Issues Of Drug Testing in Sport

Since drug use has become a common theme throughout sport there has been frequent debate on how it should be governed and handled. Drug testing in sport has been everywhere since 1968 (Mottram D., 2005), when the International Olympic committee instituted the first compulsory drug tests in Grenoble, France. Over the last 50 years, the world has progressed enormously in their methods as we strive for one hundred percent compliance to achieve ‘clean sport.’ There are many areas that should be covered and examined when considering if drug testing should continue in sport.

The approach to both performance enhancing and non-performance enhancing drugs is a crucial topic in the argument. However, the most important concern for eliminating drug testing is the health risks. Eradicating drug tests would increase the amount of performance enhancers consumed and this would result in many dangerous and fatal problems with athletes well-being. The effectiveness of drug testing has been under the microscope since testing athletes begun. Lastly, the concept of role models and the interest in sports once drugs have taken over all sports will be explored.

Drugs have been around for a considerable time in sport. Dating back to as long ago as 776 BC, Ancient Olympic competitors would experiment with herbal medications as a way to enhance their performances (Jenkins, 2007). The indisputable mentality to win at any cost is not a recent phenomenon, as it has occurred for years leading up to now. Drugs are involved in sport because of athletes obsession to win, at all costs. However, the recently formed World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) is responsible for developing and implementing antidoping standards worldwide (with respect to both lists of banned drugs and penalties for misusing them (Healey, 2013). The chemical substances of drugs alter the biomechanical systems of the body and can give people an unfair advantage (Mottram D., 2011).

WADA’s laws exist to generally provide a safe and fair environment for everyone to participate in sport. Moreover, these laws should prevent and protect athletes from subjecting themselves to health risks through the use of unsafe, performance-enhancing drugs (Healey, 2013). Although these strict rules and regulations are in place, some athletes are still involved in doping, trying to cheat their way to the podium.

Drug testing can fundamentally be split up into performance enhancing drugs (anabolic steroids, human growth hormone, etc.), and social or non-performance enhancing drugs (cocaine, marijuana, etc.). Briefly covering the use and testing methods of social drugs, there is without a doubt they should be continued to be tested. If there are no consequences to illegal social drugs, it will become an enormous problem in all sports. However, the argument is there that If it doesn’t convey an unfair advantage, should it be tested? Is it just big organizations exercising their power, disguised as morality and taking away freedom of choice (Travis, 2014)? On the other hand, WADA offers the argument back that these drugs ultimately affect the health of the athlete, and that taking drugs inappropriately is against the spirit of sport (Healey, 2013). Therefore, recreational drug use has no place in sport and we should definitely endeavour to continue testing athletes for recreational drug use.

However, a more complicated debate comes with performance enhancing drug use and more importantly - if we should continue testing for these in future. There are suspicions raised over who should test these athletes regularly. According to Gary Wilder, the chairman of WADA said, 'The detection methods are accurate and reliable. They undergo rigorous validation prior to being introduced (Wilder, 2008).” On the other hand, if these tests are inaccurate, many world-class athletes will find their life's accomplishments and reputation hinging on urine or blood tests. Consequently, when an athlete tests positive, is he or she guilty of doping? Because of what I believe to be inherent flaws in the testing practices of doping laboratories, the answer, quite possibly, is no (Berry, 2008). Unfortunately, there has been no evidence of collusion or fake samples produced by WADA, these claims are unfortunately loosely backed by no evidence. Consistently the idea of a complete termination of drug testing is put forward, however to protect athletes wellbeing and maintain a fair playing field we must persevere with performance and non-performance enhancing drug tests.

The greatest factor in why we must not discontinue drug testing is the inevitable health risks that athletes would be in danger of. There is a perception that it is impossible to fully enforce antidoping laws, consequently some commentators argue that we should relax these laws to create an “open” and more “even” playing field. However, sport without the strict antidoping laws currently in place would disadvantage those athletes who wanted to compete at the highest level without risking their health (Healey, 2013). Athletes are not the only problem, with many sports doctors becoming extremely involved in the drug escalation over the past decade. A small percentage have steered clear of the ethics and the spirit of sport and there has been a surge of the win at all costs mentality. As Spitzer has noted, the ‘pursuit of sporting excellence was the objective of sport scientists, physicians and biologists, even if this meant breaching … the conventional understanding of medical ethics” (Spitzer, 2006).

The health risks involved in drug use can be fatal and have been heavily documented throughout history. Tommy Simpson, one of the first cyclists to pass away due to doping in the Tour de France in 1967, alerted the public to the risks of drugs in sport (Houlihan, 1999). This horrible incident happened when there was no drug testing or consequences to cheating ((IOC), 2009). If drug testing was terminated, how can you say for certain these incidents wouldn’t happen today? Performance enhancers have a negative long-term effect on health and this is the main rationale for banning these types of drugs in sport (Becker, 2006)(Healey, 2013). Conversely, instead of driving drugs and doping underground, we could be more cautious of these drugs and they could be permitted under medical supervision (Kayser, 2011) (Mauron, 2009). Moreover, half of athletes would be heavily inclined to this future of sports. In a recent survey Olympic athlete admitted that they would be willing to take a drug -- even if it would kill them eventually -- as long as it would let them win every event they entered five years in a row (Abuse, 2000).

