



The Oregonian

Suspicion proves difficult to outrun

Drug use tarnishes track and field's image, but testing takes down even big stars now

Tuesday, June 24, 2008

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Distance runner Lauren Fleshman is concerned about track and field's image.

In a sport with a long line of doping scandals, Fleshman wonders whether it's reached the point that falling under suspicion helps define one's success.

"I sometimes feel like you haven't really made it in the sport unless someone doubts that you've made it cleanly," Fleshman said.

USA Track & Field instituted a zero tolerance drug policy in 2003. Since the 2004 Summer Olympics, 14 U.S. athletes have been suspended from competition after testing positive for performance-enhancing drugs.

The penalties are a byproduct of a revved-up drug testing system administered by the United States Anti-Doping Agency that has led to 30,962 drug tests since 2003.

But on the eve of the 2008 Olympic Trials, which begin Friday in Eugene, the taint of suspicion and the erosion of the sport's image remain.

"The average person probably thinks all athletes are on dope," middle distance runner Nick Symmonds said.

High-profile athletes such as Marion Jones, Tim Montgomery and Justin Gatlin were suspended and are ineligible to compete this summer. And last month, when little-known Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt set the world record in the 100 meters at 9.72 seconds, the accomplishment was met with more raised eyebrows than fanfare.

Even with the advent of the USADA in 2000, aggressive drug testing might not be enough to repair the sport's image in the near future. Because the science of drug tests often lags behind that of the performance-enhancing drugs themselves, many cheaters likely have been able to go undetected. And a clean record does not clear an athlete from suspicion.

Jones underwent 24 drug tests from 2000 to 2006 but never tested positive before the BALCO scandal exposed her reliance on performance-enhancers.

Fleshman, of Oregon Track Club Elite, said she is impressed with the testing efforts and that the suspension and arrest of an athlete of Jones' stature provides hope for the future.

"When you see someone like Marion Jones fall, you can say, 'OK, if they have the courage to put away one of the biggest athletes in the world, then they would go after anyone,'" Fleshman said. "It makes me feel better. I can rest assured that there are people out there training for the Olympics knowing that they could

go to jail and lose everything if they are cheating."

That might be a step in the right direction. But it's not enough, according to Steven Ungerleider, author of the book "Faust's Gold," about East Germany's plan to build super-athletes through performance-enhancing drugs during the early 1960s.

The image of track and field "has been a horrendous mess for many years," he said.

Ungerleider, who lives in Eugene, said that although suspensions and prison terms for offenders have helped, the problem is far from resolved, and the public remains skeptical.

Problems such as the BALCO scandal -- which involved the invention of designer drugs that were undetectable by testing and allegedly were used by high-profile athletes in several sports -- have led some to believe the problem is too rampant to eradicate.

"The system is working as far as the world anti-doping code and adjudication of athletes that are cheating and violating the ethics of sport and the law," Ungerleider said. "But I think we have a long way to go."

Some athletes, he said, believe they can get away with using drugs and must cheat to succeed. Plus, although the use of most performance-enhancing drugs is illegal in the United States, the financial rewards outweigh the risks for some.

"We are a country that rewards success and winning with shoe contracts and Gatorade commercials," Ungerleider said.

The best way to combat drug use in sports, Ungerleider said, is by educating younger athletes before they become stars.

Meanwhile, the elite athletes, 99 percent of whom test negative, are left to carry the burden of rehabilitating their sport.

It won't be easy.

While at Willamette University in 2006, Symmonds ran the 800 meters in 1 minute and 45.8 seconds, well below his previous best of 1:48. Some questioned the validity of his accomplishment.

The speculation upset Symmonds, "but a couple of friends said, 'Hey, why would you be mad? That's how you know you made it,' " he said.

The careers of Symmonds and Fleshman might never see a time when excellence no longer moves in lockstep with speculation on drug use. But each runner hopes that athletes who follow the rules will at least be given the benefit of the doubt.

"I think that, as an athlete, I can just remain clean and do it my own way," Fleshman said, "and hope that people will trust my integrity when I make breakthroughs."

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