a logical consequence of this mechanical anthropology. In line with Heinilä Hoberman fears the future development of elite sport and calls for ethical considerations that can lead to alternative future scenarios. However, because "our civilization provides us with very little in the cultural mainstream that can match the performance principle in mass appeal" Hoberman finds it "not particularly difficult" to predict how the debate will develop in the future. According to Hoberman "it is likely that a kind of athletic Nietzscheanism [...] will strain against certain prohibitions, primarily of religious origin, which prescribe that the human image should remain inviolate" (Hoberman, 1988, p. 204). As becomes clear later in our analysis of the pro-doping arguments, the debate on the ethics of doping and anti-doping developed in more diverse ways than Hoberman predicted.

Nevertheless, as we have clearly witnessed over the last 30 years, both Heinilä and Hoberman rightly predicted that doping is one of the 'dubious means' that has often been applied by athletes and teams to succeed in sport. Also, with Heinilä's and Hoberman's perspectives on sport's embeddedness in a spiralling competition, and its fascination with technology, efficiency and rationality it is not a surprise that doping is not restricted to individual athletes, such as the terms 'doping sinner' or 'rotten apple', often used by journalists and officials, implicate. As revelations from top sport over the last 15–20 years has clearly demonstrated it is instead something that is known, and often organised, by the athlete's support system (Christiansen, 2005; Møller, 2010; Pound et al., 2015; Waddington and Smith, 2009). Hence, if we take the implications of Hoberman's and Heinilä's analysis seriously (and there is no reason not to), rather than being a foreign element introduced by corrupt individuals, doping is best understood as an unintended consequence of the logic of elite sport and the technology-based performance principle that it incarnates.

Nevertheless, doping has been banned and fought because it is thought to spoil the integrity of athletic excellence. As many opponents of doping have argued; 'if the performances spectators witness are more a product of medical capabilities than athletic skills, what meaning does sport then have?' This line of thinking is also fundamental for the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) whose ambition it is to "protect the *Athletes'* fundamental right to participate in doping-free sport and thus promote health, fairness and equality for *Athletes* worldwide" (WADA, 2015, p. 11). Fairness and equality are thus presented as not only cornerstones in the global fight against doping but in sport *per se*. The tricky thing, however, is that fairness and equality are not universal values in sport but rather their application is restricted to very specific elements. The following examination shows that fairness and equality only serve instrumental purposes in elite sport.

3. Sport and equality

Sport, as the German philosopher Elk Franke has put it, is really *an expression of inequality* (Franke, 1987). The importance of fairness and equality lies in their ability to make sure that the right and proper kind of inequality is established. In order to substantiate this claim a closer look at the internal logic of sport is needed.

Sport is commonly understood as a test of primarily physical abilities (Kretchmar, 1998; Suits, 2007). Thus according to the sports philosopher Kathleen Pearson, the purpose of a sporting activity is: "... to test the skill of one individual, or group of individuals, against the skill of another individual, or group of

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