This type of future could be a reality if we monitored and tested drugs out in the open instead of behind closed doors. Consequently, Athletes would be caught in a wild sport arms race and would be pressed to take more and more drugs. These drugs would be in even more ludicrous combinations and at increasingly higher doses. The drug race in sport has the potential to create a slow-motion public health catastrophe (Thomas H. Murray, 2008). Finally, if everyone else is doing what they're doing, they would up the dosage, instead of taking 10 grams or 10 cc's or whatever it is, they'll take 20 or 30 or 40, and a vicious circle simply gets bigger (Pound, 2008). This win at any cost mentality is pervading sports at all levels of competition and results in athletes feeling coerced to use substances just to remain on par with other athletes.

Terminating testing drugs would result in an outbreak of a drug war, on top of potentially fatal injuries to our athletes draws us to conclude that we must continue drug testing athletes.

How effective are we at testing athletes? Do many athletes manage to cheat the system and pass tests despite having taken performance enhancing drugs? The effectiveness of drug testing is very important and if athletes are cheating drug tests than the whole drug testing system has no point of even existing. Fortunately, doping authorities are further ahead than they have ever been, and the technology is rapidly increasing and becoming more efficient (Healey, 2013). More efficient processes are always being experimented too, with University of Waterloo's professor Janusz Pawliszyn developing rapid on-site screening technology called coated blade-spray mass spectrometry. It can detect more than 100 drugs using just one drop of blood or a few microliters of urine (Waterloo, 2018). However, cheaters are evading detection, innocents are falsely accused, and sport is ultimately suffering. Moreover, mass spectrometry requires careful sample handling, advanced technician training and most importantly precise instrument calibration. The process is unlikely to be error-free (Healey, 2013). Drug using athletes can regularly beat tests as they have access to specialized medical advice from sports physicians (Waddington, 2000).

Conversely, with the advancement in technologies that we are having recently, and the fact that the I.O.C. retains ownership of the athlete's samples (blood and urine) for eight years following the Olympic Games. (Wilder, 2008) Consequently, these athletes would be punished for their cheating and unethical approach to sport if we can find more advancements and new ways to test them. There has been such an advancement since drug testing in sport began more than 50 years ago, with the financial support put into ensuring sports are fair and level, terminating drug testing now would be a waste of time. We must endeavour to continuously develop and expand our knowledge of drugs and drug testing techniques in order to keep sport fair and keep drug testing athletes.

Many sporting events attract sizeable crowds and have strong fan following as the interest in sport grows across the globe. With the interest in sport at an all time high, the expelling of drug testing would have a considerable effect on the general interest in sport. At the time of Lance Armstrong's conquering time at the pinnacle of cycling, we all watched in awe of his extremely impressive natural talent. However, when he was found guilty of doping, the interest in Armstrong's career diminished and we were no longer interested (Thomas H. Murray, 2008). If drug testing were to cease, then what would happen to the interest in sport?

The role of skill would be reduced and replaced by chemically induced brute strength and endurance (Nicholas J. Dixon, 2008). Moreover, the sporting events would become a test of access to good pharmaceutical technology, consequently giving high technology countries an advantage at events such as the Olympic Games. (Houlihan, 1999) (WADA, 2003). Interest in sports would diminish as spectators expect sport to be a different kind of test, one of which an athletes skill and own qualities are the main factor in determining success (Parisotto, 2006). Moreover, the greatest players and Hall of Famers would be disgraced that their god given talents have been matched by artificial humans to enhance how good they are (Gorman, 2007).

Some of the audience may be maintained, and the people and mainly the children growing up watching these sports games would be following their role models. The question begs, do we really want people looking up to cheats? What motivates teen boys to take steroids, found that the most reliable indicator of steroid use was a teen's own self, self-esteem and body image

(Shuster, 2006) (Saletan, 2006). If the perfect body image however, is set up by steroid taking athletes, to achieve that body you must concede to taking drugs in order to get there (Balko, 2008) (Schwab, 2002). The interest in sports will certainly be diminished by drugs becoming legal in sport, furthermore, role models would be drug taking athletes and it would create a vicious cycle of unhealthy drug enhanced athletes at all levels of sport.

The health risks, the effectiveness of drug testing, role models in sport and the interest in athletes and sports are all key factors in deciding whether we should endeavour to continue drug testing athletes. As we continue to advance and find new ways to win the war on drugs we inch closer to complete fairness. In conclusion, it can be well established by literature and opinion that drug testing should continue in sport as the risks of this not continuing could be fatal.