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## ARTICLE

### Why did they do it? Frank discussions with former athletes who have engaged in doping.

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#### Abstract

*Background:* Pressures to use illegal drugs are particularly strong in developing countries, where coaches from Eastern Europe work on short-term contracts, and athletic success seems vital to their continuing careers. *Purpose:* Anti-doping agencies seem to be fighting a losing battle. Can their task be helped by studying athlete motivations? *Methods:* Semi-structured interviews were conducted on six high-level Tunisian competitors in individual sports; all admitted to doping. *Results:* Some athletes doped themselves, but others were victims of more sophisticated manipulation by coaches, physicians and officials. Competitors argued that doping technology had outpaced control procedures, so that they and their families would be denied the financial rewards of success unless they became involved in doping. Money was more important than a medal to those emerging from an impoverished society. Overseas travel gave opportunity to watch international rivals engage in illicit practices and provided new access to doping agents. Behaviour was constrained more by the high cost of doping than by ethical considerations. If caught, previous adulation as a "super-athlete" outweighed subsequent shame. Those who resisted doping were robbed of camaraderie, and developed a strong antipathy to those cheating them out of medals. *Conclusions:* New approaches to doping control could include the lifetime debarring of physicians and coaches convicted of doping, contracts requiring the payment of punitive damages to sponsors by the athletes involved, and reducing the pressure to "win" from the earliest ages of sport instruction. **Health & Fitness Journal of Canada 2013;6(2):84-90.**

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#### Introduction

Doping can be viewed as a social phenomenon, in that many humans refuse to accept their physical and mental limitations. The societal use of stimulants is one expression of a widespread desire to improve innate performance (Dargaud, 2000; Helal, 2001; de Mondenard, 2004; Trabalet al., 2006). Doping in sport reflects the ever-growing demands of a competitive society with an obsessive desire for transcendence. The very success of the sports movement, and escalating financial rewards, have increased interest in doping (Auneau and Sabatier, 2001; Guerreschi et al., 2007; Le Noé and Brissonneau, 2006). The demand is to enhance innate athletic achievement, born out of a subtle blend of skill, motivation and fitness, by all possible artificial means (DePiesse and Brissonneau, 2000; Irlinger, 2000; Siri, 2002). Frequently, drugs are diverted from their intended therapeutic purpose; thus, ephedrine is administered to reduce the reaction time of sprinters, the paediatrician's supply of growth hormone is diverted to increase muscle mass, and diuretics are administered to achieve a rapid reduction in the body mass of athletes prior to a "weigh-in" (Escriva, 2001; Guillon and Nicolet, 2000; Kerninon, 2004). The crowds want entertainment. They acclaim "Gods of the

stadium," "Eagles of the Alps", and the progressive fall of athletic records, without enquiring what methods were used to obtain such results (Proia, 2004).

The prevalence of doping has progressively affected the outlook of competitors. Athletes eye three types of adversary: legitimate contenders who do not dope, those who dope in a careless and inefficient way with only a modest budget, and those who dope scientifically, using highly efficient and undetectable procedures controlled by professionals (Brissoneau, 2003; Irlinger, 2000; Laure, 2000). Apparently outstanding performances are often achieved dishonestly, but no one seems to be shocked anymore (Manidi, 2000). So the athlete is tempted to ask, why bother being honest when so many of my opponents are not? Cheating is seen as offering money, power, and prestige. So competitors begin to think in terms of opportunity costs, comparing the benefits of using doping substances against alternative legal methods of enhancing performance that are less risky to their health (Gasparini, 2004; Laure, 2000).

The Year Book of Sports Medicine has chronicled many attempts by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) to counter the use of prohibited drugs and procedures. Certain of these measures have had some success, but too often the most wily athletes have been at least one or two moves ahead of WADA teams. This poses the question whether a more effective alternative to rigorous policing might be to explore why athletes choose to engage in practices that can cause personal disgrace and permanent injury to health, and to initiate practical preventive measures based upon this understanding.

We thus secured the cooperation of six former top Tunisian athletes. All admitted to once engaging in doping practices, but were willing to discuss the motives surrounding their previous actions in the context of semi-structured interviews. The group was aged 30-40 yr, and all had obtained medals in Olympic, World, Mediterranean, Arab and/or African Championships. They included a judoka, a gymnast, a swimmer, a weightlifter, a karateka and a boxer. We note here their respective views on the prevalence of doping, on motivating factors, and on the range of responsibility for current abuses.

### **Prevalence of doping**

It is particularly difficult to ascertain the precise prevalence of doping in a developing country such as Tunisia, since formal controls are rare, and most athletes are unwilling to admit that they have themselves engaged in this practice. Nevertheless, the six athletes interviewed were unanimous in their opinion that doping was present in all individual sports, with particular prevalence in events demanding speed and strength.

