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The « Anti-Russian Mood » at the Rio Olympics: The Banning of Paralympic Athletes to Bash Russia

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There is an ugly anti-Russian mood in various Rio Olympic venues. When the Russian swimmers entered the pool for the 4 x 100M Freestyle team event, they were loudly booed.

When the Russian team barely lost 3rd place, the announcer happily announced that Russian had been "kept off the medal stand".

Last Sunday it was announced that the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) had decided to ban the entire Russian team from the upcoming Paralympics to held in Rio in September. Thus, 267 mentally or physically disabled Russians who have been preparing for the Rio Paralympics for years are now banned from competing. On Monday Associated Press story opened as follows: *"After escaping a blanket ban from the Olympics, Russia was kicked out of the upcoming Paralympics on Sunday as the ultimate punishment for the state running a doping operation that polluted sports by prioritizing "medals over morals".*

In this article I will show how some big accusations based on little evidence have contributed to discrimination against clean Russian athletes and fostered a dangerous animosity contrary to the intended spirit of the Olympics.

International Paralympic Committee (IPC) Attack

The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) made their decision to ban all 267 Russian Paralympic athletes largely on the basis of WADA's July 16 McLaren Report and private communications with McLaren.

IPC President Sir Phillip Craven issued a statement full of accusations and moral outrage. He says "*In my view, the McLaren Report marked one of the darkest days in the history of all sport.*"

However, the McLaren Report is deeply biased. Here are some of the problems with the report:

* It relied primarily on the testimony of one person, the former Director of Moscow Laboratory Grigory Rodchenkov, who was implicated in extorting Russian athletes for money and was the chief culprit with strong interest in casting blame somewhere else.

* It accused Russian authorities without considering their defense and contrary information.

* It excluded a written submission and documents provided by a Russian authority.

* It failed to identify individual athletes who benefited but instead cast suspicion on the entire team.

* It ignored the statistical data compiled by WADA which show Russian violations to be NOT exceptional.

* It did not provide the source for quantitative measurements.

* It claimed to have evidence but failed to reveal it.

A detailed critique of the McLaren Report can be found at Sports Integrity Initiative, Consortiumnews, Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, True Publica, Global Research, Telesur, and other sites.

The IPC explanation of why they banned the entire 267 person Paralympic team boils down to the accusation that *"the State-sponsored doping programme that exists within Russian sport regrettably extends to Russian Para sport as well. The facts really do hurt; they are an unprecedented attack on every clean athlete who competes in sport. The anti-doping system in Russia is broken, corrupted and entirely compromised..... The doping culture that is polluting Russian sport stems from the Russian government and has now been uncovered in not one, but two independent reports commissioned by the World Anti-Doping Agency..... I believe the Russian government has catastrophically failed its Para athletes. Their medals over morals mentality disgusts me. The complete corruption of the anti-doping system is contrary to the rules and strikes at the very heart of the spirit of Paralympic sport."*

These are strong words and accusations, not against the athletes, but against the Russian government. It seems the Russian Paralympic athletes are being collectively punished as a means to punish the Russian government.

But what are the facts? First, it's true some Russian athletes have used prohibited steroids or other performance enhancing drugs (PEDs). The documentaries by Hajo Seppelt expose examples of Russian athletes admitting to taking PEDs, a banned coach clandestinely continuing to coach, and another banned coach dealing in prohibited drugs.

Another fact is that this problem exists in many if not all countries, especially since professional athletics is big business. WADA data shows that many countries have significant numbers of doping violations.

It is claimed that doping by elite athletes is pervasive in Russia but is this true? To answer that accurately would require an objective examination not a sensation seeking media report. In the current controversy the accusations and assumptions rely substantially on individual anecdotes and testimony which has been publicized through media reports (ARD documentaries, Sixty Minutes report and NY Times stories) with very little scrutiny. In contrast with the accusations , the scientific data prepared by WADA indicates that Russian athletes have a fairly low incidence of positive drug tests in international certified laboratories.

The biggest question is whether the Russian government has been "sponsoring" or somehow supervising prohibited doping. This has been repeated many times and is now widely assumed to be true. However the evidence is far from compelling. The accusations

are based primarily on the testimony of three people: the main culprit and mastermind Grigory Rodchenkov who was extorting athletes and "whistle-blowers" Vitaliy and Yuliya Stepanov. The Stepanovs were the star witnesses in the Sixty Minutes feature on this topic. The report was factually flawed: it mistakenly reports that Vitaliy had a "low level job at the Russian Anti Doping Agency RUSADA". Actually he was adviser to the Director General, close to the Minister of Sports and a trainer of doping control officers. The Sixty Minutes story also failed to include the important fact that Vitaliy was directly involved in his wife's doping. According to Seppelt's documentary "The Secrets of Doping" "First, Vitaliy even helps his wife with doping, procures the drugs, leads a kind of double life."(5:45) Adding to the argument there may be a political bias in these accusations, all three witnesses (Rodchenkov and the Stepanovs) are now living in the USA.

The "proof" of Russian state sponsored doping rests on remarkably little solid evidence. The principal assertion is that the Deputy Minister of Sports issued email directives to eliminate positive tests of "protected" athletes. McLaren claims to have "electronic data" and emails proving this. However he has not revealed the emails. If the emails are authentic, that would be damning. How would the Ministry of Sports officials explain it? Do they have any alternative explanation of the curious directives to "Quarantine" or "Save" doping test samples? Astoundingly, McLaren decided not to ask them and he still has not shown the evidence he has.

