

Is the oxygenation of athletes a form of “doping” ?

In an article written by Mr. Gabriel Hanot, the French sport Bulletin *L'Équipe* recently published a report on the topic of the oxygenation of athletes. While quoting a few passages of this report we wish to mention a few of the personal opinions of experienced people on the subject.

We admit right away that football players are often given inhalations of oxygen in countries such as South America, chiefly Brazil, Chili and Argentine. This process is quickly spreading to Europe including Great-Britain where one seems to be convinced of the boon this method of oxygenation is to the athlete. At a Conference held at Liverpool by the British Medical Sport Association, Roger Bannister, a medical student of world fame as runner of half distance race, made the following statement : all records would be beaten were we to administer oxygen to athletes in a manner similar to the one used in connection with the victorious team of the Everest climbers. From personal experiences made in Oxford, he is able to record the fact that : “While breathing the ambient fresh air, signs of fatigue make their appearance about the 7th or 8th minute afterwards as against only 22 or 23 minutes after the taking of oxygen.” Professor Albert Hemingway of the physiological section of the University of Leeds, replies that he would prefer to see other means used, in order to attain a higher standard of performances, such as appointing more efficient trainers, improving the tracks and equipment of various sport installations.

According to Mr. Scopelli, the present trainer of the team “Espanol” of Barcelona and the most ardent supporter of the application of oxygen to footballers during half time and at the conclusion of the match, this inhaling of oxygen presents no effect of “doping,” it does not provoke any feeling of elation nor does it act as a stimulant. The players of his club have observed that after the administering of oxygen on the night of the performance, they feel much calmer than before, they sleep better and feel more rested the next day.

Wherever the atmosphere is charged with more oxygen, the air grows fresher and sport performances tend to improve. The American Champion Harrison Dillard stated at Stuttgart that the feats realized at the Olympic Games of 1952 at Helsinki were partly due to the good air of Finland abounding in oxygen.

Did the Russians not chose as site for

holding their swimming Championships, the Asiatic region of Alma Ata situated in the high range of the Tien-Chang mountains and this on account of the strong oxygenation of the air ? The Germans, although forbidding the oxygenation of their football players, actually do use oxygen apparatus not only in connection with alpinism and aviation but in the working of the mines as well as speleology and in deep-sea explorations. Does this not confirm the fact that this process is harmless ? The oxygenation of athletes is still in its experimental stage and certain French doctors have condemned it a priori.

The manager of the British team, Walter Winterbottom has observed the reaction on the Brazilian players at Rio during the contest for the World Football Cup in 1950. He said that the inhaling of oxygen by the football players while lying flat on massage tables during a lapse of time amounting to 7 or 8 minutes produced a complete relaxation of the muscles, thus inducing a loosening which is beneficial to the whole system and constitutes the best form of recuperation. It seems that oxygen applied under medical supervision is harmless and that it does not present, under any form whatsoever, the characteristics of a drug except perhaps when acting on the imagination, as was the case with the bottle of sugar and water that was carried by the famous cycling manager of past heroic days : Choppy Warburton. The oxygenation would therefore bring about a welcomed form of recuperation after the strain intense wear and tear ; it would be a means to speed up the recovering of the normal balance in the functions of the lungs, the heart and the muscles. Nothing more. The Secretary of the “Football League” Mr. Howarth has made the following statement : “There is nothing illegal in the use of oxygen as a distributor of energy. Stimulants are not forbidden ; commonsense condemns all excesses just as it has maintained within reasonable limits the glandular treatments given to footballers.”

British people therefore do not look upon the taking of oxygen as a dope or an artificial and dangerous stimulant, but as a regulator of the pulmonary function, an element which checks and holds back fatigue and the wear and tear of the organs as well as exercises a beneficial action of recuperation after the intense expense of energy and sustained effort. However do not expect miracles to happen as the result of this process of oxygenation !

Views of the Sport medical international Federation on a topical matter.

We have asked Professor Giuseppe La Cava, Secretary-General of the S. M. I. F. to kindly give us his opinion with regards to

the oxygenation imposed on the athlete while in the course of the latter sport's activity. We thank him for the most interesting report he has kindly sent us and we retain the following conclusions : ... "We must admit that the application of oxygen is of some practical assistance but only in the case of athletes who are suffering from extreme exhaustion. The *preventive* action of the therapeutic oxygenation when applied to the athlete *before* the strain and effort demanded of him provokes only a feeling of elation or well-being of short duration which is too mild in its effect to affect the yield of the athlete. Applied in this manner the absorption of oxygen comes *within the range of "doping" and not of the best kind either*:"

On the otherhand, it is evident that the use of therapeutic-oxygenation as a curative agent can be of some value when applied to *subjects who are tired* with a view of bringing a speedy recovery thus befitting them for standing up to new physical exertion, while its preventive application ought to be discouraged on the ground that it is inadequate and fails to bring a satisfactory result. As well as this, its application is not harmless and does incur a certain amount of risks.

Perhaps the best way to apply therapeutic-oxygenation is to give oxygen to athletes *between two athletic events* demanding an intense strain and effort as is the case, for instance, during half-time in a football match.