

TEST (Trivent Ethics in Science and Technology Imprint)
Heading Towards Humans Again: Aspects of
Bioethics in the New Age of Science
Ed. Miroslav Radenković
Available online at <http://trivent-publishing.eu>



Sports and the Ethical Implications of Performance Enhancing Substances

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Abstract

Sport is undergoing a period of specialization. This paper is based on a qualitative research and aims to emphasize the correlations and differences in relation to sport performance and ethical issues. First, the various types of sport-related ethical problems will be outlined, then several solutions to current problems will be detailed and evaluated on the basis of literature. Victory is valuable only if it comprises true excellence and makes the adversary improve. Sport is an activity that creates value. If, instead, it is used as a money-making tool, it leads to alienation.

DOI: 10.22618/TP.AEBIO.20214.231014

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SPORTS AND THE ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PERFORMANCE ENHANCING SUBSTANCES

Levente Nagy¹

INTRODUCTION

In sports, it is apparent the system itself compels athletes to exploit themselves. Competitiveness is everywhere, daily, as every person competes with other individuals in a way or another. There are just as many examples of competition in the economy. Sports and economy are similar in the sense that there is only a minimal difference between winners and losers. Nevertheless, these minor differences in achievement may lead to enormous differences in prestige. This is why each competitor is ready to do anything to be among the winners. Thus competitors in sports and the economy share several common attitudes and characteristics.

What should be done to enhance performance in sport while eliminating cheating? In certain sporting types, performance-enhancing drugs are relatively common. A solution for this issue seems to be abandoning the concept of leading sports. Legalizing sports achievements is the only way to a certain safe level. This should result in sport being pursued per se, without any winners.

According to the results of a 2011 survey,² over one-third of athletes had already used some kind of performance-enhancing drugs. However, drug tests were able to only reveal about 2% of these cases.

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² Tim Rohan, "Antidoping Agency Delays Publication of Research," *New York Times* (2013), <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/23/sports/research-finds-wide-doping-study-withheld.html> (accessed November 7, 2020).

Sports are two-fold. According to the rules, there is a legal and a moral side to sports. From the perspective of legality, fair play refers to respecting the rules. A fair player meets the rules and regulations. Legality thus refers to truthfulness with a type of authority or power in the background.

However, fair play is not based on emotions, as people do not have an identical sense of morality. Morality implies that people participate in sports games along with moral values. Participation and behaviour are not determined by any authority or power, but by moral principles sometimes enforced (even against ourselves). Fair sport can only appear on this level. As already seen, from a legal point of view, truthfulness is linked to external regulation. If that regulation does not operate – the judge does not see a problem, the electronic display system does not operate, the cameras do not record a decisive moment, the adversary is still judged in the same way, and thus no cheating is supposed to take place.

In Kantian thought, we are citizens of two worlds,³ thus both sides of fair play – legality and morality – have to be considered at all times.

There are different understandings of sports, be they normative or descriptive. In a normative sense, sport is an activity and it meets the requirements of fairness. In a descriptive sense sport is everything that people call sports. Normatively, sports create values, while descriptively, sports may destroy existing values. Bullfighting cannot be considered a sport in a normative sense because death and destruction are not values, but, in a descriptive sense, it is still a type of sport because the fighter achieves their aim (victory) through struggle.

Sports philosophy is a branch of applied philosophy and it aims to investigate the true sense and ultimate goal of sport, i.e. the clarification of the meaning of sport. Sports philosophy relates its findings to reality. In order to assess right and wrong in sports norms, ideals and particular value systems are needed. The ideal image and state of sports must also be compared to the reality of sports. Several values which should be considered in this case include virtues, skills, physical and moral strength and struggle.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Budapest: Osiris, 2004), 106.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Performance-enhancing drugs have been used since Antiquity when they were the instruments of druids, shamans or magicians. Therefore by tradition, the use of performance-enhancing substances goes back to the world of beliefs and religion.

In modern sports, doping was first related to cycling, a sport that became popular in the late 1800s. Doping made its first victim in bicycling in early 1900.⁴

Today the most common drugs used for doping purposes are a type of amphetamines. There are two groups of drugs, which can be identified. The first group, the classical drugs, enhances sport performance during the competitions themselves. However, as all athletes are tested today before sports events, a new group of drugs has become more common, which can be used during the training period instead.

