

DRUGS AND SPORT

A Review Article

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Ronald S Laura and Saxon W White, *Drug Controversy in Sport: The Socio-ethical and Medical Issues*. Allen and Unwin, North Sydney, 1991.

Drug Controversy in Sport - The Socio-ethical and Medical Issues, edited by Ronald S Laura and Saxon W White, is a collection of some of the papers delivered at the 1st National Congress on Socio-Ethical and Medical Aspects of Drugs and Sport, conducted by the Hunter Academy in August 1989. Two of the main sessions at the congress, a public forum and a 'hypothetical' are reported in separate publications available from the Academy, but several other papers with interesting titles are not mentioned anywhere but in the congress program. At the same time some of the published papers present basic material which is readily available in many publications, other papers cover similar material and yet other papers present much more detail than is necessary for their purposes. The collection in that sense suffers the defect, found in most collections of conference papers, of lack of coherence and balance. On the other hand, all the central questions arise either in individual papers, or in considering the conflicting assertions of different authors, and although they would require some guidance as to priority, senior secondary and tertiary students would find the collection a useful introduction to the issues of drugs in sport. For that purpose the recommendations of the congress might be useful, although a more analytical and less discursive introduction or a longer, more purposeful

conclusion would have helped to advance understanding of the many inter-related problems. At various points the two editors suggest that they have a coherent approach to the problems of drugs in sport but the reader is left with only glimpses of it. The main value of the collection is therefore heuristic, when it might have been more constructive. But then it is a report of the *first* Australian congress.

In this review I shall not comment on each paper in turn, but attempt to show how the various papers raise, and relate to, questions which are central to the issue of drugs in sport.

The editors open the volume with a paper which ranges over the contemporary interest in drugs in sport, the history of doping, the health risk steroids, the black market in drugs and an attempt to explain why athletes take drugs. The early sections include fairly standard material which is uncontroversial, but in the last section which focuses on reasons why doping persists in sport, the standard material is perhaps not so uncontroversial. Laura and White state that doping in sport is a facet of the drug problem in society, because we have 'created a drug culture' by 'our craving for instant satisfaction and for maximum achievement with a minimum of effort' (p. 12). This tendency is exacerbated by a 'crisis of values' in which only winning is acceptable. Olympic nationalism, the media and big business, all serve to make the pressure on athletes unbearable, with the result that they are prepared to risk health problems. This explanation, presenting the athlete as a victim of society which has 'become progressively distracted as a culture from the way of nature to the way of the chemist' (p. 12) is rather too glib in not considering the possibly significant differences between the athletic endeavour and society, (even if the latter is the *achieving society* governed by the performance principle). While the purposes of drug use in sport are quite clear and specific, the same is not true of drug use in society. Do the authors have in mind 'recreational drug use', the reliance on pills as the remedy for health problems, or the search for excitement or meaning or escape? Why, too, do not all athletes succumb to these pressures? Further, if we believe the views presented by

Elizabeth Toohey in her contribution 'Is there a place for drugs in the performing arts?' why is it so different among ballet dancers? Her explanation in terms of the competitive nature of sport is not so plausible for athletes in the major professional games who have a persistent long-term commitment similar to those of dancers. Ballet dancers are members of the same society. The point is not that these explanations are wrong but that they require more argument than 'when all is said (p. 12). Finally it is surprising that no mention is made of the 'level playing field argument'.

The paper by John Black, who chaired the Senate Standing Committee investigating the use by Australian sportsmen and sportswomen of performance enhancing drugs, will be familiar to anyone who has read the two reports resulting from this inquiry. It is a little unfortunate that this paper was presented after the interim, but before the final, report was published. It is useful in this collection though for its emphasis on two points. The first is the claim that:

one of the most striking features of the inquiry to date has been the inability of most witnesses to put forward logically consistent arguments as to why drugs should be banned in sport (p. 21).

This is significant, because it remains true to this day. The speakers at the congress indicate in various ways the difficulties involved, but no one seems to have a realistic idea of what would count as a sound reason, or any feasible plan as to how any such reason might be influential among those who control sport. Certainly it is not much help to be told that society is at fault, even if it is true.

The second point of importance is the decision by the Senate Committee to base their opposition to doping on the harm caused to athletes. The Committee rejected arguments based on fair play. This decision is significant in the context of this report because it provides a nice antithesis to views put forward in other papers and thereby provides the reader with an initiation into an important point of dispute. On the matter of harm as a reason, the subsequent papers by White and Laura

both raise the cases of performance enhancing procedures (steroids and- genetic engineering) which are not only not harmful but even, perhaps, beneficial, not only to performance but also to health. White presents evidence to support the conclusion that there may be a desirable form of steroid taking which will not only give female athletes on steroids advantages over their female competitors in susceptibility to fractures and management of menstruation, but will also provide a metabolic advantage over males in endurance events. So, now we have harmful steroid use and beneficial steroid use. As White points out, this raises the question of the distinction which Howard, in another paper attempts to make between a restorative (medical) use and an ergogenic (performance enhancing) use. Howard calls these equal opportunity and unequal opportunity uses, and the distinction merits further discussion. It remains a problem.

