



A qualitative analysis of the factors that protect athletes against doping in sport



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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore the protective factors against performance enhancing drug (PED) use in sport.
Design: Ten competitive athletes ($M = 5, F = 5$) representing five different sports (field hockey, boxing, football, triathlon, rugby) were recruited through convenience sampling to undertake a semi-structured interview to enable a qualitative analysis of athletes' lifelong athletic careers.
Method: Verbatim transcripts were analysed using an established three-stage coding process to identify the common themes within the narratives.
Results: Personal and situational protective factors were identified in the accounts. Personal factors included: (i) a strong moral stance against cheating; (ii) an identity beyond sport; (iii) self-control; and (iv) resilience to social group pressures. Situational factors included secure attachments to people at all stages of the athlete's life. This facilitated both the promotion of moral decision making and assisted in the development of anti-doping attitudes. When situational factors – such as a pro-doping climate – arose, key attachments in the athletes' lives interplayed with personal factors to reduce the risk of doping.
Conclusions: These findings offer insights into factors that protect competitive athletes against using PEDs in sport and further our understanding of the complex interaction between risk and protective factors at individual, psychosocial and societal levels among competitive athletes. As a complex behaviour, doping in sport cannot be prevented by solely focussing on the individual athlete; contextual factors beyond the athlete's control also impact on this behaviour. Thus, a paradigm shift is warranted to move beyond an athlete-centred approach to anti-doping.

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Introduction

Why do some athletes use performance enhancing drugs (PED), while other athletes abide by anti-doping rules? Unlike other social issues – such as illicit drug use, smoking and bullying – understanding of this transgressive behaviour is still emerging and policy and practice is not informed by either an equivalent scale or span of evidence. However, the last decade has seen an exponential increase in the number of studies seeking to identify risk factors for doping in sport. These studies have suggested the following risks: male gender (Backhouse, Whitaker, & Petróczi, 2013; Whitaker, Long, Petróczi, & Backhouse, 2013); career transitions and periods of instability (Lentillon-Kaestner & Carstairs, 2010; Mazanov,

Huybers, & Connor, 2011); previous use of nutritional supplements (Backhouse et al., 2013; Lentillon-Kaestner & Carstairs, 2010); contact with dopers, being offered drugs, availability of drugs (Lentillon-Kaestner, Hagger, & Hardcastle, 2012; Pappa & Kennedy, 2012); enhanced injury-recovery and economic rewards (Bloodworth & McNamee, 2010); competitive level (Whitaker et al., 2013); and the influence of peers, parents, cultural norms and sporting culture (Pappa & Kennedy, 2012; Smith et al., 2010).

Furthermore, 'risky' personality factors include low ratings of self-esteem, integrity, confidence and high trait anxiety (Petróczi & Aidman, 2008); dissatisfaction with one's appearance, impulsiveness, a 'win-at-all-costs' attitude (Mitić & Radovanović, 2011; Whitaker, Long, Petróczi, & Backhouse, 2012); dispositional risk taking, and sensation seeking (Petróczi & Aidman, 2008); and the fear of failure (Pappa & Kennedy, 2012). Whitaker et al. (2012) also suggest that athletes' perceptions of PES users influences the likelihood of their own use; the more positive attributes they associate with users, the more likely they are to use themselves. Emerging from this literature is a general agreement that no single factor

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predisposes an individual to use PEDs in sport; doping is influenced by multiple risk factors which can act individually, collectively and/or in sequence to support the decision to dope, whether as a one-off, episodically or systematically.

Despite these recent advances in knowledge, there still appears to be a significant aspect of this complex behaviour that is generally overlooked: protective factors. Protective factors can be defined as the personal, social and environmental factors that moderate, buffer and/or insulate against risk (Jessor, Van Den Bos, Vanderryn, Costa, & Turbin, 1995; Rennie & Dolan, 2010). Therefore, an expanded understanding of the range and role that protective factors could play, offers an important part in furthering our understanding of the doping phenomenon. Leone and Fetro (2007) interviewed 12 physically active American males to focus on their motivations for not using anabolic androgenic steroids (AAS). Protective factors included beliefs around undesirable side effects, getting caught, morality, AAS education, prohibitive costs, stigma, fear of needles, lack of awareness, and low concern with body image. In a sample of talented young athletes, a commitment to achieving performance goals through 'natural ability' was deemed protective (Bloodworth & McNamee, 2010). Additionally, religion, marital status and parenthood can be protective against current and future doping (Rodek, Sekulic, & Pasalic, 2009; Zenic, Stipic, & Sekulic, 2011).