### **Key factors**

#### *Social background*

As with African American athletes, many poorer Tunisians have only a limited level of educational attainment, and sport is thus seen as the only possible route to social success. Athletes frequently come from disadvantaged neighbourhoods where there are only poor people with no economic prospects, and sport is seen as a way for them to escape from this discouraging milieu. Thus, the weightlifter in our study "*had left school prematurely and had no future; sport was his unique alternative...*" The

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lack of education sometimes has implications for the mechanics of attempts at doping. Thus, the gymnast noted that: *"... athletes generally do not have sufficient knowledge to take doping products, because their level of education is very limited."* The karateka added from his personal experience: *"...we use these products randomly, without doctors and without monitoring..."*.

### *Specific triggers*

The karateka noted two doping trends—the athlete who makes a personal decision to engage in doping, and the individual who becomes involved through contacts with a specific coach and/or training program. The gymnast emphasized that high-level participation in individual sports allowed athletes *"to attend a variety of training camps, to travel a lot, to meet new people and to establish international connections"*. *"...When competitors go on internships abroad, e.g. to Bulgaria, they become involved in doping and this is where they make contacts for their purchases."* Such opportunities can be harmful to athletes who are easily influenced, triggering involvement in doping; the gymnast commented: *"... maybe they were influenced by the environment, their coach, or their friends..."*.

The karateka offered more details of how involvement developed: *"... they travel a lot to events in Bulgaria, Romania, and Russia"*. He tries to justify himself, and speaks knowingly: *"...I took it (the doping medication) because they (the European competitors) have to, because everyone takes it and if you do not take it you can not excel, you have to stay at the level of Arab and African competitors,"* He adds that in the international context *"...it is essential to engage in doping."* *"...I use doping in major international*

*competitions, but for African and Arab level events I do not."* He continues to justify himself: *"...I only use doping agents to get to global events; for other competitions, I take only vitamins."*

### *Cost*

For Tunisian athletes, the main constraint limiting involvement in doping is often its cost rather than any ethical considerations. Because the Tunisian competitors come from a very humble background, even the sum of \$100 to purchase doping medication may be a prohibitive obstacle to drug abuse. The cost of a doping program naturally varies from one sport to another, and depends also on the efficacy of the measures adopted. However, the karateka commented, *"there are other cases like mine, where I see athletes engage in doping and go on to win medals. Then I say, why not me? But the obstacle that hinders me is money: I need a budget of 700-1300 dinars per month (U.S. \$550-1000) to prepare properly for doping and participation in the Olympic Games."*

### *Motivational influences*

Motivational influences that lead to doping usually seem either sponsorship money or the satisfaction of outwitting control agencies, rather than the personal reward of achieving an outstanding athletic performance.

The boxer notes: *"...the athlete who wants to get a better result does it for the money,"* adding *"...most athletes dope for money rather than for performance."* He elaborates by saying that: *"...in boxing, you do not need doping to win Olympic medals and become professional, but in athletics, you must make a record time, and in weightlifting, you need to lift huge loads."*

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In the view of the gymnast, there is a category of athlete who is not interested in the sporting challenge of achieving an outstanding performance, but rather enjoys the pleasure of circumventing the prohibitions of the anti-doping agency, and of deceiving everyone. *"...they cheat to win and violate the ban, without calculating the risks and consequences to health."*

### Issues of responsibility

Responsibility for the acceptance of doping may lie with the athlete, family and friends, or team members.

#### *Role of the athlete*

Should the athlete be considered a victim or a culprit? The karateka commented *"...I wanted medals, but I wanted beautiful medals."* However, he went on to qualify this speech by stating: *"...it is true that I felt hatred when opponents won medals, knowing that they were doping although without testing positive"* and he added: *"...When I was awarded a bronze or a silver medal next to an opponent who had won gold, but who I knew was doping, I had the feeling that I was the champion. I had a personal satisfaction from my work, my performance and my sweat, with a performance that was made without the help of anyone, or any substance."*

What is the attitude of the athlete who faces the scandal of testing positive? Opinions are divided on this subject. Some athletes seek a good result at any price and detection is the issue that suddenly kills their game. However, the karateka recounted that: *"... the shame and scandal of a few months ago seems negligible vis-à-vis the heyday of 4 to 5 years, when I doped and won medal; those moments of joy and glory ever lived."*

Also, what is the position of the athlete who faces health dangers from doping? Is he or she conscious of this risk? Currently, Tunisian athletes are becoming much more cautious about the nature of doping products that they use, and they are asking a lot of questions about side effects, whereas a decade or two, almost no questions were asked. Thus the karateka suggested: *"...now, athletes are more concerned with the risks and consequences of doping, and they ask a lot of questions about effects on health."*

However, experience also plays an important habituating role in the personal acceptance of doping products. Many athletes have doped on a permanent basis for several years, have never tested positive and have never had serious health problems. For such individuals, neither occasional random testing nor urgent health warnings are likely to have any great effect.