Another controversial issue is regarding the opening and replacement of "tamper proof" bottles. The Rodchenkov account is that in the middle of the night, in cahoots with FSB (successor to KGB), they would replace "dirty" urine with "clean" urine. Rodchenkov says they found a way to open the tamper proof urine sample bottles. However the Swiss manufacturer Berlinger continues to stand by its product and has effectively challenged the veracity of the Rodchenkov/McLaren story. Since the release of the McLaren Report, Berlinger has issued a statement saying:

- *To the statement in the McLaren investigation report that some such bottles proved possible to open Berlinger Special AG cannot offer any authoritative response at the present time.*
- *Berlinger Special AG has no knowledge at present of the specifications, the methods or the procedures involved in the tests and experiments conducted by the McLaren Commission.*
- *Berlinger Special AG conducts its own regular reappraisals of its doping kits, and also has its products tested and verified by an independent institute that has been duly certificated by the Swiss authorities.*
- *In neither its own tests nor any tests conducted by the independent institute in Switzerland has any sealed Berlinger Special AG urine sample bottle proved possible to open.*
- *This also applies to the "Sochi 2014" sample bottle model.*
- *The specialists at Berlinger Special AG are able at any time to determine whether one of the company's sample bottles has been tampered with or unlawfully replicated.*

McLaren says he does not know how the Russians were opening the bottles but he knows it can be done because someone demonstrated it to him personally. In contrast with McLaren's assertions, Berlinger states unequivocally "In neither its own tests nor any tests conducted by the independent institute in Switzerland has any sealed Berlinger Special AG

urine sample bottle proved possible to open. This also applies to the 'Sochi 2014' sample bottle model."

If McLaren's claims are true, why has he not discussed this with the manufacturer? Isn't it important to identify the weakness in the system so that doping test samples cannot continue to be swapped as alleged? If his objective is to honestly find the facts, prevent cheating and improve the testing for doping violations, surely he should be consulting closely the certified and longstanding bottle manufacturer. The fact that McLaren has apparently not pursued this with the manufacturer raises legitimate questions about his claims, sincerity and "independence".

McLaren further claims to be able to forensically determine when a 'tamper proof' bottle has been opened by the "marks and scratches" on the inside of the bottle caps. His report does not include photos to show what these "marks and scratches" look like, nor does it consider the possibility of a mark or scratch resulting from some other event such as different force being applied, cross-threading or backing off on the cap. In this area also, McLaren has apparently not had his findings confirmed by the Swiss manufacturer despite the fact they state "The specialists at Berlinger Special AG are able at any time to determine whether one of the company's sample bottles has been tampered with or unlawfully replicated."

If the findings of McLaren's "marks and scratches expert" are accurate, why did they not get confirmation from the specialists at Berlinger? Perhaps it is because Berlinger disputes McLaren's claims and says "Our kits are secure".

The IPC decision substantially rests on the fact-challenged McLaren report. The IPC statement falsely claims that the McLaren bottle top "scratches and marks" expert has "corroborated the claim that the State directed scheme involved Russian Paralympic athletes."

Banning 267 Athletes instead of the Guilty Eleven

The IPC report includes data that purports to show widespread doping manipulation in Russia. They report "Professor McLaren provided the names of the athletes associated with the 35 samples ….and whether the sample had been marked QUARANTINE or SAVE." These 35 samples are presumably the same Paralympic 35 which are identified on page 41 of the McLaren Report as being "Disappearing Positive Test Results by Sport Russian Athletes". There is no source for this data but supposedly it covers testing between 2012 and 2015. McLaren provided another 10 samples thus making 45 samples relating to 44 athletes.

It is then explained that 17 of these samples are actually not from IPC administered sport. So the actual number is 27 athletes (44 – 17) implicated. However, in another inconsistency, the IPC statement says not all these samples were marked "SAVE" by Moscow Laboratory. That was only done for "at least" 11 of the samples and athletes.

If the IPC final number is accurate it means they confirmed eleven Paralympic athletes who tested positive between 2012 and 2015 but had their positive tests "disappeared" to allow these athletes to compete. These athletes should be suspended or banned. Instead of doing that, the IPC banned the entire 267 person Russian Paralympic team!

The Rush to Judgment

The McLaren Report looks like a rush to judgment. The report was launched after the

sensational NY Times story based on Grigory Rodchenkov and Sixty Minutes story based on the Stepanovs. Before he was half way done his investigation, Richard McLaren was already advising the IAAF to ban the entire Russian team. The McLaren Report, with all its flaws and shortcomings, was published just a few weeks ago on 16 July 2016. Then, on August 7, the IPC issued its decision to ban the Russian Paralympic Team from the September Rio Paralympics.

The IPC statement claims that they "provided sufficient time to allow the Russian Paralympic Committee to present their case to the IPC" before they finalized the decision. While the Russian Paralympic Committee appeared before the IPC, it's doubtful they had sufficient time to argue their case or even to know the details of the accusations.

In summary, the accusation of Russian 'state sponsored doping' by McLaren and Craven is based on little solid evidence. Despite this, the accusations have resulted in the banning of many hundreds of clean athletes from the Olympics and Paralympics. They have also contributed to the ugly "ant-Russian" prejudice and discrimination happening at the Olympics right now. This seems to violate the purpose of the Olympics movement which is to promote international peace not conflict and discrimination.

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