'DOPING' AND THE DOUBLE STANDARD IN PROFESSIONAL SPORT

Carl Thomen

Carl Thoman asks what is and isn't legimate when it comes to 'performance enhancement'?

In this paper I present an argument that challenges an intuitive and widely held view regarding the use of performance enhancing drugs in professional sport. People are generally opposed to the use of performance enhancers in sport, and this negative reaction has a number of arguments at its root. For example, critics claim that these drugs affect the purity of the sport, or that they could possibly have unforeseen and negative side-effects on athletes. By far the most prominent claim against performance enhancers is that they give an illegal and undeserved edge to those who use them. I will focus on and explain this last claim, and in doing so I hope to draw attention to a double standard I believe to be present in professional sport.

I believe that questioning the use of performance enhancers is valuable, as it leads to discussions concerning the legitimacy of rewarding athletes who are using all types of synthetic aids to be better and, ultimately, to win. There are also important ethical questions which occur on the slippery slope between sport in the traditional, amateur, 'Greek', understanding of the term, and sport played by super-enhanced, 'semi-human', and extremely well-paid athletes. If technology allowed one to alter one's genes, or to attach robotic arms, legs, etc to become better at a sport (or for that matter, better human beings), should we allow it? Before considering the claim that performance enhancers give an athlete an undeserved and unfair edge, I would first like to consider responses to some standard positions on the use of performance enhancing drugs.

Lincoln Allison challenges the standard view that performance enhancing drugs should be banned from sport (*Mail* and *Guardian*, Aug 13, 2004). First, Allison states that, for him at least, sport is valuable because it gives everyone

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the chance to participate, and because it allows us to watch and take sides as professionals exhibit those *non-physical* qualities that set them apart from others with possibly the same *physical* characteristics; qualities such as skill, tactical awareness, judgment, courage, vision, risk assessment and strategic thinking. Performance enhancing drugs do not, and could not, conceivably alter *these* qualities. Although there is no dispute that doping improves 'animal' attributes such as brute strength, power and stamina, Allison argues that if these attributes could be improved by doping, then all the better for the sport concerned, as athletes would be quicker, able to jump higher, lift heavier weights and last longer on the field of play. As Allison puts it, an athlete who uses performance enhancing drugs just 'moves up to the level appropriate to her underlying ability'.

Second, Allison questions the assumption that doping will have a negative effect on the spectator; that people would be put off watching a sport if they knew that performance enhancers were used. He considers a few famous contemporary cases. When an inquiry into the Tour de France found widespread use of EPO drugs the supporters didn't care. A full house was present to watch Mark McGwire break Major League Baseball's home-run record, even though it was widely believed that he used the performance enhancer nandrolone. Finally, Allison asks whether the fact that the number of players in the professional American Football League that weigh over 140kg has skyrocketed from 10 a couple of years ago, to over 300 today, is simply because of high protein diets? So, if doping does not influence what we really value in sports prowess, and, if as a matter of fact, spectators don't care, then why not allow it?

Allison's argument is strong; I would now like to consider the claim that performance enhancers give an athlete an undeserved and unfair edge in competition. By doing so I would like to draw attention to the inherent double standards displayed in the official attitudes towards doping and technology. The fact is, we allow performance enhancers already. It's just that we keep them outside our bodies. Consider the following:

