

Position statements - 7. Doping and substance abuse in competitive sport, 2003

FEPSAC Position Statement #7

Doping and substance abuse in competitive sport

1. Development of the problem of doping

In the 20th century, sport has become increasingly important in our society. Professionalisation and a pervasive presence in the media, combined with the involvement of more sponsor money, have led to greater interest in competitive sports. This interest has led to the perception of greater and greater pressure on the part of the athlete to perform to his/her optimum. At the same time, the performance level among top athletes has become very similar in basically all sports, thus creating a pressure to train even harder in order to gain an edge for performance.

These practices in sport mirror our society. It actually embodies the competitiveness and the rapid technological development we have witnessed in our daily lives during the last decade and in the dawn of the 21st century. Corporations and sport federations often use top-level athletes as metaphors to promote their own images in society. Thus, modern athletes feel a great deal of pressure to excel, and this has led to some athletes making the decision to cheat through using banned substances to enhance performance.

The International Olympic Committee defines doping as the use of an artifice, whether substance or a method, which can harm an athlete's health and/or is capable of enhancing his/her performance. Doping is prohibited because it is fundamentally against the ethos of the spirit of the Olympic Games: the concept of fair play. Many of the prohibited substances and methods are harmful to athlete's health and can cause short and long-term damage. Doping has a long history in all societies. Doping in sport is now scientifically organised and perfectly mirrors a society that is made out of restoratives, multivitamin products or amphetamines. Doping has become an indispensable master key for those who want to achieve higher goals at any price.

Therefore, from a psychological point of view, the problem of doping in sport is not only an individual issue, but has to be understood in the cultural and social context.

2. Reasons for doping: the role of the environment and the personal goals of the athlete

In general, investigation of the reasons for doping is an under-researched area in sport psychology. This evidence is difficult to collect because athletes do not readily reveal doping behaviour for fear of being banned, and of being stigmatised as a cheat. The reasons mentioned below are based on experience with single cases rather than on empirical scientific evidence. The possible reasons are:

1. Sport organisations frequently require athletes to cope with enormous amounts of training and heavy competition programmes, thus creating a pressure to train even harder and to perform at extreme limits all the time. In return, the athlete is given the chance of becoming a member of a famous team, of financial gain, social recognition, and national fame. In this context, the athlete has to overcome pain and to accept all the risks of the business in order to achieve the highest possible result.
2. The coach and the medical team may play an important role in strengthening the pressure to train and assisting in the attempts to fulfil the training schedule irrespective of any signs and indications of fatigue or over training.
3. The athlete who is most at risk of taking forbidden substances is the one who tries to conform to the picture of a "super person" that the sport system wants him or her to represent, and this may mean that he/she feels the need to cheat.
4. Sometimes, the athlete may develop a psychological imbalance and a loss of self-confidence to cope with the pressure to excel by his or her own means. In this situation, doping may offer to the athlete a quick solution for coping with the extant pressure.

3. Why is doping a problem from the psychological point of view?

In addition to the physical health risks that are increasingly well documented in medical research, doping has negative psychological consequences for the athlete. First, some substances (steroids) can increase the incidence of aggression. Second, attributing winning to an external source (drugs) is demotivating, and can have serious long-term negative motivational consequences (e.g., lower self efficacy). Third, attributing outcome to drugs may lower self-esteem. Fourth, the athlete lives with the fear of being discovered, and this may increase the perception of stress. Fifth, if the athlete is discovered to be using banned substances, then he or she is labelled a cheat and suffers a serious social stigma that can be psychologically debilitating. This is particularly true of high profile sports, where the media shines its unrelenting spotlight on the offenders. Sixth, the athlete who uses banned substances knowingly undermines the spirit of fair play and fair competition in sport, and may experience guilt that may lead to higher anxiety and distress. Seventh, the athlete who takes banned substances may experience guilt for setting a bad example to young athletes. And lastly, taking banned substances does have the potential to negatively affect social relationships. Thus, for these reasons, taking banned substances may have a serious negative psychological impact on the athlete.

4. Recommendations

Even though the taking of banned substances in sport may reflect a drug dependent society, the concept of fair play is inherent in competitive sport. This concept is assailed by the use of banned substances. But of more importance in the present context, the use of banned substances has psychological implications for the athlete that cannot be ignored. The role of the sport psychologist is to promote the athlete's physical and psychological health and well being. Therefore, FEPSAC is resolved to resist the use of banned substances in sport. The following are the recommendations of FEPSAC to sport psychologists consulting with athletes at all levels of sport competition:

1. Sport psychologists must be careful to provide services that promote the athlete's physiological and psychological well being.
2. Sport psychologists should take every opportunity to counsel against the taking of banned substances.
3. In the event that the sport psychologist discovers systematic organisation and use of doping by clients in competitive sport, the sport psychologist is obligated to take action to resist the practice.
4. Even though sport psychologists must reject any form of doping, they do not deny their professional responsibility to support individuals that have been accused or condemned for the use of banned substances. It is the responsibility of sport psychologists to help the athlete overcome the isolation and psychological after effects of negative social labelling. Sport psychologists should encourage the personal, social and sport-related rehabilitation of the athlete on a sound psychological basis.
5. The sport psychologist commits him/herself to intervene in coaching education programmes and sport leader training courses to counsel coaches and administrators about the psychological risks of doping and substance abuse. Coaches first and foremost have to promote clean training regimens and to show a positive behavioural model, especially with young athletes.
6. As a healthy alternative to doping and substance abuse, the sport psychologist should promote strategies that help athletes to plan their training regimen for competition without the use of banned substances.