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The anti-doping movement, buoyed recently by the BALCO scandal and the exposure of several top athletes as drug cheats, suddenly faces credibility concerns after it was revealed that a urine sample from Olympic superstar Marion Jones was declared not tainted after all.

The news of Jones' positive-turned-negative test for the oxygen-boosting agent EPO began to trickle out Wednesday evening, and by Thursday it was clear to some drug-testing experts that the potential fallout was significant.

"It's not a deathblow by any means, but it's a major body shot," said Charles Yesalis, a professor emeritus from Penn State University and recognized steroids expert.

The revelation would seem to be an opportunity for entities like Major League Baseball and the National Football League to defend their stances against adopting more rigorous policies and employing independent agencies to oversee those policies.

"I think what it's going to do is have people saying, 'I told you so,' " said Dr. Gary Wadler, who is on the board of the World Anti-Doping Agency. "That's what I call selective hearing."

It was reported nearly three weeks ago that Jones had failed a drug test while competing at the U.S. Track and Field Championships in June. The sprinter's "A" urine sample showed positive for EPO, and news of Jones' failed test was reported by several newspapers.

At the time, Jones issued a statement saying she was "shocked" by the positive and would wait until the "B" sample was analyzed to comment further. On Tuesday, after her lawyers announced the "B" was negative, Jones said in a statement that she was "ecstatic" and reiterated her stance that she has never taken performance-enhancing drugs.

The inconsistent test results that exonerated Jones exposed the anti-doping movement to criticisms on several fronts: First, that news of her "A" positive shouldn't have leaked in the first place; second, that the test for EPO is flawed; and last -- and perhaps most troubling to drug-testing agencies -- that the system's credibility could be undermined by the public nature of the Jones case.

As the doping issue has risen in the public's consciousness over the past several years, Major League Baseball and the NFL, in particular, have come under scrutiny amid suggestions they have been soft on performance-enhancing drug use by players. Owners



and union officials from both sports have resisted suggestions they should turn over testing and enforcement to an independent agency, and the Jones case would seem likely to embolden the leagues.

"I think people will take their shots, and this does open the door for the skeptics and naysayers -- the NFL and Major League Baseball," said Steven Ungerleider, an anti-doping advocate who has worked for the World Anti-Doping Agency. "People will continue to take shots at the integrity of testing and the viability of testing and on and on and on."

Ungerleider and others cited the fact that Jones was cleared after the "B" sample as evidence the system actually works as it should.

In many ways, Jones has been a lightning rod on the doping issue. She has repeatedly denied using banned drugs, although she faced detailed accusations in connection with the BALCO case. In addition, she has had significant ties to five men who have been enmeshed in the doping world: Her ex-husband C.J. Hunter, who tested positive for a metabolite of the steroid nandrolone prior to the Sydney Olympics; her former boyfriend Tim Montgomery, who admitted to the BALCO grand jury his use of banned drugs; Victor Conte, who recently completed a four-month prison term for his role in the BALCO conspiracy; Trevor Graham, who once coached Jones and has had several athletes test positive for banned substances; and Charlie Francis -- the former coach of disgraced sprinter Ben Johnson -- who once spent time training Jones.

Still, until June, Jones had never had an adverse finding on a drug test. Now that she has been ruled clean after being tarred so publicly, the anti-doping community finds itself somewhat on the defensive. USADA, for its part, has been careful to avoid charging athletes without being certain it could make a case stick. With Jones, for example, despite possessing evidence from the BALCO investigation, the agency didn't bring charges against the sprinter out of fear that losing would severely damage its reputation.

Asked Wednesday about those who would now criticize the organization because of the Jones EPO case, USADA general counsel Travis Tygart said, "I guess those with financial or other motives will always try to cast doubt when it's in their interest to do so, but when the anti-doping rules are put to the test, and they work, that actually should enhance the credibility of the system."

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