The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA, 2011) has recognised the need for a shift from the traditional research preoccupation with risk factors to encompass the potential power of protective factors. Developing a specific set of doping facilitators and inhibitors while also establishing strategies to capitalise on these points is fundamental for improving doping prevention (Petróczy & Aidman, 2008). Indeed, identifying the basis for athletes' choices not to use PEDs has the potential to reveal intervention points and develop a powerful evidence base that will strengthen prevention programming. Thus, the overarching aim of this study is to enhance current understanding of why athletes refrain from engaging in PED use by: 1) giving athletes a voice and providing a means for them to express their experiences and feelings towards PEDs; 2) exploring what specific factors shape an athlete's beliefs in regards to their use; and 3) identifying protective factor themes throughout the athletes' individual sporting careers that have allowed them to refrain from using PEDs.

Method

Participants and procedures

Utilising a convenience sampling approach, 10 athletes were interviewed – one male and one female for each of these sports; football, rugby, field hockey, boxing and triathlon. This sample size was based on the premise that thematic saturation of information can occur from as few as six interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). These sports were selected because they present a diverse cross-section in terms of contact, team, individual, ball sports, indoor and outdoor sports (Smith et al., 2010). All participants were over 18 years of age (range 18–30 years) and competed at British University & Colleges Sport (BUCS) Division 1 or national league level in the UK. Seven participants were current University students (3 female) and competed in the BUCS league. Of the three non-students; one competed professionally, one played in a national league and the final participant had retired and was currently coaching. All athletes claimed to have not used any illegal form of PEDs at any point in their career. However, a number reported being exposed to doping opportunities. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the host institution and this complied with normal expectations for informed consent, voluntary participation, etc.

Interviews were semi-structured to allow flexibility to pursue themes important to each participant and to secure detailed and multi-layered responses (Smith et al., 2010). Participants were encouraged to detail their athletic career, with childhood and early experiences serving as the catalyst for key stages and experiences in their adult sporting career (Smith et al., 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Once the interview guide was developed it was reviewed by another experienced qualitative researcher. The finalised interview comprised seven interrelated sections: 1) Sports career; 2) Training; 3) Relationships and support; 4) Knowledge of PEDs; 5) PED use perceptions; 6) PED education; and 7) Factors influencing PED use. Questions in each category followed a similar format. First, questions focused on a general topic (e.g., Can you please describe the progression of your athletic career?), supported by probes to elicit more detail. Although each participant was asked the same initial questions, their responses dictated the order and extent of follow-up questioning. The first author conducted all the interviews.

Analysis and interpretation

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Reading and re-reading the transcripts allowed immersion in the data and allowed concepts and themes to be developed (Douglas & Carless, 2009). A thematic analysis approach was used, providing flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the opportunity to highlight protective factors against PEDs in sport, whilst simultaneously allowing for consideration of outside influencing factors. Issues across the athlete's entire athletic career were explored, enabling investigators to identify the personal and situational factors that may have shaped the participants sports experience, doping perceptions and beliefs.

Data were examined using an established three-stage coding process (Smith et al., 2010). First, after reading each transcript, individual interviews were summarised to highlight the most prominent issues. Second, evidence for each theme was pooled to create a narrative around that theme. Last, thematic groupings were structured around stanzas. Sentences were segmented to highlight phrases that encompassed a specific occurrence or event. This highlighted key opinions, factors and influences in individuals' choices not to use PEDs. The process generated an independent narrative for each participant. These narratives were then pooled to identify common themes, tones and images. Pooled 'commonalities' were then linked to the theoretical constructs that guided the interview structure.

Findings

Five distinct protective variables were depicted in direct quotes and stanzas. They were: i) a strong moral stance against cheating; ii) self-control; iii) an identity beyond sport; iv) resilience to social group pressures and v) secure attachments throughout the lifespan. A pro-doping climate and 'unconscious naivety' were situational risk factors that emerged from the stories of athletes negotiating their way in a developing sporting landscape. Each of the themes is presented in detail with emphasis given to the impact and influence they have had on athletes choosing not to engage in using PEDs.

Strong moral stance against cheating

Consistently, participants were reluctant to use PEDs to enhance performance because it is against the rules and considered as cheating. One participant noted "*It's just playing by the rules. There are rules for a reason*" (Sally, Rugby). Another demonstrated strong

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