Various forms of testing were introduced in the 1960s. The Olympic Games organized in Mexico City were the first Olympics where doping tests were used. It was a straightforward test and only three cases were identified.

In the 1970s and 1980s, doping tests were not systematically used and furthermore, many of them proved to be unreliable.⁵ Tests identifying anabolic steroids, the most common performance-enhancing drugs, were first used in the 1970s. As a result of this new type of testing, eight athletes were disqualified from the Montreal Olympic Games of 1976. However, tests were still not efficient enough because the technology itself was underdeveloped and unreliable.

Today the situation is different. Analytical methods have improved, while the antidoping activities of national and international sport organizations have also become more active, despite that both antidoping tests and campaigns bear high costs.

Moller pointed out that the roots and the difficulties of antidoping movements remain unchanged because the notion of doping has never been adequately defined and clarified. Furthermore, in Moller's view,

⁴ P. Dimeo, *A History of Drug Use in Sport: 1876–1976: Beyond Good and Evil* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2007).

⁵ I. Waddington, *Sport, Health and Drugs* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2000).

because of the notion's vagueness, antidoping legal action has also remained inadequate.⁶

When an athlete craves winning, the use of 'mild' drugs may seem 'pardonable' even part of the game.

The social environment, especially the trainers and the members of the competitor's team, can have an enormous influence on the likelihood of unsportsmanlike behaviour. Thus the sports teams themselves, the athletes' social environment and the moral beliefs of the team members all have a powerful impact on the occurrence of doping.

ETHICAL PROBLEMS

The so-called elite amateurism has disappeared from sports competitions and, in Renson's view, sport has become an entertaining event instead.⁷ Sport has become show-business-like, meaning that it is not the fairness of the game that matters, but the 'pure play.'

In Renson's view, the reality is that spectacular features in sport dominate over its competitiveness. This leads to the conclusion that one should not emphasize the concept of fair play because it is non-existent. Consequently, reality and morality can be mistakenly thought to be interchangeable. Only reality should be considered, as competing athletes do not need the idea of fairness; instead, they need adequate labour protection rules similar to employees in show business. In the absence of such protective measures leading athletes are defenceless and exposed to accidents, doping pressure or health risks. Thus sports is largely about money and it is not likely that this would change.

Sports are a value-creating activity. If sports is practiced with the sole financial aim, it would lead to estrangement. In a normative sense, only those activities which bring about activities can be considered a sport. In a descriptive sense, as already seen, sporting activities can also be destructive and still be called sports.

The aim of the veritable athlete is to become the best and not simply the winner. Any victory is good as long as it involves the improvement

⁶ V. Møller, *The Ethics of Doping and Anti-doping. Redeeming the Soul of Sport?* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2010).

⁷ R. Renson, "Fair play: Its origins and meanings in sport and society," *Kinesiology* 41 (2009).

factor, meaning that all the parties involved, including the opponent, could become better through as a result of it.

Due to sponsorships and professionalization, excellence in performance is highly significant in the lives of athletes. This may inevitably lead to temptation, which may lure athletes into choosing an illegal 'shortcut' instead of the burdensome road to victory. By choosing the easy road, athletes will not become the best in their branch of sport, but they may secure financial stability, fame and respect – at least until reality is revealed.

Doping is thus a 'shortcut' to an easy victory. It is also a signal that the current status of elite sport is not acceptable. Doping denotes a variety of substances that have varied effects on health. When investigating the illegal substances used to enhance sports performance, it is useful to divide them into two distinct groups, i.e. substances and techniques.

Tamburini's classifies substances as follow:

1. Harmful but legal substances, prescribed by a doctor. This group includes anabolic steroids, human growth hormones, beta blockers, various stimulants (amphetamines) etc. Prolonged and uncontrolled usage of these substances may lead to severe health risks. The side effects of short-term use and controlled dosage are less known.
2. Harmful and illegal substances, including central nervous system stimulants.
3. Harmless and legal substances including diuretics and caffeine. These substances are used for many purposes and there are no limits to determine when and how to use them.⁸

WHAT IS DOPING AND WHAT IS SPORT?