#### *Role of family and friends*

Family members, and close friends are often key players in the life of the athlete, and the use of doping agents by athletes frequently affects family, friends, and relatives. The athlete faces a harsh dilemma in terms of personal contacts. He or she can never have a clear conscience, and often remains undecided how far to involve his immediate entourage in the decision to engage in doping. Family are likely to be concerned about his or her health and will probably wish to be warned to intervene if an illness is provoked by doping. The swimmer in our study insisted that her family be informed: *"Yes, surely this is a case that involves the family, along with other officials of the Federation."* However, the karateka disagreed with the swimmer *".. I do not think the family should be involved,*

*and I have not seen instances where this is the case. The responsibility must be carried by the athlete himself, or he and his coach." In the view of the karateka, the coach should team up with the athlete to orient him and facilitate the use of doping products. He added that informing the family could provoke misunderstandings, fear for the health of the athlete, and the spread of gossip that could harm his reputation: "...I don't think he should speak to the family, because rumours could spread, leading to detection and punishment of the athlete ... It is better to remain silent and avoid problems: "... it preserves the maximum likelihood of avoiding detection (...); in some families, it is better that nobody knows what you are actually doing, then you won't be detected."*

### *Role of technical, medical and administrative staff*

Too often, the issue of doping involves complicit coaches, doctors and senior administrative staff. The Tunisian coach is particularly vulnerable. As an employee of a Federal technical department, he or she carries a heavy responsibility for the achievements or failures of athletes in a given discipline. The overarching goal is always to obtain medals and titles at national, continental, and international levels of competition. The duration of a specialist coaching contract is usually only one or two years, and there is a tremendous pressure for "results" during this time span. Many coaches come from the countries of Eastern Europe, where doping has long been prevalent, and they seek to get good results by any means. The karateka commented *"...the coach needs a certain time with the athlete to propose doping."* The weight-lifter added: *"...foreign coaches are aware of doping. I*

*was driven by Russian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Belarus, Turkish and Tunisian coaches, all of whom spoke of doping. All maintained that you must take prohibited agents, or you will never reach the podium, and those who reach the podium are invariably doped. "*

### **Practical Conclusions**

The motives underlying doping in North Africa seem very similar to those that have been unearthed in the confessions of occasional top athletes in North America. A few practical pointers for the prevention of doping may be inferred from the present analysis. Perhaps the most disturbing finding is the complicity of certain physicians and sports scientists. Many doping procedures are complicated and carry a considerable health risk, particularly in the absence of medical support. Such malpractice could likely be greatly reduced if procedures were enacted to ensure that convicted physicians were given a comprehensive and world-wide lifetime banning from medical practice. As might be expected from a relatively poor country, a second motivation is the hope of financial gain through such avenues as post-championship sponsorships; this is undoubtedly a major factor also for professional athletes in North American sport. Games organizers are unlikely to persuade commercial organizations to reject all sponsorship schemes. But the temptation to obtain such rewards through doping would be greatly reduced if companies insisted that athletes sign a binding declaration that if convicted of doping they would return any money received in full, together with appropriate compensation for the financial losses incurred by the sponsor. Finally, there is the personal conviction "I cannot win

without doping, because everyone else is doing it." Here, the remedy probably lies in schools and youth sports organizations, where the emphasis of instruction must shift from winning at all costs to performing at one's personal best, irrespective of the official outcome. None of these initiatives will necessarily eliminate doping, but together, they could make an important contribution in this regard.

### Summary

Doping in high performance sport is a world-wide problem, but pressures to use illegal drugs and procedures are particularly strong in developing countries such as Tunisia. Many of the coaches in such countries are drawn from Eastern Europe, working on 1-2 year contracts; success, however won, is important to their careers, and this has encouraged them to become implicated in doping. This article explores the attitudes of athletes through semi-structured interviews, conducted with six high-level Tunisian competitors in individual sports. Given difficulties in enforcing current anti-doping regulations, this analysis of motivations may point to new methods of avoiding illicit enhancement of sport performance. Some athletes themselves choose unfair practices in an unsophisticated manner, but others are victims of sophisticated and less readily detected manipulations by coaches, sports physicians and even federal officials. Doping has an adverse impact upon athletes, whether they engage in doping or not. Many competitors argue that progress in doping technology has outpaced control procedures, so that they and their families would be denied the financial rewards of success if they did not become involved in doping. Money is

often more important than a medal, particularly to those emerging from impoverished groups. The overseas travel of top competition opens up new contacts and new sources of doping agents, plus the opportunity to watch international competitors engage in illicit practices. Many competitors are constrained by the high cost of doping agents rather than by ethical considerations, and those who are eventually caught find that a few months of shame are eclipsed by their previous adulation as "super-athletes." The few who resist the temptations of doping are robbed of the camaraderie of sport, as they develop a strong antipathy to those they believe to have cheated them out of gold medals. New motivational-based approaches to doping control could include tackling an excessive pressure to "win" from an early age, lifetime debarring of physicians and coaches convicted of doping, and contracts requiring athletes to repay any money received from sponsors plus punitive damages if they are convicted of doping.

### Authors' Qualifications

The authors' qualifications are as follows: Fethi Taktak Ph.D., S.D., Ines Taktak<sup>2</sup> Ph.D. Candidate, and Roy J. Shephard<sup>3</sup>, M.B.B.S.; M.D. [Lond.]; Ph. D.; D.P.E.; LL.D.

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