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As recently as the early nineties, field hockey goalkeepers wore pads made of sponge rubber and cane, gloves similar to those of a cricket batsman, and only the most rudimentary face protectors and helmets. Nowadays, wearing kit like that would be suicide. Why? Has the game of hockey changed so that it is easier to make circle entries and shoot for goal? Are there new techniques that put `keepers at a disadvantage and make them more vulnerable? On the contrary, provisions have been made (especially in set pieces like the penalty corner) that make it harder to score. These include making it compulsory for the ball to leave the circle – the shooting area – before it is allowed to be returned for a shot on goal. The simple answer to the question of why goalkeepers need so much more protection, and why rules such as the above have been introduced, can be summed up in two words: the stick. Hockey sticks have developed from long pieces of curved yellowwood, in a shape similar to that of a flat banana, into potentially lethal weapons. Not one member of the current South African national hockey side uses a wooden stick. They use sticks made of a combination of graphite, aramide, kevlar and carbon fibre. Why? Because sticks like these enable one to literally hit the cover off a ball. Ten years ago, that would have been unthinkable. However, the evolution doesn't end there. Sticks are now geometrically curved in a nature similar to that of a hunting bow. This enables anyone wanting to flick the ball (lifting the ball by slinging it along the stick) to do so with much more power, as the ball gathers more momentum as it travels across the length of the stick. Because of this, the drag-flick from a penalty corner is now a standard option, and allows teams to score more goals. International teams such as Pakistan, Germany and Holland have perfected it to such an extent that they don't need any other variations to score since their players can flick a ball at the same speed as they can hit it. Perhaps the reader should stop and consider that fact, and its implications for the goalkeeper and the defending players. First, these improvements have meant that defending teams have had to put more emphasis on safety: face masks and groin and hand protection has become mandatory. Second,

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with improvements such as these, it is getting exponentially harder to stop the opposition scoring.

Technological innovations such as the above are present in all sports, and at all levels. Companies like Nike, Adidas, Speedo, New Balance and Reebok are constantly striving to manufacture products which give athletes the edge over their opponents. One just has to take a look at the sportswear on show at the recent Olympic Games in Athens to realize this. For example, swimmers are now using full-body suits made out of material that minimizes friction with the water. Yes, would come the reply, but how much difference do these suits really make? The answer is simple: Even if they shave hundredths of a second off a swimmers time, they have done their job, as it is a fact that swimming is a sport where split seconds do matter.

Track athletes are also wearing ever more technologically improved outfits. When Cathy Freeman won the 400 metres at the Sydney Olympics, she was wearing a full-body Nike 'Windsuit', designed, as far-fetched as it may sound, to reduce air friction and thus make her run faster. Spiked athletic shoes are also standard issue today. These shoes have been proved to reduce times by full seconds by virtue of the better grip, and therefore propulsion, that they afford the athlete. Simply put, if you don't wear them, you are going to lose.

The examples above of swimmers and track athletes are particularly good ones as they both involve sports that have been the traditional bastions of those blowing the anti-doping trumpet the loudest. But isn't this remarkable, as it seems athletes can use any technology (clothes, shoes, heart-rate monitors etc) to help them beat their opponent, as long as this technology is put on *the outside* of the body. Yes, comes the immediate response, but when you take performance enhancers, *you* are not competing. It is some super-you; you are performing way beyond your natural capacity. People who use this line of argument are simply (and conveniently) omitting the impact of new technology. Don't running spikes, Windsuits and composite hockey sticks do exactly the same thing? Anyone arguing from an 'all athletes need equal footing'

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perspective is going to have to go the whole way and have us all passing the baton barefoot and naked.

This then is the double standard present today in professional sport: we allow technological improvements in equipment to help our athletes, but declare using (some) technological improvements in synthetic stimulants for the same ends illegal. Today's athletes have such sport-specific, regimented training regimes, not to mention all the added bonuses afforded by improved equipment, that performance enhancers simply represent the next logical step in trying to realize maximum human potential. The fact that I break the world record for the 100 metre sprint while using a performance enhancer doesn't detract from the fact that it was me who broke the record – it doesn't make it any less an essentially human achievement. Not just anyone taking the performance enhancer would break that record; I still need all my usual training and commitment. In short, I still need to be the best. It merely means that with the help of performance enhancers, I can be even better.

This is not an argument for all types of steroids to be made available whole-sale to the public; I feel that this could well endanger many lives. Some athletes might well want to argue that they don't want to risk their lives to compete and win, and that others willingness to do this puts them at a disadvantage. The fact is that many safe performance enhancers are banned alongside those that are dangerous – why not just ban the dangerous ones? I am not offering a complete policy on performance enhancers; I am merely asking us to rethink our intuitive reactions towards performance enhancers, as arguing that performance enhancers give athletes an unfair edge runs into the problems discussed above.

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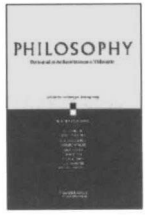
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