Defining doping is a difficult task as several definitions already exist and none of them seems to be sufficiently inclusive. Nevertheless, a description of the phenomenon must be presented because of the need to debate new trends in sports, as well as the need to oblige athletes to comply with the rules.

⁸C. Tamburini, T. Tännsjö, *Values in Sport* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2000).

Certain substances and techniques can be used for the purposes of doping. Blood doping is the best-known example. When correctly done, although there is no known health risk identified with it, it remains illegal. A widely discussed controversy is that the same effect can be reached by high-altitude training, which is a legal technique. This shows that the notion of doping can be rather ambiguous.

It must be highlighted that despite its prohibition, doping still exists. WADA (the World Anti-Doping Association) defines doping by listing illegal substances and a description of antidoping behavioural tests. Some of the behavioural requirements include the availability of athletes during the entire preparation period in order to take random drug tests.

WADA states that using an illegal substance or technique is a direct violation of doping rules. If athletes object to a doping test, or, if the test is positive, the athletes may be banned from sports activities for a certain period of time. Every year, WADA updates its list of illegal substances and techniques.

In short, doping can be defined as the abuse or misuse of performance-enhancing substances and techniques. Defining the notion of doping also implies defining the notion of sport. This a similarly difficult task, but at least a broad definition is needed in order to differentiate between sport- and non-sport activities.

Moller proposed four main criteria for a sport. (1) The activities must be performed within the framework of competition (2) they should not serve any external purpose, (3) they must be organized and done according to a certain set of rules, (4) athletes aim at success and excellence.⁹

Further on, McNamee identifies sports as ritual activities done in a well-regulated and competitive way. In his interpretation, any sport has an ethical dimension.¹⁰

Suits devoted his entire research career to defining sport. His views can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. A goal needs to be set up before the competition (score a goal, jump over a certain height etc.)
2. Rules need to be established in order to identify what is and is not

⁹ V. Moller, *The Ethics of Doping and Anti-doping, Redeeming the Soul of Sport?* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁰ M. McNamee, *Sports, Vices, and Virtues* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2008).

permissible.¹¹

Suits argued that the athletes who do not comply with these views do not, in fact, pursue a sport. Furthermore, Suits offered a classical definition of sport: 'a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.'¹²

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH DOPING?

When arguing against doping, there are three main issues to consider.

1. Doping influences health in a negative way. However, pro-doping arguments against this issue are that making these substances illegal, which deprives athletes of their rights to decide freely on what to do with their own bodies.
2. Doping has harmful effects on society as substances are sometimes used by amateurs and young people.
3. Doping needs to be blocked on moral grounds. Temporarily it can be to the advantage of certain athletes while being at the disadvantage of non-users who may unjustly be deprived of the possibility to win. This situation contradicts one of the main principles of sport, that of competition, as the results are determined by external and artificial factors instead of the athletes' capabilities and skills. Also, sports, in general, hold a certain factor of uncertainty and may generate joy and excitement in supporters and spectators. Doping would ruin the uncertainty factor, as the legalization of various doping substances and techniques would contribute to the pre-calculability of results, thus significantly weaken the inherent joy and excitement in competitive sport.

As already argued before, the financial gains of doping are enormous. Doping does not belong to the sphere of excellence in sport, but rather to the realm of temporary financial benefits and false fame.

WHY ARE DRUGS USED IN SPORTS?

McNamee presents several characteristics of doping: (1) performance enhancement (2) expansion of training time and enhancement of training

¹¹ B. Suits, "Tricky Triad: Games, Play and Sport," *Journal of Philosophy of Sport* 13 (1988).

¹² B. Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2005).

efficiency; (3) unnatural; (4) addictive; (5) harmful for health; (6) unfair advantage over others.¹³

Instead of doping, McNamee recommends other performance-enhancing techniques, including the introduction of refined and special training, the use of hypoxic environments and tents, dieting awareness, improved technical conditions and training. In his opinion, all these conditions may contribute to enhanced performance without the use of drugs.

McNamee also adds that medicine is crucial for healing purposes but is unacceptable in sports and competition. Further, he added cynically that drugs might represent the price spectators and fellow athletes pay for the progressive nature of medical science.