The difficulties following from an argument based on the harm to athletes, for the development of a sound policy on drugs in sport are raised again by Laura in a wider context in his paper 'The Doping Problem in Sport: from drugs to genetic engineering'. After an overly long discussion of genetic engineering, probably to convince readers that they are considering not some science fiction possibility, but an imminent problem for sport, Laura asks:

It may well be that genetic engineering will be used as the ultimate performance boosting aid, and if no harm is done to the athlete in the process, what grounds does the IOC have in prohibiting performance boosting transformations? (p. 108).

Laura raises the issue of genetic engineering because he wishes to argue, rightly in my view, that solving the drug problem is merely a technical solution to treat a symptom. Banning only drugs which are harmful (and detectable) is merely an antidotal solution to a fundamental problem of value and philosophy in sport. He argues that a more difficult manifestation of this fundamental problem will arise

when genetic engineering provides athletes with a *harmless* and *undetectable* competitive advantage.

This deeper problem, he describes as: a loss or failure of a philosophy of sport which motivates 'play' for its own sake - for 'the love of the game' if you like - and which sees sporting interaction as an activity which serves to enhance human integrity rather than just human performance (p. 90).

He then criticises the IOC for abandoning the notion of 'fair play' as a basis for prohibiting doping. The reader can attempt to see to what extent this criticism is true, because Arnold Beckett, a member of the IOC Medical Commission, describes the IOC philosophy of dope control in his paper 'The Future of the Olympic Movement'.

It is at this point, in the quest for a coherent approach to the drug problem however, that the reader needs a little more guidance, and doubts begin to grow about the case for banning doping. The links between 'play', 'enhancing integrity', 'fair play' (Laura) and 'the essence of the sporting contest: the matching of the natural capabilities of the participants' (Beckett p. 27) are not at all clear. Howard in his paper warns of the difficulties with terms like 'natural' and 'fair play'. He discusses 'fair play' in terms of 'equal conditions for all' and argues that this is a highly relative notion. Which conditions are considered relevant to fair play ('change your shoes but not your chemistry') (p. 45) is somewhat arbitrary. This is the view that led Senator Black and his committee to dismiss 'fair play' as providing the basis for a convincing argument against drugs: 'sport is not fair in the sense of this argument' (p. 22). The difficulties here also prompted the IOC in the words of Beckett to develop 'the pragmatic approach', leaving the philosophical basis appropriately vague (p. 27).

It is interesting to note that Laura, who wants fair play to be put back into the argument, seems unhappy with what might be regarded as a paradigm case of equal conditions for all. In his discussion of genetic

engineering he postulates the generation of an ideal genetic template for bodybuilders and the cloning of a pool of competitors, 'each of whom would have the same genetic chance of success as any other' (p. 108). He then says:

If this were to happen, the standards of the competition would doubtless be extremely high but the contest would be somewhat boring and, judging a lineup of bodybuilding clones would be a nightmare. We would be looking simply to determine how well the competitors realise the *same* genetic potential.

It all depends it seems on what the contest is about - not being boring, or finding the best athletic effort, in an ultimate sense. Rather like giving everyone the same yacht, or racing car. Sometimes we do, sometimes we don't. Choices have to be made.

The emphasis on 'fair play' however, can be misleading because it tends to conflate consideration of two separate questions: 'Why should athletes not take performance enhancing drugs?' and 'Why should performance enhancing drugs be banned?' The answer to the first question is quite simple: 'it's against the rules' and so it's certainly unfair, since the rules serve to define for competitors an equal opportunity in the contest. The answer to the second question is more difficult, requiring an argument justifying a rule banning drugs. The difference between the two questions is shown by noting that in the absence of a rule banning drugs, in one sense the question of fair play would not arise, but it may still be undesirable on other grounds for *all* the athletes to have the same legal opportunity to take performance enhancing drugs. Laura offers the beginnings of such an argument when he refers to enhancing human integrity' (p. 90). Such a phrase has echoes of the educational philosophy of Olympism where sport is valued for its contributions to the harmonious development of the athlete. As Laura argued sport is no longer valued primarily for those effects, but the argument about drugs in sport has to begin with justifiable decisions about what value sport is to have. It is unfortunate that Becker's paper presenting the IOC position, on the one hand regards the unrestricted

use of drugs and other performance enhancing procedures ‘as complete negation of the ideals of the Olympic movement’ (p. 37) but on the other is so vague in the specifications of those ideals. This deficiency is noted by Laura and the first recommendation urges the IOC to attend to the problem. Howard’s paper points out some of the difficulties in developing such philosophy.

