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TO CATCH A CHEAT

Tougher sanctions and more rigorous testing are part of the ongoing effort to combat doping by elite athletes

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Paul White/The Associated Press, 2002

Former track superstar Marion Jones, pictured with fellow Olympic gold medalist Tim Montgomery, is serving time in prison for lying about her use of performance-enhancing drugs.

Fans of track and field have descended on Eugene this week to witness what in theory is the purest form of athletic competition: Nearly naked athletes engaged in a simple test of who can run fastest, jump highest, throw farthest.

But those simple contests become tainted when athletes look for an edge, in the form of performance-enhancing drugs, to separate themselves from the field and clear their path to Olympic glory.

No one knows how many — if any — of the athletes competing in the U.S. Olympic Track & Field Trials have sought that chemical edge. But the doping police are stepping up their efforts to catch and punish the cheaters in a never-ending game of cat-and-mouse.

In fact, for the first time in the history of the Trials, athletes will be subject to blood testing during the competition, according to a report published Friday by the Tampa (Fla.) Tribune.

Every year, the World Anti-Doping Agency — an independent entity funded by Olympic organizations and by scores of national governments including the United States — adds more compounds to its list of banned substances.

But that doesn't necessarily mean more athletes who are doping will be caught, said Dr. Anthony Butch, director of the UCLA Olympic Analytical Lab, one of two labs in the United States certified by WADA.

“If the number of athletes we’re catching next year drops, I wouldn’t know how to interpret it,” he said. “Does that mean we’re doing a better job, or does it mean they’re using substances we can’t detect?”

The recent history of track and field is stained by athletes who sought that edge and were caught taking performance-enhancing drugs: Tim Montgomery. Kelli White. Justin Gatlin.

Gatlin, the defending Olympic champion at 100 meters, on Thursday lost a federal court appeal to compete in the Eugene Trials. Had Gatlin succeeded in his bid to run at the Trials, it would have added a sensational and controversial twist to the event. He was banned from the sport after his second positive test in 2006.

No one fell farther from grace than Marion Jones, a charismatic, photogenic, articulate athlete who could run faster and jump farther than any other woman.

Jones won a stunning five medals, including three golds, at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, and still holds the Hayward Field and Prefontaine Classic records for the 100 meters, 200 meters and long jump.

Now she’s Inmate No. 84868-054 at a federal prison for women in Texas, guilty of lying to federal authorities about taking performance-enhancing drugs and her knowledge of a fraudulent check cashing scheme.

“One of the greatest tragedies is Marion Jones serving time in prison,” said Steven Ungerleider, a Eugene sports psychologist and author of “Faust’s Gold,” a detailed look at East German sports doping. “She’s one of the greatest athletes in the history of the sport. She didn’t need to dope. She had a natural gift.”

‘A long way to go’

USA Track & Field, the sport’s governing body, has done a better job in recent years of “trying to get the word out that this is dangerous and unethical and cheaters are going to be caught,” Ungerleider said. “We’ve come a long way, but we’ve got a long way to go.”

The International Olympic Committee and the World Anti-Doping Agency have stepped up pressure on groups that govern the 28 Olympic sports, he said.

“Everybody has been put on notice that they want their Trials clean and the Olympic games clean,” he said. “The sanctions are getting tougher and tougher and the testing is getting more rigorous.”

Athletes who test positive for using a stimulant receive a public warning, a disqualification from the event in which the sample was taken and a loss of any award or prize money. A second offense for stimulants results in a two-year suspension. A third offense results in a lifetime ban.

Athletes who test positive for anabolic steroids, certain amphetamines or prohibited techniques face a two-year suspension for a first offense, and a lifetime ban for a

second offense.

But even with a more rigorous testing regimen, the chemists who design illicit performance-enhancing drugs will always be a step ahead of the chemists who do the testing, said Butch, director of the UCLA lab.

“It’s hard to keep up with them because it’s people in my business who have run amok,” he said. “They have the background. They know what they’re doing.

“They know what they’re making. They know what their goal is. ... The chemistry is easier than the detective work.”

Designers of performance-enhancing drugs have another advantage: They can send a specimen laced with their latest chemical variation of steroids out to a reference lab and ask that it be screened for anabolic steroids, for example. If it comes back clean, they know they’ve developed a drug that’s undetectable, he said.

Conflicting lab tests

A study published this week indicates the difficulty of detecting one banned performance-enhancing drug in particular.

Erythropoietin, or EPO, is a hormone produced naturally by the human body that stimulates red cell production.

An increase in red cell production increases the amount of oxygen the blood can carry to the body’s muscles, increasing athletic performance, particularly in the distance events.

The study in the *Journal of Applied Physiology* indicates that testing labs are likely to miss the presence of EPO in urine, *The New York Times* reported. Researchers in Denmark collected urine samples from eight young men who had been given EPO and requested two labs accredited by WADA to test the samples for EPO.

The first lab found some samples positive and a few others suspicious, while the second lab did not find any of the samples positive for EPO and only a few suspicious. The two labs did not agree on which samples were suspicious, according to the *Times* report.

Anti-doping officials said they were surprised by the study’s findings. Butch said he couldn’t comment because the study was not yet available on the Web.

Many athletes understand that testing is necessary, though some view it as an invasion of privacy, particularly the random tests that occur outside competition. Once every three months, athletes have to submit a detailed “athlete location form” to USADA so that testers can track them down at any time to get a sample. If their schedule changes, they must file an update.

If an athlete isn’t there when a tester shows up, he or she can be hit with a “missed test — unavailable” notice in their file.

Three unexcused missed tests counts as a positive test and an athlete is suspended for two years.

‘Never a fun thing to do’

Many athletes have a story about getting pulled aside for a test at an inconvenient time.

“It is intrusive, and I was really happy to do it when I was an athlete,” said Lance Deal, throws coach for the University of Oregon and a silver medalist in the hammer in the 1996 Olympics. “I figured if they were showing up at my doorstep, they were showing up at my competitors’ doorsteps.”

Kevin Elliott, who ran for USC in college and is now a member of Oregon Track Club Elite in Eugene, is competing in his second Trials, and failed to qualify Friday for the Olympics in the 800 meters.

He said he’s “a big believer” in random drug testing for track athletes.

“In a perfect world, we would not need to do it, if there wasn’t such a thing as dishonesty and illegal performance-enhancing drugs,” he said. “Unfortunately, all of these are true. We need some sort of method to justify the cleanliness of athletes’ performances.”

Gabe Jennings of Eugene, who’s competing in the 1,500 in the Trials, is known as one of the sport’s free spirits. He said he understands the need for testing, but that doesn’t mean he likes being subjected to it.

“It’s never a fun thing to do,” he said. “None of us like it, but we appreciate it being there. You need something.

“However, there comes a time when it becomes a burden,” he said. “Sometimes it feels like an infringement on athletes’ rights, that we’re being confined, that it’s unfair.

“It’s an unfortunate thing,” he said. “It’s good for the public to know what we go through as athletes, the sacrifices you pay to be a role model.”

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