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Guest Commentary

Steven Ungerleider: Saying goodbye to evil: Manfred Ewald

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Major news organizations including The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, and Los Angeles Times offered expanded coverage of the obituary of Manfred Ewald, the former East German minister of sport, on Oct. 23. His death at the age of 76, due to a lung infection, was received with some fanfare and comment by prominent members of the sports establishment and media experts. East Germany no longer exists, the Berlin wall fell in 1989 and the country unified with West Germany in 1990. So why the fuss?

Mr. Ewald, was not just your ordinary, run-of-the-mill sports figure, but in fact, the minister of sport and the president of his nation's Olympic committee for nearly 30 years. He oversaw a sports machine that produced some 500 Olympic medals from a country with only 17 million people. He wore many hats during his 30-year tenure. In addition to being the "sportsfuhrer" of the former GDR, he also had strong ties to the Jenapharm Pharmaceutical Company and to the International Olympic Committee in Lausanne. His credentials might have been perceived, in some circles, to be quite impeccable. But, this is not why he made headlines.

Manfred Ewald commanded a task force of doctors, trainers and coaches who masterminded the biggest doping scam in the history of sport. In addition to recruiting youngsters identified as potential talent for the state, he and his team of experts systematically injected more

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than 10,000 East German athletes (some as young as 11) with illegal and dangerous performance enhancing drugs. Many of the drugs, anabolic steroids and their synthetic derivatives, were forced upon youngsters with the intent of winning medals and elevating the political prestige of East Germany amongst its rivals in the West. Ewald and his colleagues had great success. In fact, he was so good at his job that the past president of the International Olympic Committee awarded him "the Olympic Order" in 1985, a distinction known to be as prestigious as getting the Nobel Peace Prize.



But the cost to the nation and its citizens was enormous and quite devastating. The pills and the injections have led to severe health problems experienced by thousands of former East German competitors. Many athletes suffer from heart disease, pancreatic cancer, liver tumors and severe depression. Women were most severely impacted. Many suffer from ovarian cysts, deepened voices, facial hair (which requires heavy make-up to disguise) and miscarriages. Many women have given birth to deformed children; some are now blind, many born with club feet. The list goes on.

While I was meeting with scholars in Germany and doing research for my book, "Faust's Gold, Inside the East German Doping Machine," I was looking carefully at how Mr. Ewald and colleagues could pull off this major, three-decade-long scam. Fortunately, all of the doctors and their subordinates kept meticulous notes and log books of every pill, injection and steroid cocktail given to each athlete. These notes were subsequently found in the STASI police records which led Berlin prosecutors to file 412 indictments and prosecute GDR officials for "intentionally committing bodily harm" to minors and other athletes. What we found in the STASI files and other documents was shocking evidence of a state-sponsored doping regime that led right to the top of President Honnecker's government.

Indeed, Mr. Ewald, along with many other officials, was prosecuted and given a small fine and 22 months of jail time, which became a probated sentence due to his poor health. During the trials, which I attended and wrote about, it was disclosed that Ewald was born in 1926, the son of a tailor. He joined the Hitler Youth movement in 1938 and in 1944 became a full-fledged member of the Nazi party. At the age of 27, in 1963, Manfred Ewald worked his way up to a significant position in East Germany's Central Committee. His Nazi past reared its ugly head during the Berlin doping trials, and reached a painful moment of despair, when chief counsel Michael Lehner yelled at one of Ewald's colleagues, Dr. Lothar Kikpe, and said: "you are the Joseph Mengele of the GDR."

Unlike his indicted co-conspirators and other GDR coaches and doctors, who did acknowledge use of illegal steroids and administration of the injections, Manfred Ewald denied any involvement in the state-

sponsored system of performance enhancement drugs. At one point, he even noted prior to his testimony; "Communists do not murder people!"

While most of the athletes I interviewed who testified against Ewald and other officials at the criminal trials, felt some emotional relief and vindication, nearly all were furious that Ewald refused to accept any responsibility for his crimes against humanity. Some women even brought forth their deformed children - and with the permission of the presiding judge - asked Mr. Ewald to look at their children and see what harm he had caused another human being, another generation. The German government has recently set up a victim's compensation fund to assist more than 1,000 athletes who have applied for support.

So why the fuss over a deceased German doping expert? There is bitterness and on-going suspicion from many playing fields. Many of the German athletes returned their medals to the International Olympic Committee and asked that they restore proper acknowledgment upon the "true winners" of Olympic contests. This includes many of our pre-eminent female swimmers from the Munich, Montreal and Seoul Olympiads. This request has fallen on deaf ears! But more importantly, new documents have emerged from the Berlin prosecution files which indicate that one drug from the Ewald era, androstenedione (a.k.a. Andro, made infamous by baseball champ Mark McGuire) was designed and produced as part of the East German program. Although this drug is banned in some sports, it is widely available in health food stores and sold pervasively on the Internet. According to one U.S. government study, nearly 4 percent of high school seniors have used steroids, and some 500,000 adolescents have "cycled" through steroid use at some point in their life. A study of Massachusetts middle schools found that 2.7 percent of kids admitted to trying steroids for sports performance. The DEA and Justice Department has also become quite alarmed as new patent applications have surfaced, filed by former GDR doctors, who now want to bring their pharmacological brilliance to the United States.

And finally, we must not always point fingers across the ocean, but face some very unpleasant skeletons in our own closet. A lawsuit filed by former U.S. athletes is now pending in U.S. District Court in Denver. The complaint alleges doping practices by American coaches and trainers on some of our former elite athletes. One athlete has come forward and noted that his trainer was previously employed in the former German Democratic Republic. The case is scheduled for trial in April of 2003.

Although Manfred Ewald rests quietly in his grave, no doubt we have not heard the last news of his legacy.

(Dr. Steven Ungerleider, a psychologist and member of the U.S. Olympic Committee Sport Psychology Registry, is the author of "FAUST'S GOLD: Inside the East German Doping Machine," published by St. Martin's Press, 2001.)

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