In the absence of a sound philosophical basis the argument from harm is equally as tenuous as the argument from fair play. As Howard argues, ‘reasonable risks and honest mistakes are one thing, deliberate exploitation of oneself or others is quite another’, (p. 52) but deciding between a reasonable risk and exploitation is impossible in the absence of a framework of values. Risking one’s health in the pursuit of worthwhile goals is not always to be despised. It is not clear either that reference to Kantian notions of people as ends rather than means has any weight when adult athletes make deliberate choices, in full knowledge of the best evidence about risks. Certainly exploitation of the young and the ignorant is difficult to defend, but that is another problem. It is a strange omission, too, in the report, that no mention is made of the relationship between harm and dosage, and of the advantages of medically controlled use. Among those attending the conference was at least one person well known for advocating medically controlled use, so that athletes do not fall victim to the ‘more is better’ syndrome, taking massive doses. Arguments against controlled rational use depend for their force on the nature of the value of sport as Laura urges. Then there is the further matter of how to have a defensible view prevail; that is, how to have it shared among those who control sport, and how to bring it to bear on the conduct of sport. Even if the IOC had a shared defensible view one might be sceptical about whether it would make any difference, given the power of the media because of the financial dependence of sport on it.

L Scott Frazier in his paper ‘Psychological Parameters of Drugs in Sport’ provides an overview of the many dangers associated with drug use and urges the education of parents, coaches, doctors and peers,

about these dangers. The introduction to his survey raises the question 'What is an acceptable drug and what is not?' and he offers the following definition of what is unacceptable from the European Council:

the administering or use of substances in any form alien to the body, or of physiological substances in abnormal amounts and with abnormal methods by healthy persons with the exclusive aim of attaining an artificial and unfair increase of performance in competition (p. 111).

Frazier argues that the definition is useful in distinguishing between 'restoring or maintaining health' and 'bestowing an advantage', but feels that it needs to be supplemented by reference to harmful side effects. Some of the difficulties posed by such a definition have been discussed already, but the distinction between 'restoring or maintaining health' and 'bestowing an advantage' deserves further attention, because it is raised in various forms by a number of the authors, and provides a further illustration of the prior need for a clear justification for what is desirable in athletic endeavour. Howard argues for the value of the distinction between drugs of equal and unequal opportunity: the first enable you to perform at your established potential (restorative, but not in a health sense); the second enables you to enhance your performance. Goldman in his overview of the medical and side effects of performance enhancing drugs refers to two classes of sports drugs: restorative (aiding recovery to a previous state of health and performance) and ergogenic. White raises the troublesome example of exogenous oestrogen which can be seen either as 'a form of therapy that will correct an endogenous defect' (restorative or equal opportunity) or as 'a form of therapy that will provide the athlete with an illegal advantage' (ergogenic, or unequal opportunity).

These distinctions need to be considered against the nature of the athletic endeavour which has two basic components: training to improve one's potential (getting fitter) and performing to that potential on demand (one can train for that too). The ultimate is to perform to one's highest potential when it matters. An athlete may win while performing

well below potential, or may lose performing at potential (or indeed exceeding the purported potential). Howard seems to think that a harmless drug which removes a defect preventing performance to the standard of established potential is acceptable but one enabling an enhanced potential is not. The first one is restorative in the sense of restoring the athlete to his/her potential; it would cover drugs to prevent nervousness, or to improve ability to focus under pressure of an important competition or to ease the pain of injury. It is difficult to see how such a use is different in any way which is important to athletics from a use to enhance potential: both end up enhancing performance.

Medical uses are restorative in a different sense; they restore the athlete to a potential not limited by some recognised health condition. White's discussion shows the difficulty of maintaining the distinction in these cases too. Again, to make a rational policy one needs reference to a defensible theory of the value of sport. Only then can one give a sense to what is meant by '*falsely* enhancing the physical and/or mental condition' (Goldman p. 131), and other such claims. We have rules which prescribe the use of drugs to enhance cycling performance but which allow the use of new cycles not available to other competitors. It is necessary to decide what matters.

It can be seen therefore that this collection will enable the thoughtful reader, or the reader with a thoughtful teacher to confront the important questions. Not many answers are apparent but that is hardly to be expected in a collection of papers from a *first* national conference. As Howard says the challenge remains, 'to articulate what it is to be a fair and honest competitor in an age of biochemical technology' (p. 57).

This volume may be one place to start.