

Win, or Die Trying: How Doping Hurts Sports Culture

In the 1980s, physician Robert Goldman conducted a survey asking athletes if they would take a pill that would make them the best in their sport, but kill them in five years. Shockingly, over 50% said they would take the pill. Although Goldman's experimental credibility has been questioned for many years, his research reveals a dark side of professional sports; the urge to win often trumps morals and even safety. Cheating has plagued sports since their creation, and "doping" using banned performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) has become more and more prevalent, leading to the creation of the World Anti-Doping Agency in 1999. While the general sports audience today still considers doping as cheating and supports strict bans, a growing group of ethical critics and geneticists have emerged, pushing for the legalization of PEDs. These sports scientists emphasize the significance of heredity and socio-economic factors in athletic success, and many policymakers want to use PEDs to "level the playing field." While inherent inequalities exist in high-level sports, allowing doping would do nothing to create fairer opportunities, ruining the fundamental culture and enjoyment of sports.

A widespread legalization of doping amplifies, not reduces the genetic inequities already found in sports, widening the gap between the rich and the poor, the genetically "gifted" and the "unlucky." Many studies have already found associations between certain genes and athletic performance; for example, professor of kinesiology Lisa Guth at Iowa State found that the ACTN3 gene could have significant advantages for athletes in power events like weight lifting (Guth and Roth 2013). This commonly studied gene provides evidence that genetics does play a large role in athletic performance, and this is a fact that is widely accepted by the sports community. Genetic differences are indeed a significant factor in human performance, but they are a biological aspect that cannot ever be removed completely. Though some geneticists like

Professor Julian Savulescu, Chair of Practical Ethics at the University of Oxford, sees doping as a genetic equalizer, allowing PEDs actually worsens these inequalities. Dr. Dan Roden, a professor of medicine at Vanderbilt University, conducted a 2002 study on genetic responses to drugs, finding that a person's genes greatly impact their body's response to specific drugs (Roden et al. 2002). When someone takes steroids, the results they see and improvements in performance will depend mostly on their genetics, just like much of their natural athletic ability. Those athletes with genes better suited for using powerful drugs will therefore have a natural advantage over those that do not respond as well. This will only lead to a narrowing of the successful niche in athletic success; athletes must be born with favorable athletic genes *and* favorable genes for doping, causing greater inequality in sports.

Aside from improving genetic "equality," researchers like Savulescu also believe that allowing doping can improve the socio-economic gap in sports. Savulescu compared the cost of advanced training techniques like hypoxic air machines with the common blood steroid Epogen, finding that using the drug would be significantly cheaper and more accessible (Savulescu et. al 2004). In essence, since performance enhancing drugs are relatively cheap, making them more available to athletes would allow those in poorer areas to compete more fairly with their richer counterparts. While it is true that these drugs are far more affordable than "fair" methods of training, could they almost be *too* accessible? Savulescu does not consider the widespread implications of legalizing such powerful drugs with proven side effects, as they will be more accessible to *all* athletes, including the amateur and the youth. Further, more developed countries and regions will advance their doping technology faster, producing more novel, more effective, and more expensive steroids solely for the wealthy elite. Similar to the issue of genetic equity, a legalization of doping harms, not helps the socio-economic disparity in professional sports.

Aside from issues of equality, today's culture of professional sports has become more about business than enjoyment, and a legalization of doping removes the enjoyment from elite sports altogether. The official motto of the Olympics today echoes the belief that "the essential thing is not conquering, but fighting well" (Baron et. al 2007). In other words, the ideal sports culture is one where effort and participation are valued over winning. This is where the inherent value of sports lies: in character building, perseverance, and personal growth. However, social and market factors have transformed professional sports into a booming global industry, rather than the utopia of participation trophies envisioned by the Olympic committee. Most countries today pay their Olympic athletes massive bonuses for winning medals; the United States rewarded their gold medalists with \$37,500 USD each, with smaller countries like Singapore offering a whopping \$1,000,000 USD for gold medal winners (Elkins 2018). With such life-changing sums of cash and alluring sponsorship deals from companies, how can an elite athlete focus on just "fighting well?" Such high stakes do not mix well with a legalization of doping; the entire goal of doping is to "win at all costs," and this is supplemented by an increasing drive to win for material gains, contradicting the intrinsic value of sport.

This unhealthy level of competition has already been seen in the highly publicized Tour de France. In such a prestigious event, the social and financial gains are immense, and so are the incentives to win. Doping has been so prevalent in the Tour de France that some critics like Verner Moller, a professor of sports science at Aarhus University, claim that "cycling culture is so infected that it may be beyond rescue" (Moller and Dimeo 2014). Moller argues that allowing doping would make the race fairer since all cyclists would be able to reach their full potential with powerful PEDs. While it seems like a simple logical solution, these critics fail to recognize the ethical considerations that come with a free-for-all stance on doping. Since PEDs such as

Epogen do provide significant cardiovascular advantages, doping will eventually be a requirement for athletes to be competitive. But what if religious or genetic factors prevent an athlete from injecting steroids into their body? This solution of a full legalization of doping is a careless, selfish solution that ignores the health of athletes and also the nature of a historical competition.

This current prevalence of doping in professional and international sports has even percolated into lower-level competitions, as doping in amateur sports is becoming more common. A recent 2017 study by April Henning, a lecturer at the University of Stirling and a member of the USA Cycling Committee on Anti-Doping, discovered a disturbing trend in amateur doping. She discussed the idea of “unintended promotion,” which is when the publicity of a PED in a professional sport leads to increases in the use of that drug in amateur sports; for example, after Maria Sharapova was exposed for using the banned drug Meldonium, sales doubled in Russia (Henning 2017). This shows that the prevalence of doping on the professional level significantly influences the use of PEDs in amateur and even youth sports. If doping is allowed at these elite levels, it is not unlikely that we would also see an increase in amateur doping. This level of sport is known for being a healthy level of competition, where the general public can participate and enjoy the intrinsic benefits of sports. Aside from the physical dangers, doping at the amateur level emphasizes again the “win at all costs” mindset of professional sports, ruining the culture of a broad spectrum of healthy everyday sporting activities.

For many amateur and intramural athletes, doping can also extinguish the feeling of personal growth, hurting the value of all sports. Peter Singer, a professor of bioethics at Princeton University, wrote in his essay “Is Doping Wrong?” that most people try to improve their performance in sports “for its own sake, for the sense of achievement” (Singer 323). Singer

believes that the general public chooses to play sports for a wide variety of reasons, for exercise, for fun, for money, but the joy from sports comes from improving through honest practice and a feeling of accomplishing something. The fundamental goal of doping, however, is purely to enhance performance, to help win and conquer over all. Legalized PEDs encourage an environment of cutthroat competition, where winning, not self-fulfillment and pleasure, is the only motivation to play sports. For the protection of sports culture and value, doping must continue to be banned and discouraged at all levels of competition.

This is not to say that today's doping prevention measures are effective; as spectators and athletes, we must change the way the sports community views competition to prevent PEDs from ruining sports culture. Condemning exposed dopers does nothing for the future; to preserve the value of sports, we as the audience must think more closely about who we cheer for, who we support, and what type of sports culture we promote. By supporting the qualities of sportsmanship and friendly competition, rather than only cheering on winners, the community can defeat the entire purpose of doping, making PEDs obsolete in the future. I see these virtues already in the high school sports community; on my swim team, my teammates and I raced against each other every day, building healthy rivalries. We pushed each other to get better, competed with each other, and celebrated with each other, even when we got second, third, and occasionally last place. I hope one day all athletes can enjoy this feeling every time they compete, even professional athletes.

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