Furthermore, McCalla adds that it is generally thought that the doping problem cannot be solved by making drugs more accessible.¹⁴

ARGUMENTS AGAINST DOPING

The purpose of the antidoping movement is to save sports. By definition, doping is using stimulating agents intentionally, with the aim of artificial or unfair enhancement of performance. But how can intentionality be proved? Athletes may defend themselves by arguing that they have only taken prescribed drugs, designed to improve their health. This argument is already known to be frequently used.

One of the essential antidoping arguments is its unnaturalness. There are two important questions related to this issue. The first issue is centred around what is considered natural versus unnatural, while the second one explores the arguments against the unnatural aspect of doping. There are no clear boundaries between what is natural and what is not. So, are 'natural' performance-enhancing substances acceptable and the others are automatically dismissed? In addition, sport itself can be seen as a sequence of unnatural activities performed in unnatural circumstances. Furthermore: why would the unnatural automatically be deemed immoral? Is the unnatural body considered ideal, whose functioning is not supported by normal human biological functions?

¹³ M. McNamee, *Sports, Vices, and Virtues* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁴ S. S. McCalla, N. Shepherd, "Moral/Ethical Analysis of Performance Enhancement in Sports," *International Journal of Arts & Sciences* (2014), www.universitypublications.net/ijas/0704/pdf/T4N233.pdf.

What natural when using performance-enhancing drugs and techniques? Sleeping in an oxygen tent to stimulate red blood cells to multiply and improve the body's oxygen supply seems to be acceptable because it is the body itself which produces these substances.

The biological antidoping argument thus asserts that doping is wrong because the substances used are harmful to the human body. However, not all illegal substances are harmful, so other arguments need to be found to declare doping harmful.

What should be the boundaries of controlled interference? How could doping be prevented? In addition to regular medical tests, athletes should be presented with the ethical side of the sport. The most common ethical argument is that doping allows using physical advantages in an unfair way. We may argue that there already is a considerable degree of inequality in sport. Then why should only doping be blamed for uneven conditions and unequal opportunities?

A further problem is that the same substances may have a different impact on different individuals. Considering this, legalizing certain forms of doping would not automatically lead to equality in sport.

PRO-DOPING ARGUMENTS

Tamburini believes that the prohibition of doping should be repealed because it is unreasonable¹⁵. Two major problems related to doping can be identified. The first problem relates to physical (medical) issues, while the other one is an ethical problem because doping does not comply with the principle of equal opportunity.

Tamburini's answer to the medical problem is that certain types of sport, including mountaineering, boxing or American football, can be more dangerous and can thus cause more severe injuries than doping itself (or might even lead to death). Furthermore, doping damages the health of athletes who use it, but it may also have effects on those who are reluctant to use drugs. Peer pressure might push these people into using drugs. Children and young people might also be affected, especially as successful athletes serve as role models, therefore young people might follow their examples.

Doping in professional sport is an increasingly severe issue. However, antidoping programs have been neglecting the ethical side of sports,

¹⁵ C. Tamburini, T. Tännsjö, *Values in Sport* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2000).

although the issues inherent in sport ethics are of great significance for young generations; furthermore, they have pedagogical implications.

It is not right to curtail the professional freedom of athletes, thus smoking or the consumption of coffee is not prohibited.

A significant number of professional athletes are adolescents. The use of performance-enhancing drugs must be prohibited because they are not considered mature to make such decisions independently and responsibly. However, this way, they would be disadvantaged by the athletes who do use performance-enhancing drugs. Often the adults decide instead of the young and these adult decisions are often based on the idea of moneymaking and profit.

Another argument for doping is related to equal opportunity. There is no equal opportunity in sport, but the use of performance-enhancing drugs could counterbalance the differences. Nevertheless, people's reactions to drugs are not alike. Instead of talent and skills, technology would play the most decisive role in sports achievements. Doping would transform sport into a technological game; consequently, the winner would be predictable, excluding the surprise factor.

Doping is typical in scalarly measurable types of sport, in which the results can be measured in metres, centimetres, kilograms, or seconds. Creativity-based sports are more dependable on talent.

Today large companies are involved in sports organizations and they sponsor athletes who are thus advantaged as compared to unsponsored athletes. This is another factor of inequality. This leads to another pro-doping argument (although a weaker one) everybody must run the race, with or without drugs, while the same rule applies to each participant – this is one of the basic principles in sport.

The essence of sports is testing skills and capabilities. When using performance-enhancing drugs, it is not the athlete but the substance which contributes to victory. Doping implies minor yet decisive differences.

Simon argues against doping.¹⁶ In his opinion, eating habits and training methods should be updated and modernized, thus contributing to the enhancement of performance in sport.

Furthermore, if doping is legalized, athletes would not be considered humans and characteristic features such as courage, perseverance and motivation would not improve.

¹⁶ R. L. Simon, "Good Competition and Drug-Enhanced Performance," in *Philosophic Inquiry in Sport*, ed. William J. Morgan, Klaus V. Meier (Champaigne, 1988).

There are several other arguments for the use of doping. Prohibition refers to the restriction of one's personal freedom by not making decision-making possible. Thus the prisoner's dilemma appears.

If nobody used doping, everyone had the chance to win the game, thus it is not in the interest of athletes to use drugs. On the other hand, if all participants use performance-enhancing drugs, then once again, everybody has the same chance of winning. If everybody uses the same performance-enhancing drug, but, due to side effects, it is an improper balance.

The problem is that doping implies the violation of rules, as it is prohibited. In this context, Tamburini believes that doping may be used in professional sport but it must be prohibited in amateur and recreational sport.

The professional athlete is driven by the desire to become number one and reach external goals such as money and prestige. Thus amateur and recreational sports have different aims. Those who play sports as amateurs have different, often internal goals.

Morgan's view on performance-enhancing drugs suggests that despite their harmful, addictive and morally destructive effects - they need to be legalized because there are too many chemicals, dietary supplements, painkillers in special diets and the dividing line between these substances and the performance-enhancing substances is very obscure. Furthermore, in addition to drugs, there are too many different unethical training methods, which are primarily undetectable and harmful.¹⁷

Competitors have varied access to resources such as trainers, psychologists, training equipment etc., resulting in unequal competition conditions. Still, modern sport is often identified with equal opportunity and fair play, and several experts say that the spread of doping would end sports activities.

In addition, modern sport faces other problems, such as its connection to economy and politics. This might also contribute to the risk of doping.

17 W. J. Morgan, "Athletic Perfection, Performance-Enhancing Drugs, and the Treatment-Enhancement Distinction," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 36(2) (2009), www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00948705.2009.9714755.

The general opinion about doping used to be that it is acceptable if it does not harm the athletes' health. Thus medical and ethical arguments supplement each other.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

The antidoping arguments can be summarized as follows:

1. Competitive sports have a significant educational role in other areas of life as well.
2. From a medical point of view, doping in sport is incompatible with health.
3. From an ethical point of view, doping is incompatible with sports as athletes may be unfairly given advantages, thus damaging the sporting spirit.

According to Kant, the human being is the citizen of the Empire of Freedom, but also of the physical world of duties, and has to be present in both worlds. But can we exist in two worlds at the same time? Kant's philosophy gives us an answer to this question: the world of freedom does not exist without the world of duties. We are aware of our freedom only if we are aware of our duties. If we do not obey, then we succumb to our instincts and desires.

The ultimate goal in sport is victory, although not by all means. Victory is valuable only if it comprises true excellence, i.e. it also makes the adversary improve. If the adversary is defeated through cheating, there is no improvement; consequently, there is no victory. In this regard, the author of this essay agrees with Robert Simon, that all athletes must believe that victory takes place only if all participants improve. Values need to become universal in sport, independent of gender, age, or health. This needs to be the central idea of sports.

Victory in itself does not grant anyone supremacy over adversaries. The best sportsman does not always win, but a true sportsman is always determined to become the best.

My approach describes the issue of primacy in fairness. There are no ceremonies organized before competitions to make solemn promises. Participation is the promise itself.

18 P. Dimeo, *A History of Drug Use in Sport: 1876–1976: Beyond Good and Evil* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2007).

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